In a letter marked “urgent” sent in 1937 to Mikhail Kalinin, the nominal head of the Soviet state, Spanish communist Adela Rivera Sánchez told an intimate story of war. A party member since 1930, Rivera Sánchez wrote that she had recently arrived in the Soviet Union from Asturias with three small children, the youngest of whom was two. Because the Spanish party required her “immediate return to work in Spain,” she wrote that she was planning “to leave my three children in the Soviet Union and return as soon as possible.”

Such a decision was not uncommon among international communists, who viewed the Soviet Union as a safe haven for their children. What complicated her return – and the reason for her appeal to Kalinin – was that she was two-and-a-half-months pregnant. The “situation in Spain and the conditions of my work,” she explained, “do not permit me to have another child at this time (I am 26 and this is my sixth child).” Thus she asked Kalinin to intervene on her behalf and permit her to have an immediate abortion, “so that I can return to my country and take an active part in the struggle of the Spanish people.”

Rivera Sánchez needed special dispensation to terminate her pregnancy because abortion had been prohibited in the Soviet Union in June 1936.

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1 “Predsedateliu VTsIK Tov. Kalininu,” Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 531, op. 1, d. 186, l. 3. Her name appears in Cyrillic as Adela Rovira Sanches.


3 RGASPI, f. 531, op. 1, d. 186, l. 3.
Spanish Republic never fully decriminalized abortion.\textsuperscript{4}) The Soviet legislation justified the abortion ban as a means of combating “a frivolous attitude toward the family and family responsibility.”\textsuperscript{5} Rivera Sánchez, however, presented her reasons as anything but frivolous. Rather, she invoked earlier revolutionary norms that called on exemplary communists to subordinate the satisfactions of family life to the needs of the revolution, while also underscoring the fact that she already had five children.\textsuperscript{6} In response to her request, she received a note instructing her to report on 13 December 1937 to the Secretariat of the President of the Central Executive Committee to “discuss your matter.”\textsuperscript{7} The archive contains no information regarding the outcome of that meeting.

Rivera Sánchez’s request allows us to see how, for the most committed, international communism was not only a political movement; it was also a way of life. Her appeal dramatizes the personal sacrifices that communists made for the cause. It also suggests how a “good” communist might understand and enact the connection between her political duty and her personal life – indeed she might not consider herself to be making a sacrifice at all as she left her children thousands of miles from home and petitioned to end her pregnancy in order to participate in “the struggle of the Spanish people.” Her determination to join the struggle in Spain demanded the perhaps temporary abandonment of her maternal role. At the same time, her individual circumstances encouraged her to challenge, however implicitly, the Stalinist sanctification of the family. Thus her story – and others like it told in this book – illustrates the ways in which communist commitments shaped personal lives and personal relationships influenced political understandings.

Focusing on the everyday lives of international communists, this book offers a grassroots history of international communism. Transnational interactions among communists occurred, as Rivera Sánchez’s story illustrates, in the context of norms and institutions largely established by the Soviet party. But although such interactions were unequal, they were also messy, unpredictable, emotionally charged, and ultimately productive. This book thus explores the transnational exchanges that occurred in Soviet-structured spaces – from clandestine schools for training international revolutionaries in Moscow to the International Brigades in Spain – as a means of tracing the everyday practices of being communist. It analyzes the appeal of communism, specifically Soviet


\textsuperscript{7} RGASPI, f. 531, op. 1, d. 186, l. 5.
communism for those outside of the Soviet Union, by taking it seriously not only as a revolutionary political creed but also as a way of understanding (and remaking) both the world and the self, the self in the world.

International Communism and Individual Lives

When the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd in October 1917, they aimed not only, or even primarily, to remake the Russian empire and the Russian people. They intended to shake the world: to spark a global transformation of political and human relations. This Bolshevik sense of world historical mission took the institutional form of the Third or Communist International (Comintern), founded in Moscow in 1919 as the headquarters of world revolution. Even now, from the vantage of our thoroughly globalized world, the breadth of the Comintern’s revolutionary ambition is impressive; by 1935, it operated on six continents and had sixty-five member parties. Working in well over a dozen languages, Comintern agents and functionaries collected information and issued directives on topics as diverse as strike activity, the agrarian question, women’s activism, youth mobilization, regional party organizations, the labor press, clandestine operations, the celebration of communist holidays, and the training of new cadres – to provide only a very partial list. The Comintern, in short, can be understood as an enormous fact-finding and policy-making operation run out of Moscow, structured largely by the shifting needs and interests of the Soviet leadership.

