

6-1-1990

La Colonia Latina: The Response of Tampa's Immigrant Community to the Spanish Civil War

Lisa Tignor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory>

Recommended Citation

Tignor, Lisa (1990) "La Colonia Latina: The Response of Tampa's Immigrant Community to the Spanish Civil War," *Tampa Bay History*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol12/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tampa Bay History by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

LA COLONIA LATINA: THE RESPONSE OF TAMPA'S IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY TO THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

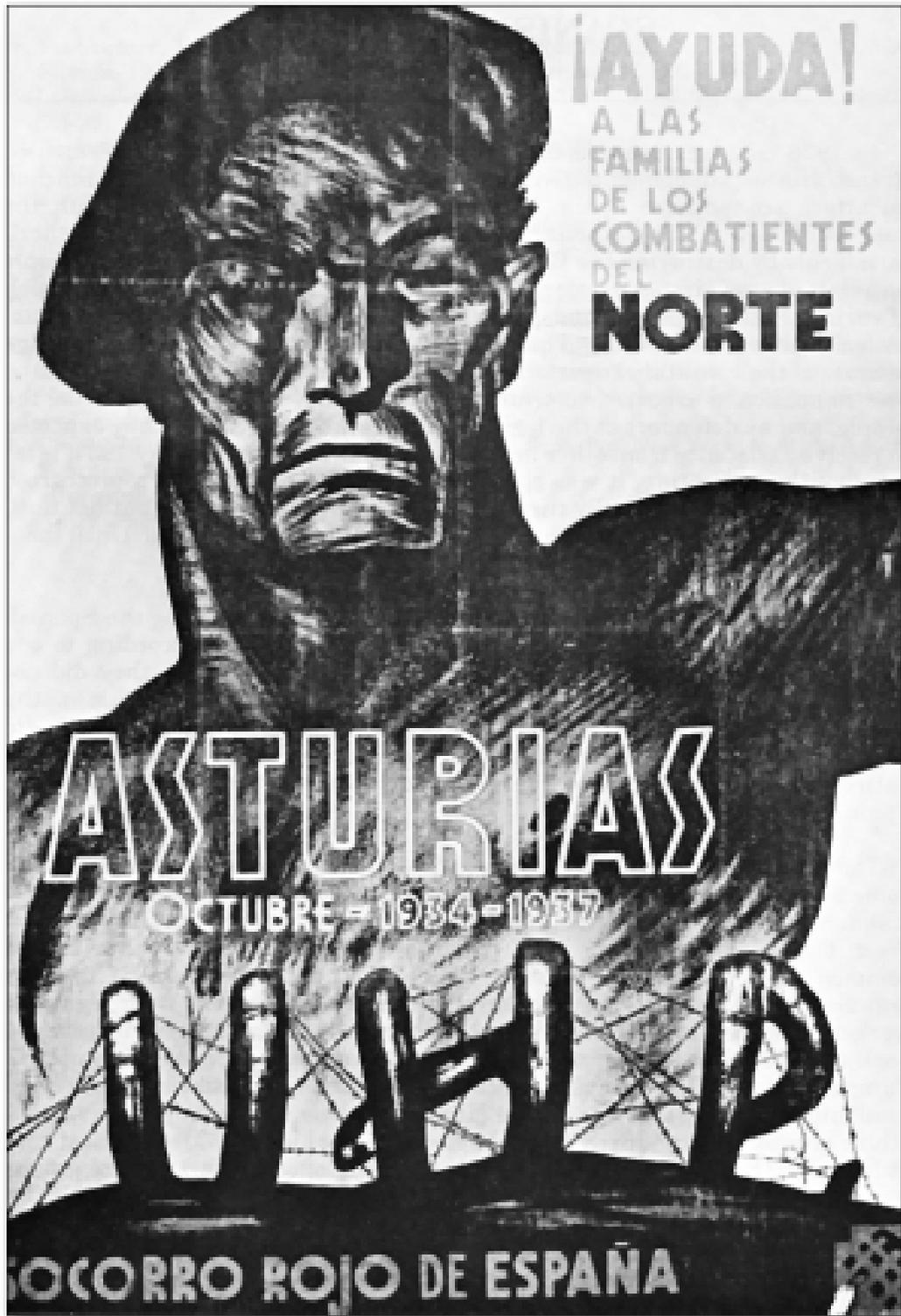
By Lisa Tignor

In 1936 civil war erupted in Spain. On July 18, 1936, General Francisco Franco's forces, supplemented with Moorish recruits and legionnaires, launched an attack on southern Spain. These self-proclaimed Nationalists, with the support of the Spanish Catholic hierarchy, were determined to restore authoritarian rule by destroying the Republic. Earlier in the year, the Spanish people had elected a government under the leadership of the Popular Front, a coalition of various leftist organizations, parties and unions. When the civil war began, each side thought it would end quickly. Nationalists believed they had the edge because of their military superiority, bolstered by aid from Germany and Italy. The Republicans expected to triumph because they had the support of the people, and as defenders of the legitimate government of Spain, they expected to receive assistance from other democracies. However, by January 1937, after five months of fighting, it was clear that the civil war would be a protracted struggle. The war eventually turned in favor of the Nationalists, but not until the spring of 1938 did it become certain that Franco would succeed. Until then, partisans of both sides had retained hope of ultimate victory.

Although the United States remained officially neutral during the Spanish Civil War, American public opinion divided over the issue. According to one observer, most Americans "had no opinion, they did not know, they did not care."¹ A majority of citizens in Tampa, Florida, undoubtedly shared this apathy with the rest of the United States, but Tampa's Latin community decidedly did not. Local Latins reacted immediately to the Spanish Civil War, which was not entirely unexpected by people who had closely followed recent developments in Spain.

