

Charlie Hutchinson: the only black Briton in the International Brigades

80

SOLICITUD DE PASO O INGRESO EN EL PARTIDO COMUNISTA ESPAÑOL (SECCION DE LA INTERNACIONAL COMUNISTA)

El camarada Charles Hutchinson
Nacionalidad English nacido el May 10th 1918
Localidad Oxford provincia Oxford nación England
Residente en España desde Dec - 5th - 1936
en calidad de (1) Volunteer Soldier en el lugar (2) Member of Com Arts TB Alliance
Miembro del Partido Comunista de England desde 1935
Inscrito últimamente en la célula de Fulham Branch localidad de London SW6 nación England
solicita su paso o ingreso al Partido Comunista Español.
El _____ Firma Ch Hutchinson

(1) Indíquese la profesión o el grado —(2) Indíquese la fábrica o la brigada.

Form completed by Charlie Hutchinson in Spain, giving brief biographical details.

It's widely known that within the American Lincoln Battalion of the International Brigades that served in the Spanish Civil War there were a number of [African Americans](#). Most famously the Texan military veteran and Communist, [Oliver Law](#), became the first Black American to command white troops in battle; when he was tragically killed at Brunete in July 1937, he had risen to the rank of commander of the American volunteers. What is much less known is that there was a black British volunteer serving in the British Battalion. His name was Charlie Hutchinson.

It's perhaps not surprising that little known about Charlie for, apart from a small file held within the Comintern archives in Moscow, few details of his time in Spain remain and, sadly, no photographs. While it would be a stretch to discuss wider issues of race and prejudice within the International Brigades based on the record of one volunteer, his experiences do tell us much about the difficulties many Britons encountered when they wanted to go home. As one Scottish member of the battalion later explained, 'while you could volunteer in, you couldn't volunteer out.'¹

We know that Charles William R. Hutchinson was born in Witney, Oxfordshire, on 10 May 1918. His mother, whose maiden name was Harper, was presumably not in a position to raise him, for Hutchinson tells of growing up in the [National Children's Home and Orphanage in London](#). In the spring of 1936, Hutchinson, who had just turned 18 years of age, was living in Fulham and working as a lorry driver. He was also Branch Chair of the local Young Communist League and it seems clear, from remarks he made later, that he had become personally involved in the battle against Mosley's Blackshirts. In the late summer of 1936 this led him, like nearly 2500 from Britain and Ireland, to volunteer to go to Spain and personally take the fight to Franco, Hitler and Mussolini. As he explained: "I am half black. I grew up in the National Children's Home and Orphanage. Fascism meant hunger and war."² For Charlie, as for the numerous Jewish volunteers, fascism was a real and personal threat, beyond any theoretical abstraction.

He left Britain in either late November or early December 1936 and was recorded by Special Branch as having 'left for Spain to serve as machine gunner with Govt. Forces.'³⁾ At this time the British Battalion had not yet been formed, so once in Spain he joined the British and Irish dominated Number One Company of the Marseillaise Battalion of the 14th International Brigade.⁴⁾ He was with the unit when it was sent to contain a Rebel breakthrough at Lopera, on the Córdoba front in southern Spain. There, outnumbered and at the mercy of the Rebels' overwhelming air dominance, the British and Irish company was cut to pieces. Charlie Hutchinson was wounded and a great number of his comrades – including Charles Darwin's great-grandson, [John Cornford](#) – were killed.

Having recuperated from his wounds, Charlie was informed that he was going to be sent home due to his age, but he refused to leave.⁵⁾ So, rather than being sent to join his compatriots in the British Battalion then fighting on the Jarama front, he was transferred away from the line, assigned to be an ambulance driver with the 5th Republican Army Corps. However, while Charlie seemingly wanted to remain in Spain, his mother (from whom it seems he was no longer estranged) was of a different mind and she wrote in April 1937, citing his young age and pleading that he be sent home. This seem to have rather changed Charles' feelings about leaving, partly because he was becoming worried about his step-father, who had been hospitalised with serious gastric problems.

es copia 83
85

Barcelona, 27 de Agosto de 1938

Camarada FUSIMAÑA
Comisario del XVº. Cuerpo de Ejercito

Estimado Camarada,

Me comunican que el Camarada HUTCHINSON Ch Charles Williams, presta actualmente servicio como conductor de ambulancia en la Sanidad del XVº. Cuerpo de Ejercito.

Este Camarada llegó a España el 25 de Noviembre de 1936, cuando no tenía más que 18 años. Ha pertenecido a la 1ª. Compañía Inglesa y ha combatido en los frentes de Cordoba y de Madrid.

En el mes de Abril de 1937, su madre exigió su regreso por razones de edad. Despues estuvo aun en el frente de Teruel, Aragon y Ebro. No ha recibido ninguna carta de sus padres desde hace 10 meses, que parece ser se encuentra actualmente en condiciones bastante difíciles.

Ha hecho una solicitud de permiso y su dirección actual es RT.

Te ruego intervengas para que este Camarada obtenga un permiso de acuerdo con las ultimas disposiciones del Excmo. Señor residente del Consejo de Ministros, Dr. NEGRIN.

Saludos antifascistas.