Thus histories of international communism are often organized around the important question of the extent to which “central authorities in Moscow” controlled “national communist parties.” The so-called traditionalists in this debate focus on local parties’ subservience to Moscow. In this vein, some


9 An inventory of the Comintern archive was available at http://www.comintern-online.com/ (accessed 11 April 2013).

10 McDermott and Agnew, Comintern, xx.
scholars of the British party emphasize the degree to which study at the International Lenin School, the Comintern’s most prestigious institution devoted to training foreign communists, forged strong bonds between British communists and the Soviet regime – in some cases ties so close that British communists became Soviet spies. So-called revisionists, by contrast, emphasize the social histories of local parties and the dynamism and at least partial autonomy of the communist grassroots. From this perspective another study of British students at the Lenin School emphasizes the “limited and ephemeral” influence of the school and the “resilience” of “prior cultural formations” even in the face of “intense conditioning.”

Recent transnational and cultural studies of international communism have complicated this traditionalist-revisionist dichotomy. In an essay collection on Bolshevism, Stalinism, and the Comintern, editors Norman LaPorte, Kevin Morgan, and Matthew Worley propose expanding the “centre-periphery debate” via transnational comparisons of the extent to which the Soviets controlled a range of national parties. Brigitte Studer and Heiko Haumann’s multilingual collection on Stalinist subjects emphasizes that Soviet control was as much cultural and subjective as political. In his contribution to a collection of essays on British communists, Kevin Morgan emphasizes the variety of communists’ relationships with Moscow. He suggests that exploring the diversity and idiosyncrasy of communist biographies – paying attention to “personal centres” rather than institutional ones – offers a “possible route out of the recent impasse of the centre-periphery dichotomy” and what he calls the “fixation” on questions of control.
Introduction

Drawing on the cultural and biographical strands of this recent work, this book focuses on the everyday work of creating a transnational revolutionary network. Looking at sites of transnational exchange it emphasizes the complex webs of interaction, at once personal and political, that linked international communists not only to Moscow but also to one another. Part I (Chapters 1–2) focuses on Americans and Spaniards who studied and worked in Moscow in the 1930s and introduces several individuals whose trajectories I follow throughout the book. Places like the International Lenin School functioned as points of connection between center and periphery, sites of everyday interactions among communists, both international and Soviet. As they interacted in institutions structured by the “center,” mobile communists from the “periphery” lived and made international communism, although never just as they pleased.

Part II (Chapters 3–5) follows to Spain a number of Lenin School alumni and others who worked or studied in the Soviet Union and explores the transnational contacts central to the experiences of so many who participated in the International Brigades. Initiated in Moscow and managed on a day-to-day basis largely by Western European communists, many of whom were trained in the Soviet Union, the International Brigades brought about thirty-five thousand volunteers to Spain: It constituted the largest and most ambitious, although ultimately unsuccessful, international operation orchestrated by the Comintern. I pay particular attention to the American volunteers in Spain (widely known as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade), who included large numbers of foreign-born or first-generation Americans and were thus a notably transnational and multilingual contingent.

Part III (Chapters 6–7) tracks the personal and institutional connections among those who participated in the Spanish war through World War II and the early years of the cold war. I focus on both Spanish exiles in the Soviet Union, who saw the Soviet war against Germany as an extension of “our war,” and on American communists, who unlike many of their European comrades, had no later story of local resistance to Nazism to overshadow or compete with the (often mythologized) memory of the Spanish war. The book concludes with a discussion of the impact of the cold war and of de-Stalinization on international communists’ connections to one another and the cause.

The Spanish Civil War and the Culture of International Communism

The conflict that came to be known as the Spanish civil war began as a military coup on 17–18 July 1936. Deeply rooted in the social, economic, and political upheavals that shook Spain in the early twentieth century and that in 1931 gave rise to the Spanish Republic, the insurgency aimed to halt change and to overturn Republican reforms that challenged the traditional authority of large landowners, the Catholic Church, and the army.17 Initiated by

17 For introductions to very different assessments of the origins of the war, see Helen Graham, The Spanish Civil War, A Very Short Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005),
soldiers in Spain’s Army of Africa, the coup achieved rapid success in the Protectorate of Morocco. However, on the peninsula supporters of the Popular Front government that had been elected in February 1936 offered strong, if not always well-coordinated, resistance. Thus “despite the support of many officers, the uprising in Spain” was “largely unsuccessful,” taking control of only about one-third of the country. The situation initially seemed to favor the Republic.

