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Senior thesis for B.A. in History

HIS499 Senior Seminar
Bethel University, St. Paul, Minnesota
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Abstract for “A Long Way from Minneapolis’: Minnesotans in the Spanish Civil War”

This thesis examines for the first time the sixty Minnesotan men who volunteered to fight in the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War. Centered around the lives and experience of three men – George Zlatovski, Benjamin Gardner, and Clarence Forester – the work takes particular care to examine the familial, ethnic, immigrant, social, temperamental, and political contexts that shaped the men and contributed to their decision to fight in Spain, carefully reading the Minnesota experience against the established literature on the broader American experience. Chapter One introduces the significance of the Spanish Civil War in general and of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in particular, using one Minnesotan’s participation in the 1996 Brigade commemoration in Spain as a framing device. Chapter Two examines demographic aspects of the Minnesota volunteers, taking care to identify commonalities and contrasts. The chapter further introduces the early biographies of each of the three central figures. Chapter Three then outlines the Depression-era political context by which all of the men were affected and traces the tactical shifts of the Comintern and CPUSA of the late 1920s and 1930s. The chapter suggests that a broadly-shared idealism among the volunteers accounts for their commitment to Communism and defines two groups of future-Lincolns: those who joined the Party during the Third Period and those who were more drawn by the broad, internationalist approach of the Popular Front. Chapter Four advances the central cast to Spain, noting the dissimilar methods by which Minnesota volunteers gained access to the country. Chapter Five sketches the larger outlines of the XV International Brigade in Spain and continues the biography of the central trio, focusing particularly on their experiences of modern war and on the political nature of life in the Brigades. Of particular concern are the reactions of the men to the reality of Spain, both those of continued faith in the cause and those of disillusionment. Chapter Six brings the men back to America and traces their varied experiences after the war, from service in Germany during WWII to continued FBI harassment through the McCarthy years and beyond

Chapter 3 Making the Leap: From Political Awakening to Spain

An examination of the Minnesota Lincolns' demographics, their personal stories, and the trends that link them to each other suggests several points of entry for understanding why the men went to Spain. As previous chapters have explored, ethnic identity, personal experience of hardship, and the struggle to find employment all help explain why the men were willing to volunteer: most did not leave stable jobs, spouses, or deeply-rooted family and social connections behind when they left the United States. Yet, to rely on these explanations entirely excises the single most important aspect of the men's corporate identity: their political commitments. Indeed, it is impossible to truly understand the Minnesota Lincolns without examining the ideologies that motivated them and, in the context of the unsettled and restless Depression years, provided a socio-political structure to their lives.¹

Not least because it was the Soviet Union that organized, recruited, and paid for the passage of the International Brigades, communism was the governing ethos for the preponderance of the Lincolns. Sixty-three percent were full Communist Party USA (CPUSA) members; three were Young Communist League (YCL) members who for whatever reason did not eventually obtain full party membership. Moreover, three men² took the additional, and indeed, unnecessary step of joining the Spanish Communist Party (*Partido Comunista de España*; PCE) once in Spain – in addition to their extant domestic memberships. Clearly then, communism – whether the doctrinaire Communism of the Stalinist or the inchoate sympathies of the fellow traveler – was the political language most of the men spoke. Even those who were not party or party affiliate members orbited in communist circles – self-consciously or not. For the 1930s were the glory years of the CPUSA, a decade in which the apparent demise of capitalism and democratic legitimacy gifted it with a rapidly expanding membership, an increasing mainstream acceptance, and a geopolitical message of international relevance.

The organization known in the 1930s as the CPUSA had a twisting and confusing history. Initially, there were two American Communist parties, both of which were founded in 1919. Later, at the behest of Lenin and the Comintern, the two were merged. Factional battles wracked the organization through the early 1920s as the party's eclectic founders – ranging from orthodox Marxists, detritus from the ongoing breakup of the International Workers of the World (IWW), and members of different foreign language party sections – jostled for power. Continual shifts in tactical approach saw the party weakened through the 1920s, a situation which came to a head in 1928 when secretary Jay Lovestone and his followers were expunged from

¹ This thesis will refer to the men as “Lincolns” and to the unit they served in as the “Lincoln Brigade.” While this is not quite accurate, it is a oft-seen convention. There never was a Lincoln Brigade, only a Lincoln Battalion, part of the XV International Brigade. In actuality, Minnesotans served in several different battalions in Spain. However, it is common practice to lump all Americans together under the heading of the “Lincoln Brigade,” a practice continued here.

