

Miscel·lània

The Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade

Richard Bermack

Photographer And Event Organizer
at Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives
Mail: rbermack@gmail.com

Send: 15/10/2024

Accept: 30/10/2024

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives is an offshoot of the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade organization. American volunteers returning from the Spanish Civil War formed VALB in 1937 to continue the struggle against fascism and to provide support for their members and Spanish refugees. It continued as an activist organization known for supporting progressive causes. It was labeled a subversive organization by the US government and its members were persecuted by the FBI.

In the 1970s, as its members entered old age, they became concerned with the preservation of their personal papers. They didn't want them to end up in the wrong hands and they wanted control of their history and legacy. They set up an archive at Brandeis University in Massachusetts.

At the same time as the "old left" became concerned with their legacy, the "new left" was reaching maturity. The Vietnam War ended, and the civil rights movement was becoming mainstream. The younger generation of progressives was searching for ideological roots and role models contrary to the narratives they grew up with in the 1950s.

Armed with cassette recorders and cameras, members of the new left set out to interview and record veterans of the old left. The 1970s and 1980s became a golden era of books and documentary films featuring elder radicals of the labor movement, the communist movement, and the Spanish Civil War.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, the Radical Elders Oral History Project was formed in the late 1970s as a collaboration between the old left and new. I was the project's photographer. We interviewed about 20 people on audio cassettes with the intent of making them available to the public. But this was before the prevalence of personal computers, and transcribing was a stumbling block. We were more successful at producing radio programs and events. The project ended in 1981.

One of the group's members, Peter Carroll, interviewed two African American Lincoln Vets, Luchelle McDaniels and Vaughn Love. Peter left the group and joined the newly formed VALB Associates, an auxiliary of younger people organized by Bay Area VALB leader Milton Wolff. Milt was the last commander of the American vets in Spain. He understood the need to get younger activists involved. I exhibited my REOHP photographs at one of the Bay Area VALB events and Milt recruited me.

The Associates included children of the vets, other "red diaper babies," and other new leftists like myself. For the kids of vets, it was a way to rebuild relationships with their parents now as adults. Their childhoods may have been rocked by the repressive anti-

communist days of their childhood. Many of their parents had been in prison, underground, or impoverished by the blacklist or too busy and stressed out with political actions to be as nurturing as they could have been. And for others with leftist parents, the vets were their parents' heroes. For the non-red diaper activists, like myself, it was a way to connect up with the legacy.

The Lincoln vets had a special attraction. Unlike some of the overly ideological and didactic members of the Communist Party USA, VALB members were more charismatic and more open minded. This was especially true of Milt, who cultivated younger people. The Bay Area VALB group became a community and a family.

Peter Carroll was interested in the VALB archives and connected up with the New York VALB office. Together with Lincoln Vet Bill Sussman and others, he transformed the archives from a depository of papers to an educational organization. In 1978, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives became a non-profit organization. They recruited radical history professors from around the country, including Tony Geist, the son of a vet, who was a professor in both the US and Spain. They produced touring exhibits, books, and films based on the archives and other materials. ALBA created lecture series, essay contests, and eventually a teaching institute to train teachers, with a curriculum of classroom lessons and workshops on the Spanish Civil War.

Peter authored *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford, 1994), the most authoritative book on the Lincoln Brigade.

ALBA collaborated with the Juan Carlos Center at New York University and moved the archives to NYU's Tamiment Library, the largest archive of American labor and radical history.

As ALBA expanded the legacy of the vets through educational activities, VALB continued its legacy as an activist organization, marching in demonstrations with its banner and aiding other causes. One of the main activities was a yearly reunion, attracting activists of all generations. The largest were in New York and the San Francisco Bay Area. In the 1980s, when I started attending, close to 1000 people attended in New York and nearly as many in the Bay Area. These events not only honored the vets, but featured speakers from other activist organizations and raised money for their causes. They particularly focused on international causes and solidarity movements. At one event in the Bay Area, I believe they raised close to \$100,000 to buy ambulances to support the Sandinistas during the Nicaraguan war. Support of Cuba was another ongoing activity.

By the late 1990's the two organizations informally merged, with the younger ALBA members taking over most of the work.

We began producing multi-media presentations to show at annual events, telling the story of the Spanish Civil War through music, dramatic readings, and archival photographs. The event would end with a slide show of portraits of the VALB members and the band playing "Viva La Quince Brigada."

Several VALB posts around the country began installing monuments, similar to the DIDPATRI's bronze plaques, in Seattle, Washington, and Madison, Wisconsin. The most ambitious monument is in the Bay Area. In 2008, a 45-foot long monument featuring photos and quotes was installed on San Francisco's Embarcadero, an area famous for labor struggles, including the historic 1934 general strike. Many of the participants of that strike later fought in Spain. The New York ALBA/VALB office paid for the surviving vets from around the country to travel to San Francisco for a last grand celebration and a farewell. Ten vets attended, several in wheelchairs. Within a few years the remaining vets passed away. The VALB organization officially dissolved, passing the torch to ALBA.

In 2011 the New York Puffin Foundation launched the annual ALBA-Puffin Human Rights Award, presenting \$100,000 to an activist organization, which was presented at the annual event.

The Covid epidemic presented both challenges and opportunities. The annual Human Rights Award, as well as the ALBA teaching institutes, were now streamed online instead of in person, making them available to much wider audiences. ALBA is now experimenting with hybrid events. The events still end with a slide show of portraits of the vets, accompanied by “Viva La Quince Brigada.”

Peter Carroll passed away on September 16, 2024. Sebastiaan Faber, a professor at Oberlin College, in Ohio, and María Hernández-Ojeda, a professor at Hunter College in New York, took over the teaching institute, which now has a full slate of programs. The ALBA office is run by Mark Wallam and Dennis Meany.

The Tamiment Library has digitalized much of the vets’ archive, making it available online.

Links:

ALBA website. <https://alba-valb.org>

ALBA Teaching institute. https://alba-vrevista.ebre38@ub.edu_alb.org/education/teaching-institutes/

ALBA collections at the Tamiment Library NYU <https://specialcollections.library.nyu.edu/search/?utf8=%E2%9C%93&f%5B%5D=tamwag&q=ALBA>

ALBA New York museum collection

<https://dcmny.org/do/590421a4-6a5d-4712-87f8-3de93c55d1f5>

Executive Summary

The Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was an organization of the American volunteers returning from the Spanish Civil War, who believed in preserving their legacy through activism in progressive causes. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives is an offshoot of the VALB organization. ALBA was founded in the 1970s, at a time when people were recovering the legacy of the 1920s and 1930s activists, which had been repressed during the 1950s anti-communist era. ALBA, a non-profit with an educational mission, helps maintain the vets’ archival materials at the Tamiment Library at New York University; produces touring exhibits, books, and films based on the archives and other materials; and created lecture series, essay contests, and eventually a teaching institute to train teachers, with a curriculum of classroom lessons and workshops on the Spanish Civil War. It also administers the yearly ALBA-Puffin Human Rights Award. It took over the VALB office and programs after the vets passed away.

Authorship: This work was conceptualized and written by Richard Bermack. The author has read and agrees with this version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest: The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).