What turned the attempted coup into a civil war and an international cause célèbre on the left was the provision of German and Italian military aid to the rebels. By the end of July, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler were dispatching weapons, planes, and troops to Spain. In August 1936 German and Italian planes ferried General Francisco Franco and some fourteen thousand Spanish and Moroccan troops across the Straits of Gibraltar to Spain. On the mainland the Army of Africa launched a ruthless campaign through western Andalusia and Extremadura to Madrid, employing the tactics that colonial officers had developed as a response to guerrilla warfare in the Rif: “sporadic, mobile warfare, executed on a number of fronts” coupled with “systematic ethnic cleansing as a means of ensuring order.” Ultimately, Italy contributed more than seventy thousand troops, and both Germany and Italy sent hundreds of artillery pieces, tanks, planes, and pilots, including the infamous German Condor Legion responsible for the April 1937 destruction of Guernica. In August 1936, the French government, hoping to undercut aid to the insurgents, proposed a ban on all intervention in Spain that won the support of Britain and the Soviet Union, as well as of Italy and Germany, even as the latter two violated it. Thus as the rebels built their forces, the nonintervention agreement denied arms to the Republic.

1–19, and Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5–81. Graham argues that the Republic’s “failure was a quite specific one: It proved unable to prevent sectors of the officer corps from making a coup” and that it was the insurgents’ “original act of violence” that “killed off the possibility of other forms of peaceful political evolution” (48); Payne argues that “political violence was initiated primarily by the left” (45) and that the insurgents acted only “when they judged that it literally would be more dangerous not to rebel than to rebel” (68).


Airlifted across the strait, the brutally effective Army of Africa saved the insurgency from defeat, while the arrival of German and Italian bombers and tanks firmly linked it to fascism and Nazism, not least of all in the Soviet media. Less than two weeks after the rebellion began, Izvestiia carried reports of German and Italian military aid to the rebels and, like Comintern propaganda, characterized the struggle in Spain as a link in the chain of international fascist aggression. A photo that ran in Pravda of a downed rebel airplane with a swastika on its tail made the connection between German fascism and the war in Spain unmistakable. By contrast, the Soviet press emphasized that the Loyalist cause was the “cause of all advanced and progressive humanity” (delo vsego peredovogo i progressivnogo chelovechestva), as Stalin declared in a telegram to the Spanish communist leader José Díaz that appeared in the 16 October 1936 issue of Pravda.

From the beginning, this image of the Soviet Union as committed to defending democracy against fascism was both pervasive and contested. Soviet antifascism galvanized many international volunteers, but others saw it as a smokescreen. Among the earliest and certainly best-known critics of Soviet propaganda and actions in Spain was George Orwell, who in Homage to Catalonia documented his military service in Spain as a member of a militia affiliated with the POUM (Partit Obrer d’Unificació Marxista), an anti-Stalinist Marxist party. For Orwell, vociferous Soviet antifascism effectively obscured the fact that the “whole Comintern policy is now subordinated (excusably, considering the world situation) to the defense of the USSR.” Concerned only about ensuring their own security via cooperation with France, the Soviets, he argued, were more interested in quashing the revolution in Spain than in winning the war. On the other side, the rebels represented communists – Francoist shorthand for all who supported the Republic – as irredeemable infidels, foreign agents of Moscow against whom it was reasonable and necessary to employ “Nationalist” Moroccan troops and German bombs.

The opening of the Soviet archives after 1991 has done little to resolve or substantially reframe debates on the sincerity of Soviet antifascism. Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck, and Grigory Sevostianov, the editors of Spain Betrayed, a collection of Soviet military and Comintern documents published in English translation in 2001, argue that the newly accessible materials verify the “duplicitous maneuvers of the Soviet Union in the Spanish Republic.” Particularly controversial is their claim that the archives demonstrate that the


12 George Orwell, Homage to Catalonia (1938; reprint, San Diego: Harvest/HBJ, 1980), 56.

14 Balfour, Deadly Embrace, 286.

15 Radosh et al., Spain Betrayed, xxii.
real Soviet mission was not to save the Republic or combat fascism but rather “to ‘Sovietize’ Spain and to turn it into what would have been one of the first ‘People’s Republics,’ with a Stalinist-style economy, army, and political structure.” From their perspective, the documents indisputably debunk the “compelling legend” that the Soviet effort to stop fascism in Spain constituted “one of the noblest and most selfless undertakings of the international communist movement.” They thus raise what historian Tony Judt called “the most delicate question” of whether “the International Brigades and their supporters were duped.” Judt for one was ready to agree that the international volunteers “were duped,” dismissing the communist rhetoric of antifascism and defense of democracy as a “fairy tale.”