² The male noun and associated pronouns will be used throughout. The rationale is simple: there were no known female volunteers from Minnesota.

the party. Lovestone had insisted, in opposition to the newest tactical line from the Comintern, that the United States was not subject to the same conditions as other democratic capitalist countries were – a position he termed American exceptionalism. Because capitalism was more firmly rooted in American culture, Lovestone argued, American socialists ought to pursue more moderate policies. That insistence directly contradicted one of the central decisions of the 6th World Congress held by the Comintern that summer. At least, such was the rationale offered by Stalin. In reality, Lovestone’s removal was more likely presaged by his support of Stalin’s rival, Nikolai Bukharin. When Bukharin was edged out by Stalin in 1929, Lovestone had to go. He was removed and after a brief interregnum, was replaced by Earl Browder, a Kansas native who had recently returned to the United States from clandestine work in Nationalist-controlled Shanghai. Browder would remain as Party secretary until 1945.³

That new Comintern policy which Lovestone had run afoul of – known collectively as the Third Period – was issued in the summer of 1928. Primarily a tactical shift for Communist parties across the globe, the Comintern’s new analysis predicted the imminent collapse of world capitalism. The world capitalist powers, the Comintern argued, had allowed their decadence to rot away the foundations of their power. As a result, the Third Period would be characterized by mass working-class radicalization, even as the capitalist system devoured itself. Drawing on orthodox Marxist-Leninist doctrine, the Comintern decreed that the international sections of the vanguard Party needed to position themselves to harness and direct this newly-generated working-class energy. The most significant implication of the new policy meant that, unlike in previous tactical eras, collaboration with other leftists was impossible. Where reformism was espoused by any non-Party political element, it was derided as “social fascism”; such a strategy would compromise the true revolutionary nature of the times.⁴

The militant tactics and tone set during the Third Period were given legitimacy when the country entered the Depression; the prophetic rhetoric issued since 1928 had come true. As unemployment soared and living conditions became harder for working class people across the country, Communists stood poised to take advantage of the new conditions. Indeed, it is difficult to overestimate the impact the Depression had on political thought in the United States. As Cary Nelson suggests, “the crisis of the Thirties pushed people to the limit of capitalist ideology and sometimes a bit beyond in their daily struggle to exist.” Ordinary people across the nation embraced working class radicalism as a means of protest against a system which had failed to work for them.⁵ It was during this period that Minnesota Lincolns first began to join the party. In 1928, Minnesota Lincoln party membership stood at a mere two: Ben Gardner and an older Greek immigrant

³ Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 7-8. This and *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II* (Fraser M. Ottanelli, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991) inform the above paragraphs.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-14.

⁵ Cary Nelson quoted in Howard, *Forgotten Radicals*, 125.

Lincoln, Louis Privolos. By 1933, CPUSA membership had grown to ten and YCL membership had doubled from four to eight among the sixty Minnesota Lincolns – admittedly modest numbers.

In response to the Depression, the Party embarked, not without organizational difficulty, on a series of Hunger Marches in cities across the nation. The Party also started a national push for unemployment insurance, a campaign that would dominate communist efforts through 1934. In addition, Communists engaged in a panoply of direct action programs, from preventing homelessness by physically returning evicted renters' belongings to their homes, protesting cuts to food relief, and organizing against bank repossessions on defaulted mortgages. By marrying idealist rhetoric with highly visible action, Communists both articulated a compelling vision of a new society and provided concrete examples of how that vision could be actualized.⁶

A key strategy that the Party began to utilize in a nation-wide effort to actualize their vision of a communist was that of direct action – the harnessing of masses of workers to press governments and employers for change. One Minnesota Lincoln perhaps best exemplifies direct action activity. Ben Gardner was certainly one of the most active Minnesota Lincoln communists, holding Party positions in Minnesota and later on the East coast. As a ten-year-old child immigrant from the outskirts of Odessa, Gardner had arrived in the United States sometime shortly after 1917. Settling in Duluth, a small working class town populated largely by immigrant dockworkers and situated on the nose of Lake Superior, Gardner had been forced out of school and into work by his father. He became an automotive painter around 1924 and worked in this trade for four years.⁷

Gardner next surfaced in 1930 or '31 as an active Communist in the Duluth area. A letter to his wife while he was in Spain mentions the National Guard, which may explain the missing years between 1928 and 1930-31.⁸ Regardless, Ben emerged from the early years of the Depression as a militant communist labour organizer, having been brought into the Party by an older brother in 1928. Still in Duluth, Gardner began utilizing direct action tactics to help the city's poor (Duluth had been particularly affected by the Depression). In 1930, Gardner helped organize Duluth's unemployed, founding at the same time the local Unemployed Council. And in 1932, he appeared at the head of a Communist-organized Hunger March on the town city hall – a march which succeeded in drawing fifteen-hundred people from the surrounding area.⁹ Despite these numbers, Gardner's activities were largely ineffective and suggest the limits of the direct action tactic. Although the tactic could have proved successful in instigating social change, direct action fundamentally

⁶ Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 60-62.

⁷ Jessica Weglein, "Guide to the Benjamin Gardner Papers," ALBA.141, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives.

⁸ Gardner to Alice, June 5, 1937, quoted in Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks, *Madrid, 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 65-66.

