



African Americans in the Spanish Civil War Before Spain

In a little-remembered prelude to World War II, a small group of African Americans, together with 40,000 men and women from 53 nations, traveled thousands of miles to defend the legally elected Spanish republican government against a military uprising backed by Fascist and Nazi dictators. Among these international volunteers were 2,800 idealistic men and women who left the United States to become "The Abraham Lincoln Brigade." About ninety of these, including two women, were African Americans. They sailed from a land where discrimination was custom, segregation the law of the land, and [lynchings](#) were still common. What made more than seven-dozen African Americans sail to a distant land to fight world fascism?

Following World War I, large numbers of African Americans embraced radical ideologies. This new militancy among U.S. blacks was a response to decades of unrelenting, brutal oppression. In 1896 the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that segregation did not violate the Constitution. Conditions were slightly better in the North but patterns of racism and exploitation restricted African Americans to unskilled jobs and forced them to live in crowded neighborhoods.

After World War I, U.S. Blacks confronted once again the forces of white supremacy and a revitalized Ku Klux Klan. Yet the appearance of a Communist government in Russia in 1917 opened new vistas for African American militancy. After Lenin's Communist party came to power in the Soviet Union and boldly proclaimed "the wretched of the earth" should rule the world, African American resistance took on new meaning. In Chicago, an African Blood Brotherhood led by Cyril Briggs talked of arming Black men for self-defense and called for unity with white workers to overthrow capitalism and imperialism. In 1924 Briggs led his followers into the U.S. Communist party.

Other African Americans also turned to the Communist party for inspiration and organizational support. The most significant African American Communist of this early era was World War I veteran [Harry Haywood](#). During the 1920s Haywood headed for the Soviet Union. In 1928 at a Comintern conference he embraced a proposal that Blacks who lived in the sixty contiguous southern U.S. counties (where they accounted for a majority of the population) be entitled to self-determination including the right to secede from the United States. Such ideas became the basis of the Communist party's organizing among southern Blacks during the 1930s. Haywood later served briefly as a commissar in the Lincoln Brigade.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s Black militants were increasingly drawn into the U.S. Communist party. With the slogan "Black and white unite and fight!" Communists took up issues affecting African Americans such as the struggle for self-determination in the South and resistance to lynchings and other forms of oppression. In Black neighborhoods Communists gained support when white "comrades" helped families evicted from their homes.

The event that solidified black support for the Communist party was the [Scottsboro Case of 1932](#). Confronting an obvious example of racial injustice in Alabama, Communists provided legal assistance for nine young Black men falsely accused of raping two white women.

Other political struggles of the 1930s politicized African Americans who would later serve in Spain. For [James Yates](#) interracial unity against racism and economic exploitation became a reality during a march of unemployed workers in Chicago:

Suddenly I felt as one with these people, Black and white.
I was part of their hopes, their dreams, and they were part of mine.
And we were part of a larger world of marching poor people ...
We were millions. We couldn't lose. My throat swelled with pride.

African Americans also perceived Italian imperialism as a threat to world peace. In 1935 Benito Mussolini, seeking a new Italian empire in Africa, launched an invasion of Ethiopia. African Americans in New York and Chicago organized a "Hands off Ethiopia" campaign. The African American poet and journalist [Langston Hughes](#), who later served as a journalist during the Spanish Civil War, wrote "The Ballad of Ethiopia" that included these words:

All you colored peoples
Be a man at last
Say to Mussolini
No! You shall not pass

As fascist aggression stirred the African American community, Blacks and whites joined to collect relief supplies. Some trained for military action. In New York, where a thousand men drilled, [Salaria Kea](#), a nurse at Harlem Hospital, collected funds for a 75-bed hospital for the Ethiopian front. [W.E.B. Du Bois](#) and [Paul Robeson](#) addressed a "Harlem League Against War and Fascism" rally and A. Philip Randolph linked the invasion to "the terrible repression of Black people in the United States." An anti-fascist rally in Chicago organized by Communists Harry Haywood and [Oliver Law](#) was banned and the mayor sent 2,000 police to disperse a crowd of ten thousand.

African Americans were also becoming aware that Nazi racial views spelled death for the world's people of color. "I had read Hitler's book, knew about the Nuremberg laws," recalled [Vaughn Love](#), a volunteer from Harlem in New York City, "and I knew if the Jews weren't going to be allowed to live, then certainly I knew the Negroes would not escape and that we would be at the top of the list. I also knew that the Negro community throughout the United States would be doing what I was doing if they had the chance."

By May 1936 when Mussolini's army had occupied Ethiopia, only two African Americans pilots are believed to have reached the front. But ten weeks later when Mussolini's troops joined Franco's assault in Spain, African Americans saw an opportunity to strike back. In Chicago, James Yates and his friend [Alonzo Watson](#) concluded "Ethiopia and Spain are our fight" and prepared to leave for Spain.

Many African Americans saw Franco's military rebellion in Spain as an extension of Mussolini's aggression against Africa and of the fight against Jim Crow and hard times in the United States. For Vaughn Love, "fascism is the enemy of all black aspirations" and he could not wait to "get to the front and kill these Fascists." In Spain, Oliver Law told a journalist, "We came to wipe out the fascists; some of us must die doing that job. But we'll do it here in Spain, maybe stopping fascism in the United States too, without a great battle there."

Some Black recruits brought unusual skills to the fight against fascism. In 1937 when the United States only had five licensed African American pilots, two of them, [James Peck](#) and [Paul Williams](#), volunteered to challenge the Fascists' air mastery. In the United States they held commercial licenses but found their careers frustrated. In Spain they found action. Another African American, [Dr. Arnold Domowa](#), a Harvard graduate and noted Harlem dental surgeon, brought his surgical skills. As head of the Medical Corps' Oral Surgery Unit, he often operated without "a drop of Novocain" and "a lack of instruments and supplies needed for adequate jaw surgery. And frequently we had not even enough gauze and bandages to dress the wounds of the men." Albert Chisholm, arrived in Spain from Washington where he had drawn political cartoons for the [Northwest Enterprise](#), a Seattle African American newspaper. Chisholm gladly contributed his work to the International Brigade newsletter, *Our Fight*. Burt Jackson was a skilled mapmaker at Fifteenth Brigade headquarters.

The Spanish Civil War also stirred broad humanitarian concerns. Nurse Salaria Kea joined 70 other American women who volunteered to serve in Spain's hospitals.