Tampa's Latins, residing primarily in Ybor City and West Tampa, comprised some 30,000 to 40,000 of the city's 100,000 residents. Cubans, Spaniards and Italians had created a relatively homogeneous ethnic enclave in Ybor City and West Tampa. Despite some cultural differences, Latin immigrants shared common craft traditions, mutual aid activities and a commitment to labor organization. As skilled cigar makers with a strong sense of their rights as workers, they had collectively confronted employers in a series of strikes dating back to 1887, shortly after the first cigar manufacturers opened factories in Tampa. Outside the workplace, local Latins had also historically survived hardships by joining together and helping one another. For instance, the various ethnic groups had organized mutual aid societies which provided medical care at low cost. Over the years, intermarriage among once distinct émigré groups strengthened these bonds.²

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War heightened longstanding differences between Tampa's immigrant community and the native-born Anglo-Americans who dominated the city. For example, religion separated Anglo and Latin Tampanians in an unusual way as compared to other American communities. Like the majority of Americans, Anglo Tampanians typically attended Protestant churches. While many Latins considered themselves nominally Catholic, a strong anti-clerical feeling dominated their actual behavior. Indeed, the majority of the community did



This poster called for “Aid to the families of the fighters of the North (in) Asturias,” a region in Spain that sent many immigrants to Tampa.

Photograph from *The Palette and the Flame* by John Tisa.

not adhere to the basic sacraments of baptism, marriage and burial with the church. Italians, Spaniards and Cubans in Tampa derived some of their anti-clericalism from radical ideologies, and some from personal experiences. But whatever the source of this attitude, the anti-Catholicism of Tampa Latins mirrored the sentiments of Spanish Republicans.³ Moreover, many Tampa immigrants had been born in Spain, and they and their children still had relatives there. Other Tampa Latins, besides those with personal ties to Spain, generally rallied to the cause of the Republican government during the Spanish Civil War. This included Italians living in Tampa. Elsewhere in the United States, Italian-American communities often supported Benito Mussolini who sided with Franco's forces, but according to one contemporary observer, Tampa's Italians demonstrated the opposite sentiment by booing newsreels of Il Duce.⁴