⁹ Richard Hudelson and Carl Ross, *By the Ore Docks: A Working People's History of Duluth*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 176-177.

relied on the mobilization of a critical mass of people – numbers which neither Gardner or other Communists were ever able to approach.

Another of the Party's strategies during the Third Period was that of Dual Unionism. Rejecting the previous tactical period's strategy of "boring within" – an approach that sought to co-opt existing union structures such groups as William Green's AFL – the Party now sought to build dual, overlapping unions that were under exclusive Communist control. Such was reflective of the Third Period's emphasis on non-cooperation with other leftist groups. Although dual unionism efforts occurred nationally, a particular area of focus for the Party was the anthracite region of Pennsylvania. There, the thousands of coal miners scattered among John L. Lewis' United Mine Worker (UMW) locals seemed like perfect targets for the tactic.¹⁰

Here again, Ben Gardner is an exemplar. Although Gardner's work in Duluth was proceeding well, it was not to continue; the Party needed him in Pennsylvania. There, he was to assume shared leadership of the inchoate Communist anthracite coal mining union. The union – such as it was in the early 1930s – was affiliated with the UMW, but had been founded and was presently headed by communists. Such an arrangement was justified under Third Party doctrine because the UMW locals in question were entirely Communist-run. During his time in the anthracite, Gardner was involved in several violent incidents. One, in 1932, occurred when William Foster, the Communist presidential candidate, came to the anthracite on the campaign trail. On the appointed evening, Foster ascended the platform to deliver his speech. He was promptly arrested by the local police. As the *Daily Worker* reported, "After Foster was arrested, Ben [Gardner] ... rose to the platform and began to speak, denouncing the arrest of Foster. After three minutes, the police began to drive the crowd from the hall by force." Several local Communist leaders, including Gardner, later protested the police incursion at Foster's trial, where they were rebuffed by the town Magistrate, a virulent anti-communist.¹¹ In January of 1933, Ben was arrested and jailed again, this time during his attempts to organize a Hunger March on City Hall and the local food relief board. During his second appearance before the Magistrate, Gardner was ridiculed in front of the town press – a humiliating experience. Throughout the remainder of 1933 Ben was arrested, indicted, and jailed numerous times as he attempted to relieve the crisis of unemployment gripping the anthracite region.¹²

These types of activities suggest why the party was attractive to Minnesotans, and to Americans more broadly. Most basically, the Party plausibly diagnosed the causes of the economic distress and offered solutions. But the Party did more than that. Membership opened doors to a social community that stretched from coast to coast and across the world. The sense of class-solidarity the Party provided was almost religious

¹⁰ Walter T. Howard, *Forgotten Radicals: Communists in the Pennsylvania Anthracite, 1919-1950*, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2005), 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 106-108.

¹² Howard, *Forgotten Radicals*, 99-169; Weglein, "Gardner Papers."

in tenor. Indeed, one Minnesota Lincoln, George Zlatovski, later compared Communism to a secular religion, complete with its own hagiography, saints, and martyrs.¹³

Above all, the Party appealed to a certain type of person: those commonly described as dreamers, idealists, or utopians, and those with a compelling concern for the poor and downtrodden. Among the Minnesota Lincolns this language of description is pervasive, even if several of the veterans would later divest themselves of this earlier identity: Chi Chang described himself as “full of romantic ideals” and commented on his “youthful faith in Utopias.” The half-Finn Clarence Forester saw himself as “an idealist,” and Norman Dorland, in similar language, confessed to going to Spain “as an Idealist.” Fellow Finn Martin Maki was eulogized as “a very incredible idealist.” George Zlatovski was an “incurable romantic” and Veikko Lindfors always looked out for the “little people.” John Blair “couldn’t stomach the dog-eat-dog approach.”¹⁴

To such men, communism’s ethos of equality, justice, and fair treatment for the working person was compelling – and for good reason.¹⁵ Economic issues aside, the Communist party of the 1930s advocated a startlingly progressive and inspiring vision of society. Communists sought to create a genuinely open Party that welcomed all, no matter one’s national origin, race, or sex. Indeed, even scholars like John Haynes and Harvey Klehr acknowledge – however begrudgingly – that “for many black Americans the party was the only predominantly white organization willing to confront Southern racism head-on.”¹⁶ Whatever the reality of Communism in the Soviet Union during this period, the CPUSA, especially among its lower levels of membership, genuinely sought to construct an inclusive and democratic ethos. That commitment was evident to Minnesota Lincolns who overwhelmingly identified with the same set of ideals. Indeed, the biographies of the men suggest that their acute awareness of and identification with society’s downtrodden and oppressed primed them for a political commitment to Communism. And while millions of other Americans also suffered the privations of poverty and joblessness during the depression, most did not participate in the social and cultural alienation experienced by many of the Minnesota Lincolns. When Lincolns encountered the rhetoric of the party – focused as it was on poverty relief, job protection, and the creation of a participatory society – there was a natural attraction. Moreover, the Party was thought by its members and admirers to

¹³ George Zlatovski, “An Anti-Hero of Our Times,” (memoir), The George Zlatovski Papers IHRC2913, Jewish (Eastern Europe) American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, 74-75.