For other historians, however, the claim that the newly opened archives clearly and incontrovertibly demolish the supposed “legend” of the Spanish civil war is itself a fairy tale. Historian Peter Carroll, best known for his work on the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, argues that two recent document collections including *Spain Betrayed* willfully misuse historical evidence to replace the “honorable legend of the Lincoln Brigade” with “the myths of the Moscow archives.” Helen Graham, a prominent British historian of the war, characterizes *Spain Betrayed* as an exemplar of “the new historical McCarthyism.”

She finds “nothing” in the documents presented to sustain the editors’ assumption that “all Soviet actions in Spain were designed to achieve” – and in fact did achieve – “total control of the Republican government and army.” To make their case, she argues, the editors left “entirely out of account the broader picture of Republican Spain at war.” Historians attending to the “broader historical context” often understand the Soviets as opportunistic – but not necessarily insincere – antifascists: Providing military aid to the Republic served Soviet efforts to prevent “German aggression from turning eastward.” Historian Daniel Kowalsky notes that for its part the Republic accepted the Soviet aid only “grudgingly,” recognizing that “Communist participation and assistance,

27 Radosh et al., *Spain Betrayed*, xvi.
which could not reasonably be refused, was as likely to doom the Loyalist cause as save it,” by “completing its alienation from the West.” He also emphasizes that Soviet control of “events on the ground in Spain was always severely limited.”

From this perspective, the argument that the Soviets were working effectively to transform Spain into a “people’s democracy” on the (later) East European model seems at best “questionable.”

If the war in Spain is no longer, as Christopher Hitchens claimed in 2001, “probably the one argument from the age of twentieth-century ideology that is still alive,” its historiography remains polarized, a high-stakes “take no prisoners” affair. Thus it is worth emphasizing that this book puts the Spanish civil war at the center of a history of international communism in order to understand the importance of Spain as a personal and political point of reference for individual communists, not to argue that the Republic was dominated by communists. The emphasis here is less on high politics than on understanding the meanings and political and emotional appeal of communism for individuals. Indeed the book does not intervene directly in the polemics over alleged Soviet manipulation or control of the Spanish Popular Front government and the international volunteers. It does not assess Soviet motives or track the impacts of Soviet military and political intervention.

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35 Ibid., 703.
40 On Soviet intervention, see Kowalsky, “Operation X,” 159–78; Ángel Viñas, El escudo de la República: El oro de España, la apuesta soviética y los hechos de mayo de 1937 (Barcelona: Crítica, 2007); Daniel Kowalsky, Stalin and the Spanish Civil War [electronic resource]
Nor does it raise the “delicate question” of whether the volunteers were duped.41

The book links international communism to the Spanish civil war because so
many communists reported, then and later, that in Spain they lived their ideals
more intensely, passionately, and fully than they had anywhere else. Even for
those who eventually left the party, the Spanish civil war often remained a
defining moment of their own life stories and personal networks – something
that they often separated (or tried to separate) from the larger Stalinist context.
Thus the focus is on Spain as a critical, but not isolated, moment in the history
of international communism and international communist lives.

To get at the role of Spain in communists’ life histories and communist
culture, the book sets the International Brigades in the context of the under-
standings, experiences, and identities that communists brought with them to
Spain. It begins in Moscow with an examination of everyday life at the Lenin
School and in the offices of the English-language Moscow News. In both places,
remarkably transnational groups of communists worked to define and live lives
of Bolshevik “virtue,” not only in politics but also in the realms of gender and

41 For an introduction to the contentious historiography see George Esenwein, “Freedom Fighters
or Comintern Soldiers? Writing about the ‘Good Fight’ during the Spanish Civil War,” Civil
Wars 12, no. 1–2 (March-June 2010): 156–66. Many accounts focus on particular national
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War (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press 1982); Verle Johnston, Legions of Babel: The
International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War (University Park: Pennsylvania State University