Victoriano Manteiga provided a voice for Tampa Latins, and he became another unifying force in the community during the Spanish Civil War. Once a reader in the cigar factories, Manteiga had founded *La Gaceta*, a local Spanish-language daily newspaper, in 1922. He established a reputation as an ardent defender of cigar workers and their causes, especially unionization, which leading Tampa Anglos usually opposed. In 1936 Manteiga helped organize and manage many of the fund raising efforts for the Spanish Republic. His most important role, however, may have been in providing an alternative source of information about the civil war. Latin workers wanted sources they could trust, and leading English-language newspapers, such as the Tampa Tribune, had long presented a decidedly anti-immigrant view of labor struggles and vigilante activities directed at local Latins.

The *Tampa Tribune*, refused to take sides in the Spanish Civil War, but it lacked sensitivity to the Latin community's emotional response to the civil war. Although the *Tribune* carefully reported the numerous donations made by Latins to the Republican cause, its editorials frequently showed a bias that offended Latins. For example, it simplistically labelled the Republicans as reds and communists. Moreover, on October 2, 1936, the paper asserted that each side in the Spanish Civil War was equally guilty of excesses.⁵ Just a few weeks later the *Tribune* stated in an editorial, entitled "Savagery in Spain," that "the Spaniards are courageous, cruel, and proud." These opinions infuriated Victoriano Manteiga who responded in his own column, calling the *Tribune* editor not only discourteous to the Latins who helped build Tampa, but naive about the situation in Spain.⁶

In his editorial column Manteiga criticized the generally poor quality of the press coverage of the war by the international wire services, especially the Associated Press, which issued inaccurate or false reports.⁷ A similar complaint came from the U.S. ambassador to Spain, Claude G. Bowers, who wrote to President Roosevelt that "nine tenths of the press reports are false. I have never seen, not even during the World War such persistent and outrageous propaganda."⁸ In November 1936 Manteiga specifically accused his colleagues at the *Tampa Tribune*, of falsely reporting the surrender of Madrid based on AP information.⁹

Because of their involvement in national and international labor politics, Tampa's Spaniards, Cubans and Italians had a world view that extended well beyond the scope of most Anglos. Whether they intended to move back to Cuba or Spain or remain in this country, Latins wanted news of events affecting their families and relatives at home. *La Gaceta* prominently featured news about Latin America and the Caribbean region. Indeed, readers looked southward, sharing

cultural ties with Latin Americans which were more significant than any links with their North American neighbors. They wanted information about Latin Americans who were just as passionate about the war, but with some favoring the Nationalists and others the Republicans. Manteiga applauded when Mexico supplied the Spanish Republic with war materiel.¹⁰ The local Latin community hoped that the United States would follow Mexico's example and side with the Republic.

Of all Latin American countries, Cuba and its response to the Spanish Civil War most interested Tampeños. *La Gaceta* had obtained some of its information about Spain via short wave radio from Cuba, but it soon reported that the Cuban government was censoring press and radio reports favorable to the Republicans.¹¹ In 1936 Cuba had not officially endorsed either side in the civil war, and the United States was pressuring for Cuban neutrality while Spain sought support for its government. Evidence suggests that Cuban President Fulgencio Batista may have considered aligning Cuba with Franco and the Nationalists in order to break the hegemony of the United States, but Cuba remained neutral until 1938 when it finally supported the Republican government.¹²



Victoriano Manteiga, founder of *La Gaceta*.

Photograph courtesy of Roland Manteiga.