¹⁴ Chi Chang, “Going Through College,” *Chinese Students Monthly* 21:2 (1925): 36-40; Jim Klobuchar, “He Tried the Strength of His Ideals in Spanish Civil War,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, January 15, 1994; Norman Dorland, “To My School Mates and People of Memphis,” Steve Nelson Papers ALBA.008, Series III, Box 4, Folder 32, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives; Zlatovski, “Anti-hero,” 1; Glenn Lindfors, Minneapolis: 2014, interview by author, author’s personal collection; Kavita Kumar, “Martin Maki Dies, Fought Spanish Fascists,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, May 25, 2001; John Blair, “Summary of Life,” Robert Steck Papers, ALBA.104, Series II, Box 4, Folder 34, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives.

¹⁵ While not all of the men listed here were CPUSA members, all *were* either CPUSA, YCL, or reliably known to be fellow travelers to varying degrees.

¹⁶ Quoted in Hudelson et al, *By the Ore Docks*, 205.

transcend petty national issues in favour of global concerns – an appeal that strengthened for the Minnesota Lincolns as the Thirties wore on.¹⁷

For international events in the spring of 1933 and 1934 would cause the Comintern to abandon the Third Period tactic. The rise of Hitlerism in Germany and the growing power and bellicosity of fascist Italy prompted the Comintern to reassess its policy of non-collaboration with other leftists, particularly as it became increasingly apparent that Hitler viewed the Soviet Union as an enemy state. By 1934, the Comintern had pivoted from the militarism of the Third Period and embraced the “Popular Front” tactic. Doing so meant postponing the revolution and widening the sphere of cooperation between all leftists. Dutifully, the international Communist Party apparatus – including the CPUSA – began implementing the new tactical directive. “Social-Fascism” became an obsolete concept. Instead, the Popular Front came to mean virtually one thing: broad and vehement anti-fascism.

Ben Gardner’s biography again illustrates the shift. By 1934, he was no longer needed for the work in the anthracite and left for Philadelphia with his wife Alice (they had married in 1931). There, he became involved in one of the numerous Popular Front anti-fascist organizations, the American League Against War and Fascism. Arrested yet again – by now a common experience for Gardner – during an anti-Nazism protest at the German consulate, Gardner was sentenced to a year in prison. During that time, he and Alice only saw each other for a mere fifteen minutes, three times each month. After his release in 1935, Gardner resumed his work with the unemployed councils in Philadelphia, an activity he would sustain until departing for Spain.¹⁸ Gardner’s smooth transition from Third Period militancy to the broad appeals of the Popular Front suggests that for the minority of Minnesota Lincolns who had joined the Party prior to 1934 – there were twelve such men – commitment to the Party’s social ethic predated identification with the anti-fascist, internationalist outlook of the CPUSA.

But for those who had not joined the Party during the Third Period, the Popular Front gave much-needed coherence to the global crises of the mid 1930s by linking together fascism in Spain, Japanese imperialism in Asia, and Germano-Italian aggression in Europe as separate manifestations of the same reactionary phenomenon. Even small children in Spain were influenced by this logic. While there, Minnesota Lincoln Chi Chang encountered a local boy of twelve or thirteen who, upon realizing Chi was Chinese, told him in heavily accented English: “Little ones in China are bombed too! Fascists, no good, all over the world.”¹⁹

¹⁷ This view of the Party is somewhat ironic considering how closely tied its policy was to the Comintern and thus to Soviet geostrategic goals. For more on this line, see Stanley Payne, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 128 ff.

¹⁸ Howard, *Forgotten Radicals*, 99-169; Gardner to Alice, October 24, 1937, Benjamin Gardner Papers, ALBA.141, Box 1, Folder 1, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives; Weglein, “Gardner Papers.”

¹⁹ Chi Chang, “Spanish Vignettes,” *The Volunteer* XXIX:4 (2012): 14-15.

Indeed, it was the Communists' doctrinaire opposition to fascism that appears to have elicited the most support from Minnesota's eventual Lincolns, if measured quantitatively alone. Their membership in the CPUSA skyrocketed with the inauguration of the Popular Front, nearly tripling from twelve in 1933 to thirty-four by the eve of American participation in the Spanish War in 1937. Such an expansion was driven by a peculiar characteristic of the Minnesota Lincolns. As a previous chapter concluded, although most of the men were not highly educated, a significant number of them expressed a love of reading. While the practice of reading allowed the men to escape the monotony of everyday Depression existence, by the early 1930s, their literary appetites would have a more profound impact on the course of their lives. In many cases, it was their practice of reading that seems to have provided the channel through which they were first alerted to the threat posed by global fascism. And once aware, they sought more information, information that was likely supplied by the extensive Popular Front literature on the subject. Through these materials they gained an international consciousness that fit neatly with the concerns of the Popular Front.

