



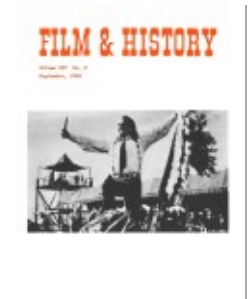
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*The Good Fight: The Abraham Lincoln Brigade in The Spanish Civil War* (review)

William Murphy

Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies, Volume 14, Number 3, September 1984, pp. 69-71 (Review)



Published by Center for the Study of Film and History

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## The Good Fight: The Abraham Lincoln Brigade in The Spanish Civil War

*Produced and directed by Noel Buckner, Mary Dore and Sam Sills. Narrated by Studs Turkel. Project historian David Paskin. 1984, color and black & white, 98 min.*

*Distributed by First Run Features: classroom rental \$175.*

The Good Fight, financed in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, is a sympathetic portrayal of the Americans who volunteered to assist the Spanish government during the civil war of 1936-1939, a military rebellion aided by the fascist governments of Italy and Germany. The film focuses primarily on the testimony and experiences of the men who joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a component of the International Brigades of some 40,000 volunteers from all over the world. The film also includes interviews with women who served in the Loyalist medical corps.

Like many historical documentaries being made today, this one combines archival film, photographs, and sound recordings organized around interviews with persons who lived through the events portrayed. The archival materials are well selected, high-quality reproductions. The "witnesses" are informative, articulate and engaging, and convey the viewpoints of men and women (including Black Americans) who were involved in the war. The presentation overall is lucid and the filmmakers' intent couldn't be clearer. The film is in the final analysis an unabashed tribute to the volunteers.

The readers of this journal will want to know the documentary's pedagogical value. Perhaps the best place to begin is by describing what one should not expect to find in this film. First, it is not a general history of the Spanish Civil War like To Die In Madrid, Frederic Rossif's moving documentary chronology. Second, it is not a history of the internecine political struggles between the Republican Government, dominated by a socialist/communist coalition, and the revolutionary left and the anarchists. Third, it is not a history of the machinations by the Soviet Union which aided the Loyalist side at the expense of the immediate social revolution. The New York Times (April 15,

1984) critique of The Good Fight dwells on Russia's apparent foreign policy objectives in aiding the Loyalist side without discussing the film itself.

Like it or not, The Good Fight, is definately about a chapter in the history of American foreign policy, for it looms large in the background of all the discussions about neutrality, aid, and travel restrictions. But unfortunately it is here that the filmmakers do not share the hsitorian's interest. The words of the veteran volunteers are valuable as points of view, but they hardly begin to describe much less explain the dynamics of American policy toward the war or its participants. Roosevelt, Hull, and the Congress settled on a policy of neutrality that helped to guarantee a fascist victory. Several factors prevented Roosevelt from having a free hand: opposition to his domestic programs and the uncertainty that it caused in foreign affairs; isolationism; and traditional ties to Britain and France whose policies failed to challenge German and Italian agression until it was much too late to prevent a world war. A discuission of these important issues would help to create a context for this film in the classroom.

Viewing the fiml on its own merits, students will gain knowledge in several areas: the motivations and political sensibilities of the volunteers, their experiences in Spain behind the lines under fire, Loyalist support activities in the United States, and the cold and suspicious reception that awaited the volunteers on their return home. Politically, many volunteers seemed ignorant of the civil war's real issues, such as the centralization of land ownership, regional autonomy, political and social reform, and separation of church and state. Most volunteers went to Spain not so much to defeat the Spanish right-wing factions as to fight fascism manifested in the domestic and external policies of Germany, Italy and Japan. That some volunteers were communists cannot be denied. Many were active in the union movement. Most volunteers were in their early twenties, undisciplined, idealistic, and not just a little cynical about the indoctrination being fed to them by their political commisars in Spain. They made a good accounting of themselves in battle, taking high casualties. Above all it was a war of militias against professional armies, Spanish, Italian and German. Conditions were severe. There were always shortages of arms and supplies. Given the odds, it is amazing that the war, lasted three years.

The film concludes with a sequence of clips showing

veteran volunteers demonstrating against policies like American involvement in Southeast Asia and in Central America which seem to hark back to the civil war days. The volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade would appear to have lost none of their idealism.

William Murphy  
National Archives and Records Service

## FILM & HISTORY NEWS

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### History Through Film Syllabi Needed for AHA Publication Project

As noted in a previous issue, The American Historical Association (AHA) has been funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to conduct a study of the use of film and television materials in historical research and teaching. The project will result in a book on the subject and a new edition of the Association's pamphlet Teaching History With Film. To be successful such a project requires the assistance of teachers active in the field. Please send syllabi, discussion outlines, paper assignments, exam questions, and any other materials you might use in studying film and television with your classes to Project Director John O'Connor, c/o Film & History. You may rest assured that any of your ideas or experiences used will be fully credited in the forthcoming AHA publications.