Unlike Latin Americans and Tampa Latins, most North Americans did not take sides in the Spanish conflict during 1936. They were concerned with economic problems and upcoming national elections, not international events. Some thought the Republican left in Spain would become merely a pawn of the Soviet Union. Clearly, the public mood in the rest of the United States was isolationist, as demonstrated by the neutrality legislation passed by Congress from 1935 to 1937.¹³

The neutrality of the United States, in the face of German and Italian intervention on the side of Franco and the Nationalists, disillusioned Tampa's Latin community. Victoriano Manteiga dismissed North American responses to the war as at best misguided and at worst dangerous to the future of the world. He asserted that U.S. neutrality helped the Nationalists and did not stop any fighting or killing. According to Manteiga, no one could be neutral; if one were neutral, one supported Fascists.¹⁴

Soon after Franco and his troops had marched against the Spanish Republic in July 1936, the Latin community in Tampa organized to support the Republicans. Led by local labor activists and officials of their mutual aid societies, Tampa Latins created the Committee for the Defense

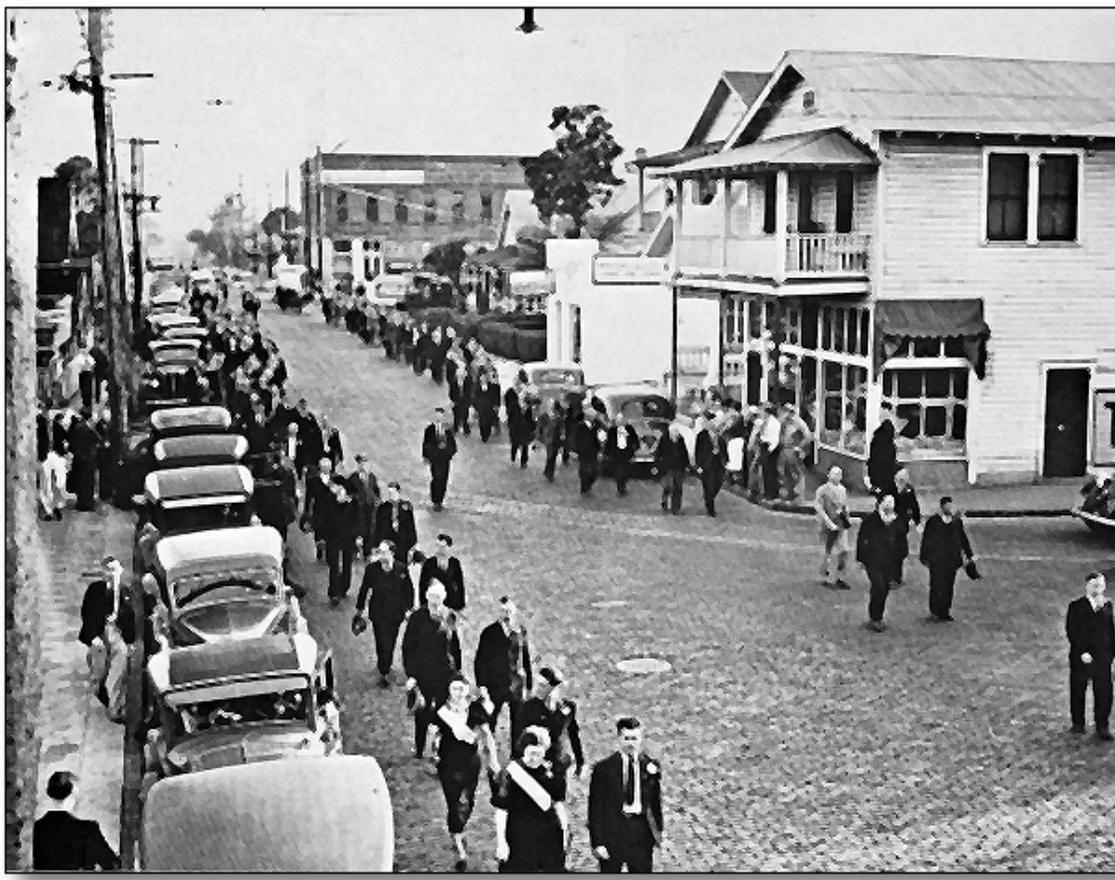
of the Spanish Popular Front (Comité de Defensa del Frente Popular Español) in early August 1936. The leaders sent a sub-committee to visit Raul Vega, a cigar manufacturer and president of the Ybor City Chamber of Commerce, to ask permission to collect funds in the Latin community's businesses, especially cigar factories. Vega replied that he would consider the matter.¹⁵ Within several days, *La Gaceta* published the cigar manufacturers' answer: the owners refused to permit collections in the factories because they wished to comply with U.S. neutrality.¹⁶ The community responded quickly and in force. The following evening one thousand residents assembled to hear leaders of the Committee for the Defense of the Popular Front, and they voted to collect funds in defiance of the owners. Manteiga observed that the owners who opposed the collections had to surrender to the will of the Latin community.¹⁷