However, their international consciousness was often largely just that – a vague awareness of the import of international events, derived and defined largely from avid consumption of news material: mainstream newspapers such as the Minneapolis Star, ethnic and class-based radical weeklies like the Superior-Wisconsin-based *Työmies*, and CPUSA material. And to a degree rarely seen in other conflicts, the Spanish Civil War aroused impassioned literary activity. With the exception of the Catholic press and the Hearst news empire, most American editorial boards favoured the Republic; Minnesota Lincolns had ample material from which to form Republican sympathies.²⁰ Such analyses of international events, particularly those found in overtly ideological sources, often lacked subtlety and suggest the Lincolns had little contextual understanding of the issues facing the Spanish working class.

As a result, the Lincolns tended to see international issues as extensions of the domestic struggles they were familiar with. Even so, dismissing the international dimension of the Lincoln's outlook – unsophisticated though it might have been – would be a mistake. As is usually the case, what the men themselves *thought* was true assumes greater importance in describing their motivations than the technical accuracy of their beliefs; in this case, the Lincolns certainly saw themselves as actors on a global stage.

One such man – who, like most Minnesota Lincolns, was ushered into the Party under the auspices of the Popular Front – was George Zlatovski. A teenaged immigrant from the Soviet Union, Zlatovski had settled in Duluth, Minnesota, where he lived through the 1920s, thoroughly disaffected by the cultural wasteland that was the 1920s port town. His commitment to communism was accomplished in stages. The Zlatovski family had always been progressive (the parents had participated in the abortive 1905 Russian revolution) and this political ethos was transferred to the son, although not without starts; in 1925, after seeing an Italian propaganda film, the teenage Zlatovski came home and told his father, “I want to be a

²⁰ Peter N. Carroll and James D. Fernández, *Facing Fascism: New York and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Museum of the City of New York, 2007), 33-35.

fascist!” The elder Zlatovski turned livid – “I do not think I have ever seen him so angry against me as at that moment,” the son later recalled – and castigated George. These early flirtations with rightist politics faded as Zlatovski grew older. He remembered being displeased to hear news of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria on his birthday in 1931, and was later impressed with the defense future Comintern head Gregori Dimitrov offered during his trial for setting the Reichstag fire in 1933.²¹

The next stage in George’s radicalization came during his stint working as a logging surveyor in Ely Minnesota. The poor conditions in the logging camps worked to increase the young man’s sympathy for unionization. By the spring of 1933, conditions in the camps had deteriorated to the point of insurrection. Washington’s birthday, as a state holiday, ought to have seen the loggers free from a day of work. Instead, a supervisor announced that such a holiday was, as Zlatovski recalled, “much too good for us” and ordered the loggers to work. George volunteered to bring the men’s grievances to their supervisor. A meeting was granted, but after George had made his speech, the supervisor turned to each man in turn and asked: “Are you in agreement with this Red agitator?” The men, cowed, refused to defend George, who was promptly fired.²²

That fall, George moved beyond sympathizing and began to actively engage in party work. A younger cousin had asked him to attend a meeting of the International Labor Defense, a Party front organization. Throwing himself into the ILD work, George “found real happiness for the first time in [his] life in America.” He began reading Marxist literature, which, he recalled, influenced him to become a full party member. His love of literature and theatre led him to increasingly identify with the “cultural front” – the name the Party gave its attempts to create a proletarian culture.

George and his leftist friends from Duluth spent several years engaged in this cultural front work, producing communist-themed plays as part of the burgeoning Little Theatre movement in Duluth – a movement whose establishment they contributed to. One play saw George and future Lincoln Chi Chang both cast as actors. Chi, who had immigrated from China in the early 1920s, was recently graduated from the University of Minnesota and worked as an engineer in one of northern Minnesota’s Mesabi iron mines. Their play was “Waiting for Lefty,” a progressive spectacle centered on the theme of company violence towards workers. This experiment in constructing proletarian culture was a disaster, as was most of the ad hoc theatre in which George participated. After Zlatovski’s accidentally knocked out a fellow actor with an overly-excited punch, Chi Chang forgot to crank the victrola which provided the music for an important scene. Even so, the Little Theatre movement was an enjoyable venue for George and his friends to explore working-class themes in an artistic setting.²³ These early cultural front experiments also gave George a much-needed outlet for his

²¹ Zlatovski, “Anti-hero,” 6; 68-69.

²² *Ibid.*, 71-72.

²³ *Ibid.*, 73-81.

heretofore smothered artistic sensibilities. That so many of his fellow playwrights were communists would accelerate his adoption into the Party, the first place in which Zlatovski had truly felt at home in America.