EL COMISARIO DELEGADO DE GUERRA
Inspector de las Brigadas Internacionales
Luigi GALLO

Letter from Gallo (Luigi Longo) to Comrade Fusimaña, Commissar of the XV Republican Corps

Over the next few months, Charlie made a number of appeals to his superiors, garnering much support, but little success. The following June, he wrote a worried note explaining that he hadn't received a letter from his parents for ten months, leading him to assume that they must be facing dire circumstances. Yet, rather than asking to be permanently repatriated, Hutchinson asked only that he might be granted a temporary leave of absence to deal with his family problems. 'I have been in Spain since Nov 25th 1936', he pleaded, 'When I came to Spain I was 18½ yrs and not on one occasion have I use[d] my age for an excuse.' Furthermore, Charlie was himself now suffering from health problems, so was becoming increasingly desperate.⁶⁾

Assessments by his superiors make it manifestly clear that the lack of progress was not as a result of any failure on Hutchinson's part. Jim Ruskin, a Captain in Brigade Transmissions, recounted that both Hutchinson's political views and his work were 'Good [and] for his age quite developed.'⁷⁾ Likewise, Charlie's senior officer in the Motorised Company of the 15th Army Corps, Harry Evans, described Hutchinson as 'a hard and capable worker'.⁸⁾

Finally, in August 1938, an order was given that Hutchinson should be repatriated due to his young age and exemplary period of service. On the 27th of that month the Italian Communist, [Luigi Longo](#), one of the most senior and powerful commanders of the International Brigades (known in Spain as 'Gallo'), wrote to a Comrade Fusimaña, the Commissar of the XV Army Corps, on Hutchinson's behalf:

Te ruego intervengas para que este Camarada obtenga un permiso de acuerdo con las ultimas disposiciones del Excmo. Senor Presidente del Consejo Ministros, Dr. NEGRIN.⁹⁾

[I ask you to intervene so that this Comrade obtains a permit in accordance with the last dispositions of the Hon. Mr. President of the Ministers Council, Dr. Negrín.]

Despite this, nothing seems to have happened, for on 2 September 1938, Charlie sent another personal appeal, complaining that 'I was 18 when I came to Spain and I feel it is just to[o] bad if the I.B. can release a kid of 20 y[ea]rs after nearly two years of good service.'¹⁰⁾

His appeal was answered personally by Alonso 'Lon' Elliot, a former Cambridge University languages student, who worked under [Luigi Longo](#) in the Political Commissars' headquarters in Madrid and in the Foreign Cadres Commission of the Spanish Communist Party in Barcelona. Elliott assured Charlie that he was taking a personal interest in his case and apologised that it still hadn't been resolved. 'For my part', he wrote, 'I will see that comrade Gallo is reminded of your case, and can assure you that everything that can be done from the Barcelona end will be done to help you. Best of luck, yours fraternally, AME.' However, somewhat unhelpfully, he suggested that Charlie should raise the matter once again with his immediate superiors.¹¹⁾

After all these efforts on Hutchinson's behalf, one might assume that he would have been repatriated with the other British volunteers, following their withdrawal from the front in September. However, when the survivors of the British Battalion crossed the border into France on 6 December 1938, the unfortunate Hutchinson was not among them. Only on 19 December, nearly two weeks later, was he finally released from service and repatriated.¹²⁾

That a request to repatriate one British volunteer should thwart the efforts of several senior figures in the International Brigades rather flies in the face of the view that the Brigades were a highly-disciplined, strictly-hierarchical organisation, where commanders, such as Longo, held absolute power and could act with impunity. While that could certainly be the case on occasion, it is important to recognise the corrosive effect the war had on the Republicans' political and military

efficacy. As Paddy O'Daire, one of several Irish commanders of the British Battalion accurately observed, 'all war's a muddle.'¹³⁾

As yet, little evidence can be found of Hutchinson's later life. We do know that Charlie was one of the first of the Spanish veterans to volunteer for service in the British Army in the Second World War. He served for a time in Iran, before being transferred to France in 1944, just after D-Day.¹⁴⁾ And in early 1947, a Charles W. Hutchinson was married to a Patricia L. Holloway and the same individual reappears in the electoral register of 1958, living at 11 Argyll Mansions, Fulham, London. Records suggest that he later moved to Bournemouth, where he died in March 1993, aged 74.¹⁵⁾

Charlie Hutchinson occupies a unique position as the only mixed-race volunteer among the British volunteers in Spain, so it would be fitting if more details could be found about his life. However, there is one small detail that remains to tell: in 1985, while helping M.J. Hynes with his research for an undergraduate dissertation, Charlie Hutchinson (along with 65 other British International Brigaders) completed a questionnaire on his experiences as a volunteer in Spain. Whether the questionnaires themselves survived is unknown, but one snippet remains, allowing Charlie to have the last word on why he believed so many people from around the world joined him in choosing to risk their lives on behalf of the Spanish Republic:

The Brigaders came out of the working class; they came out of the battle of Cable Street, they came out of the struggles on the side turnings ... they weren't Communist, they weren't Socialists, but they were anti-fascist.¹⁶⁾

<http://www.richardbaxell.info/hutchinson/>