This initial opposition overcome, the defense committee in a week collected \$2,000, which it sent to Spain.¹⁸ Jose Yglesias, a West Tampa native who lived in Ybor City at the time, later recalled: "Everybody gave ten percent of their pay for the Republic. It was wild. The total community was with Loyalist Spain. They used to send enormous amounts of things. It was totally organized."¹⁹

Despite the general indifference and occasional opposition of North Americans, the Latin community in Tampa sustained its effort to aid the Spanish Republic. The generous contributions to the Republic demonstrated the depth of Latin feelings. According to one contemporary observer, "Altogether the per-capita aid rendered by the cigar workers was greater than that of any other group in the United States. They sent nearly \$200,000, two ambulances, tons of food and clothing, and six million cigarettes to war-torn Spain."²⁰ Victoriano Manteiga echoed this appraisal: "Tampa aids the cause of the legitimate government [of Spain] and this aid is comparatively greater than any other city in the nation."²¹

Fund raising for a common cause was familiar to the workers since they had regularly collected union dues and strike funds in the past. Volunteer collectors visited the cigar factories on pay day to collect what they could for the Spanish cause. Although it was an economic hardship, workers gave generously throughout the course of the war and took pride in their contributions. Every week *La Gaceta* listed cigar factories in order of the total amount of their contributions. Another list named individual and small business contributors with their donations. Mutual aid societies of Ybor City and West Tampa supplemented the workers' weekly contributions. The three major Latin clubs, Centro Español, Centro Asturiano and Círculo Cubano, offered their assistance. Centro Español declared in August 1936 that for the rest of the year, its fiestas would raise funds "for those who suffer and for the Spanish Republic!"²²

The Tampa defense committee participated in a loose network of volunteer groups working in behalf of the Spanish Republic. This network operated locally in Tampa, as well as regionally and nationally. In addition to working closely with the local cigar makers union, the Tampa committee cooperated with the Italian Antifascist Group in Ybor City. The committee's leadership also corresponded with various organizations in other cities.²³ For instance, Jacksonville cigar workers forwarded funds for the cause to Tampa.²⁴ Similar organizations were active in New York City and Chicago, according to letters printed by the Tampa Committee in *La Gaceta*.²⁵



On May 6, 1937, several thousand people marched from the Labor Temple in Ybor City to Tampa's City Hall to protest the slaughter of innocent civilians by Nazi and Fascist bombers in Spain.

Photograph courtesy of *La Gaceta*.

Activities on behalf of the Spanish Republic coincided with increased union organizing in Tampa. The depression had been extremely hard on Latin workers, but in 1936 the cigar business began to recover. A trade magazine of manufacturers, *The Tobacco Leaf*, reported factories operating on a six-day week and production and employment levels reaching the highest point of the 1930s.²⁶ However, wages lagged behind rising prices. Luisa Moreno, an organizer for the cigar makers union, complained that cigar workers could not get wage increases despite the improving economy.²⁷ Manteiga agreed, quoting high prices for basic consumer commodities, such as ice, eggs and milk, and declaring that wages remained too low.²⁸

With employment expanding and the cost of living rising, the time seemed right to organize cigar workers again. The leaders of the Committee for the Defense of the Popular Front came from the ranks of union organizers, and they combined efforts to support the Spanish Republic with renewed attempts to increase union membership among the cigar workers.²⁹ The annual convention of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was scheduled to meet in Tampa in

November 1936, and this undoubtedly also helped raise union consciousness among Tampa cigar workers.