After a modestly successful May Day march in 1935, the emboldened local Duluth Communist Party decided to embark on a program of street speaking. George's name was submitted, and he duly gave a fiery speech denouncing the recent Italian invasion of Ethiopia. One hundred-fifty miles to the south, Minnesota Lincoln Clarence Forester was back in Minneapolis, experiencing firsthand the kind of street-level political activism in which Zlatovski was only starting to engage. Clarence had been living in Superior in the years prior to 1934 where he assisted his half-brother in running the Finnish-language radical newspaper, *Työmies*. That same year he moved to the state's largest city and found work variously as a movie projectionist, a dog-biscuit baker, and a dishwasher. Clarence remembered hearing dozens of political speeches – like Zlatovski's – given around the city. Communists, anarchists, Socialists, and Salvation Army speakers all literally held forth on street corner crates, each hawking their own particular messages.²⁴

But Clarence was doing more than merely listening to political speeches. That year, he was one of thousands of Minnesotans who participated in a series of trucking union strikes which paralyzed the city's coal delivery yards. Led by two Trotskyite organizers, the 1934 Trucker's Strikes were aimed at breaking the power of the Citizens Alliance, a business cabal that had militated against labor organizing in Minneapolis since the 1920s. The strikes energized the city's working class and brought thousands to the streets. Several were killed during clashes with police and company men, but by the end of the long and bloody summer, the union had essentially triumphed. It mattered not that the strikes were settled only after president Roosevelt intervened directly, threatening banking service freezes to the trucking firms. Even so, the strikes finally broke the power of the Citizens Alliance in the city and reshaped the labor landscape for the next decades. While Clarence wasn't a member of the trucker's union, he felt that "sometimes to get the rights you should have, they're not given to you, you have to fight for them." It didn't hurt that one of his Communist friends, Jimmy Flowers, was heavily involved in the strike.²⁵

Back in Duluth, a few days after his debut as a street speaker, George Zlatovski was called into the Party headquarters and offered full membership. At the occasion, he was warned that membership likely meant destroyed career prospects, low pay, and probable violence. George accepted anyway.²⁶

After joining the Party, George worked to organize the Duluth steel plants with limited success. Eventually, he was elected to the Section Committee for North Minnesota and even attended a Chicago Party convention. However, George was eager to leave Duluth and so, with the toss of a coin, decided on New

²⁴ D.J. Tice, "A Have-Not's War," in *Minnesota's Twentieth Century: Stories of Extraordinary Everyday People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 96.

²⁵ Clarence Forester, interview by Carl E. Ross, Oral History (transcript), Minneapolis, 1989. AV1990.228.18; Eric Nathanson, *Minneapolis in the Twentieth Century: The Growth of an American City* (Saint Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010), 61-91; Tice, "A Have-Not's War," 95.

²⁶ Zlatovski, "Anti-hero," 80-83.

York City over San Francisco. There, he joined the ranks of the most densely concentrated Communist Party section in the country. Using his connections, Zlatovski was placed in a Works Progress Administration job in a district controlled by a fellow functionary. His job: to offer recommendations on improving the New York Subway system. Stuck in this rather lackluster work by day, George became something of a bon vivant at night, indulging his appetite for culture – and for women. The Party carried on a thriving social scene in the New York of the Thirties, and George threw himself into it with vigour.²⁷

Meanwhile, in Minneapolis, Clarence's avid reading had convinced him that fascism posed a grave danger to the democratic world. On one of his frequent trips to the Minneapolis Public Library, Clarence read of Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. One particular piece of reportage stood out to him: an Italian bomber pilot, asked what it was like to bomb crowds of people in Ethiopia, described it as "just like a rose coming into bloom." Clarence remembered feeling sick at that response, thinking, "there's got to be something wrong with people like that, that something should be done about them." Clarence, although he never graduated from the YCL to full Party membership, became a convinced anti-fascist. His International Brigade ID card would be stamped *anti-fascista* within the year.²⁸



When the Spanish war broke out in July 1936, it "became immediately the touchstone [...] for all the communists, socialists, progressives, and liberals," George Zlatovski remembered. That a military coup backed by Hitler and Mussolini could be allowed to defeat a legally elected, democratic government was outrageous to leftists around the world. Worse were the measures quickly adopted by the Western democracies – the United States included. By early August, the French had proposed a Non-Intervention Agreement to prevent arms sales to Iberia – a proposal which was quickly adopted by the British. To U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hall, "the initiative in dealing with the Spanish problem lay with the European nations" and any attempt by the U.S. to oppose non-intervention would have been "unthinkable." The American ambassador to Spain, although personally sympathetic with the Republican government, concurred, writing on August 26 that the United States "must not become involved by any meddling with the domestic quarrel of Spain."²⁹

Then, on January 6, Congress voted to extend a previous Neutrality Act, making military exports to foreign war zones illegal. The Act also prohibited U.S. citizens from travelling to Spain; passports from this date forward were stamped, "Not valid for travel to Spain." A Minnesota representative, John Bernard, cast

²⁷ Zlatovski, "Anti-hero," 86-98.