The visits of two prominent Spanish officials in late November 1936 heightened the community's enthusiasm for Republican Spain and indicated the significance of the Latin community's support for the Republican government. The Spanish ambassador to the U.S., Don Fernando de los Ríos, was feted by prominent Latin citizens for four days. During his stay he toured some cigar factories and enjoyed the hospitality of the centros.³⁰ Isabel Palencia, a member of the Spanish parliament who toured the United States and Europe to promote the cause of the Republicans, arrived in Tampa near the end of the ambassador's stay, and both were greatly encouraged and moved by the response of the Latin community.³¹

Ambassador de los Ríos and Isabel Palencia asked to speak to the AFL convention in Tampa, but the federation refused. Despite widespread sympathy for the Republic, a resolution urging AFL support for the Spanish Republic also failed.³² Victoriano Manteiga argued in *La Gaceta* that the AFL and its president, William Green, should be condemned for their failure to back Spain and acknowledge labor's support of the Republic.³³

Defenders of the Republic also encountered local resistance. One source of opposition was the cigar factory owners.³⁴ During the fall of 1936, Jock Murray, a writer for *Tampa Tribune* and local correspondent for *The Tobacco Leaf*, described disinterest, neutrality and even opposition to the Spanish Republic among cigar factory owners. Manuel L. Pérez, a member of the executive committee of the Association of Cigar Manufacturers and Leaf Tobacco Dealers, wrote an article entitled "Views on the Tragedy of Spain." He unequivocally declared his position on the war: "the present Spanish government is NOT a popular government representing the will of the people; it is a government of reds running wild with power."³⁵

The resignation of the Spanish consul in Tampa, Paul Ubarri, surprised the Latin community and revealed another source of opposition to the Republic. Ubarri suddenly declared his support for Franco's Nationalists and his desire to return to Spain after their anticipated capture of Madrid in November 1936. When they failed to do so, the Republican government announced that it could no longer support Ubarri and recalled him to Spain. The local community had welcomed Ubarri, and he had originally played a prominent role in the activities on behalf of the Republic. Manteiga expressed shock at Ubarri's deceitful behavior. In response, Latins supported their own citizen, Gustavo Jimenez, as interim consul.³⁶

Further opposition arose in the Anglo community in Tampa. A public condemnation of the Latin community's support for the Republic came from the Catholic pastor of Sacred Heart Church, the Reverend Felix J. Clarkson. According to reports in *La Gaceta*, Father Clarkson delivered a virulent attack from the pulpit and exhorted his congregation to "not give a penny of your money nor one word of support to to Loyalist government of Spain, or the government of Mexico, or the government of Russia, because they are communists and atheists to the bottom of their hearts. They are against God – Remember God First, Afterwards and Always."³⁷ Since most of the residents of Ybor City and West Tampa did not go to his church, it is unclear whom Father Clarkson wished to reach with his highly emotional message in support of General Franco. Perhaps he appealed to some of the families of the successful factory owners or leaders



A poster issued by Spain's Republican government to rally support during the battle of Madrid.

Photograph from *The Palette and the Flame* by John Tisa.

in the Anglo community. His position certainly paralleled that of the Catholic hierarchy in Rome and North America.³⁸ In any case, these attacks by factory owners, the Spanish consul and the Catholic Church had no demonstrable effect on the continuing ardor of the Latin community for the Republic.

During the first months of the Spanish Civil War, Latins in Tampa succeeded in raising a substantial amount of money to aid the Republic. However, they were unsuccessful in convincing others to support their cause. The *Tampa Tribune* recorded amounts collected, meetings attended and dances held, but it was not swayed to change its "neutral" editorial policy. The AFL did not feel enough pressure, even in this city with an eventful labor history, to allow representatives of the Republic to speak to its assembly. Thus, while Latins collectively responded to the crisis in Spain, they enlisted no allies, even locally, to join them.

The Spanish Civil War assumed heroic proportions during the later months of 1936. The war was not simply about political leadership. Spain served as a training ground for the Axis powers, as Germany and Italy practiced war on a defenseless civilian population. The United States, by denying help to the defenders of democracy, virtually insured the victory of fascism.³⁹

Although most Americans viewed the conflict without emotion or concern, Tampa's Latin community understood what was at stake in Spain. They were personally connected to the conflict because of relatives still living in Spain and because of their culture and language which emanated from Spain. Additionally, they shared with Spanish Republicans a political ideology based on radical politics, labor organization and anti-clericism. The Spanish Civil War has been called the last opportunity to side with the forces of good against evil. Only years later could some look back and see the lost opportunity to halt fascism and perhaps prevent World War II. Some individuals who influenced U.S. foreign policy during the Spanish Civil War eventually recognized their errors.⁴⁰ Tampa Latins, on the other hand, knew they had fought "the good fight."

¹ Jay F. Taylor, *The United States and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), 136, quoting Thomas A. Bailey.

² Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 50, 55.

³ *La Gaceta*, August 6, 1936; Mormino and Pozetta, *Immigrant World*, 216-21.

⁴ Stetson Kennedy, *Palmetto Country* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1942), 321.

⁵ *Tampa Tribune*, October 2, 1936.

⁶ *Ibid.*, October 21, 1936; *La Gaceta*, October 23, 1936.

⁷ *La Gaceta*, November, 14, 1936.

⁸ Bowers to Roosevelt, in Edgar B. Nixon, ed., *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Foreign Affairs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 395.

⁹ *La Gaceta*, November 24, 1936.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, October 31, 1936.

¹¹ Ibid., September 25, 1936; see also October 7, 1936.

¹² Alistair Hennessey, "Cuba," in Mark Falcoff and Fredrick B. Pike, eds., *The Spanish Civil War, 1936-39: American Hemispheric Perspectives* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 127.

¹³ Taylor, *Spanish Civil War*, 43.

¹⁴ *La Gaceta*, September 2, 1936.

¹⁵ Ibid., August 7, 1936.

¹⁶ Ibid., August 13, 1936.

¹⁷ Ibid., August 14, 16, 1936.

¹⁸ Ibid., August 17, 1936.

¹⁹ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times* (New York: Patheon Books, 1970), 109.

²⁰ Kennedy, *Palmetto Country*, 322.

²¹ *La Gaceta*, October 29, 1936.

²² Ibid., August 18, 1936, p. 4.

²³ Ibid., October 8, 12, 16, 1936.

²⁴ Ibid., June, 19, 1936.

²⁵ Ibid., July 3, October 29, 1936; Taylor, *Spanish Civil War*, 48, 129, 136.

²⁶ *The Tobacco Leaf*, October 3, 10, November 7, 28, December 19, 1936.

²⁷ *La Gaceta*, September 22, 1936.

²⁸ Ibid., October 16, 1936.

²⁹ Ibid., October 1, 1936.

³⁰ *Tampa Tribune*, November 22, 24, 1936; *La Gaceta*, November 21, 22, 1936.

³¹ *La Gaceta*, November 22, 23, 1936.

³² Taylor, *Spanish Civil War*, 136; *Tampa Tribune*, November 16, 19, 1936; *La Gaceta*, November 18, 1936.

³³ *La Gaceta*, November 18, 1936.

³⁴ Kennedy, *Palmetto Country*, 321.

³⁵ *The Tobacco Leaf*, November 28, 1936.

³⁶ *La Gaceta*, November 12, 1936; *Tampa Tribune*, November 17, 1936.

³⁷ *La Gaceta*, November 25, 1936.

³⁸ José M. Sanchez, *The Spanish Civil War as a Religious Tragedy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1987), 184.

³⁹ Douglas Little, *Malevolent Neutrality: The United States, Great Britain, and the Origins of the Spanish Civil War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 265.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 262.