²⁸ "International Brigades ID booklet," P1822, Box 1, Clarence Forester Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

²⁹ Zlatovski, "Anti-hero," 105; Cordell Hull quoted in Dominic Tierney, *FDR and the Spanish Civil War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 40; Claude Bowers quoted in *Ibid.*, 53.

the lone dissenting vote in the entire U.S. Congress.³⁰ Although both of the Act's prescriptives contravened the normative right of an established government to purchase arms on the open market, from an American perspective, neither action was unexpected. Public polls from the time indicate that while nearly twice as many Americans supported the Republic as they did the Francoists, still, the majority held no preference. When it came to jeopardizing American neutrality, opinion was even further set against intervention: seventy-six percent opposed modifying the Embargo and seventy-nine percent opposed the sale of arms.³¹

As the western powers turned their collective backs on Spain, the Soviet Union began its intervention on behalf of the Republic. Although Stalin's motivations for doing so are among the most contested issues of the war, in all probability, the Soviet leader viewed Spain as useful for several reasons: as a geostrategic bargaining chip to build collective security against Hitler and as a way to elide his own domestic pressures which sought a greater commitment to exporting revolution.³² By November, the Comintern had begun assembling a network to funnel volunteer soldiers to Spain.³³

When it came to actually choosing to fight in Spain, each Minnesotan made his decision differently. For some, the process was intensely personal. Ben Gardner, while working in the American Committee Against War and Fascism in Philadelphia, was one for whom the decision was a private matter – so private that he did not even consult his wife before announcing that he would fight in Spain. With what was perhaps unwarranted optimism, Gardner later wrote in a letter to Alice, “I felt I had to decide one way or the other and I also [knew] that you probably would have agreed with me that I had to go.” Evidently, Alice would come to resent this lack of consultation, feeling that her husband did not fully understand the position he had left her in.³⁴

For others, what was initially an individual choice quickly became communal. When Clarence Forester decided to go to Spain, he did so along with two Finnish friends. On January 21, 1937 a group of Spanish students from the University of Madrid spoke at the Minneapolis Auditorium in a meeting organized by future-Lincoln Martin Maki. Forester, who was in the audience that night, remembered how the student's pleas for American aid to the Republic affected him: “After listening to them and talking with them after they were through [with their speech], I decided that if I could go there, I would.”³⁵ Later that night, Forester was

³⁰ Tierney, *FDR*, 51-52; Cameron Stewart, "Summoned to the Eternal Field": An Inquiry into the Development and the Composition of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939 (Ph.D diss., Claremont University, 1971), 110.

³¹ Hadley Cantril, ed., *Public Opinion 1935-1946* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 807-808.

³² For more, see Payne, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism*, particularly the discussion on pages 128 ff.

³³ Peter Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 9-10. Much ink has been spilled over the question of Soviet responsibility for the International Brigades. While it is irrefutable that the Soviets planned, executed, and funded the Brigades, it seems equally clear that the Communists merely created an organization to funnel existing sentiment, i.e., it would be too generous to give the Soviet Union sole responsibility for the International Brigade phenomena.

³⁴ Gardner to Alice, August 30, 1937, ALBA.141, Box 1, Folder 1.

³⁵ Clarence Forester, interview by Jay Hutchinson, Oral History (VHS), Minnesota, [2000]. 142.G.6.8F-1, Box 2, Clarence M. Forester Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

approached by Eric Burke, a local Communist organizer, who inquired whether Clarence would like to go to Spain or not. “I said sure I’ll go,” Forester remembered replying.³⁶

Some days hence, while visiting Harold Stone of Minneapolis at a mutual friend’s house, Clarence mentioned that he planned to fight in Spain. As Clarence remembered, Stone was quick to agree the two should go together. At that moment, the pair were joined by a third friend, Veikko Lindfors, who had stopped by the house on an errand. Clarence and Howard quickly agreed amongst themselves that they ought to take Veikko with them. “With you where?” Clarence remembered Veikko wondering. “To Spain, which is a long way from Minneapolis.”³⁷ Veikko too, joined the group.

Others felt compelled to go by their position as Communist Party members. After following the news of the war avidly, George Zlatovski learned at the end of 1936 that some number of Americans had departed for Spain. By March, George himself had decided to volunteer. Describing his decision in the apocalyptic language common among Lincolns, Zlatovski wrote: “being a romantic and a passionate Communist made it impossible for me to sit on the side lines while the future of the world was being decided.” Although he wished to fight as a combat soldier, the Party told him otherwise. One of the few trained engineers among the volunteers, George was needed in his technical capacity. He would join the American Medical Bureau, a humanitarian organization whose legality under the Neutrality Act conveyed legitimacy upon its members who traveled to Spain.³⁸

For all of the Minnesotans who eventually volunteered, what is often surprising is the ease with which they made their decision. Even those who well understood the danger felt little fear. Pete Jorgensen, a Danish-born dairy farmer from Askov Minnesota, remembered volunteering in spite of his expectation that he would not survive the war. For Jorgensen, there was no other realistic mindset – an attitude bespoke of his bleak assessment of the Republic’s chances of successfully repelling Franco. After all, he reasoned, those who hoped to fight the general’s well-armed military with little more than bows and arrows ought not to expect an easy victory.³⁹ While Jorgensen’s analysis proved accurate, the seemingly flippant nature of many of the men’s decisions suggests that a youthful sense of invulnerability permeated the volunteers.

But perhaps a different thesis better explains the nonchalance the men exhibited – particularly since few of the Minnesota Lincolns *were* young men. As M. W. Jackson identifies, many American Lincolns viewed their efforts in Spain as a direct extension of their struggles in America, believing that “the oppressor in Spain is related materially and morally to the oppressor in the United States.”⁴⁰ Jackson’s distillation of the Lincoln’s

³⁶ Forester, interview by Carl E. Ross.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Zlatovski, “Anti-hero,” 107.

³⁹ Peter Jorgensen, et al, interview by Thomas O’Connell and Steven C. Trimble, Oral History (transcript), Askov Minnesota, 1976. AV1990.228.65, Twentieth Century Radicalism in Minnesota Oral History Project, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁴⁰ M. W. Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1994), 86.

logic is consonant with the rhetoric of the Popular Front: that the struggle against fascism was a global affair, and that fighting fascists in Spain was exactly the same as fighting company strikebreakers in Minneapolis. This conception of American political struggle and Spanish martial combat as essentially ‘one fight’ finds ample evidence in the writings of the Minnesota Lincolns and does much to explain the ease with which the men chose to go to Spain. Ben Gardner wrote his wife that they were “still carrying on the same fight together, only on a wider and more separated front.” Clarence Forester reasoned that fighting in Spain was his first chance to strike back at the German and Italian aggression he’d read about: “For me, it wasn’t that different from going on that [truck driver’s] picket line in 1934.” For other Lincolns, their writings shift between domestic and Spanish activity with little sense that the two are different. In his recollections thirty years later, Martin Kuusisto, a Communist lumberjack organizer, moves smoothly from discussing a 1937 logger’s strike to Spain and back to Minnesota in the space of one sentence.⁴¹

The Minnesota Lincoln’s conflation of the Spanish Civil War with their American experiences is a ground potentially rife with misunderstanding. It’s worth noting that for many of the men, the modern and altogether natural distinction between American political struggle *qua* rhetorical struggle and a civil war as necessarily violent would have made little sense to the Minnesota Lincolns; the American political world of the 1930s – particularly on the fringes that the Lincolns inhabited – was one in which the violence of 19th century industrialization had not yet fully subsided. To the Minnesota Lincolns, political activism in America was *assumed* to entail violence – recall George Zlatovski’s unperturbed acceptance of the consequences of a Communist life: destroyed career prospects, penury, and violence – an assumption the biographies of the men corroborate. Ben Gardner was arrested multiple times amidst police violence, Clarence Forester participated in the bloody – and deadly – Trucker’s Strikes, which saw brickbats and iron bars wielded in clashes between company enforcers and worker mobs, and Zlatovski had to be rescued from at least one political rally when company police attempted to remove him by force. His cousin was less fortunate, having been crippled during a similar event in Minneapolis.⁴² In the context of such violence, it’s of little surprise that the Minnesota Lincolns were not dissuaded from volunteering for Spain by the prospect of disfigurement or death. They had already faced both in America.



For the Minnesota Lincolns, their decision to fight in Spain grew primarily out of preexisting political commitments and activities. And while the demographic factors examined in an earlier chapter are important for understanding why these men volunteered for a foreign war, their own words suggest that it was ultimately a political ethos that drove them across the Atlantic. Their assumption of that title – Communist – was grounded in an America where economic progress could no longer be assumed, and where racial

⁴¹ Gardner to Alice, July 12, 1937, ALBA.141, Box 1, Folder 1; Tice, “A Have-Not’s War,” 99; Martin Kuusisto, interview by Irene Paull, Oral History (transcript), Minnesota, 1968, [Uncatalogued], Minnesota Historical Society.

⁴² Zlatovski, “Anti-hero,” 85-86.

oppression and disaffection with global developments prevailed. Their idealism provoked them to militate against the injustice they saw around them, and whenever they first encountered the Communist Party, they found in it an idiom that gave voice to their feelings. But Communist commitment – and that of Depression-era leftists in general – did not come without cost; violence was a frequent reality for the future Lincolns. Thus, when the chance came to fight a *real* war – a war with geopolitical consequences – against the same type of oppressors they had fought on the picket line in America, the Minnesota Lincolns chose to exchange their pamphlets for guns. Within weeks, the first of the Minnesota Lincolns would begin to wend their way toward Spain.