Nationalism Through Communism: The Experiences of British Volunteers to the Spanish Civil War
Miranda van Dijk (COL 2017)
Advisor: Antonio Feros

My project is aimed towards exploring the experiences of several thousand British citizens who travelled to Spain from 1936 to 1939 to fight in the Spanish Civil War. This was an incredibly ideologically charged war that pitted a liberal Popular Front government against a quasi-fascist military coup. The British Volunteers who I am studying volunteered on the side of the Popular Front, mostly in the Comintern-organized International Brigades. I am exploring several themes within these volunteers, including the way that the Communist Party of Great Britain embraced the Popular Front, allowing it to recruit volunteers with nationalist sentiments, and how volunteers embraced these sentiments and eventually moved away from the Communist Party’s message. With this research, I hope to shed light on how an ideological conflict can initially attract volunteers based on perceived ties, and how those volunteers are affected by their participation in the conflict.

My time in London and Manchester allowed me to access letters and diaries kept by individual volunteers. I was also able to find copies of the Volunteer for Liberty, a wall newspaper published by the International Brigades. Through this research, I have been able to connect more directly to these volunteers’ experiences and understand how volunteers perceived their places in the Spanish Civil War. By accessing these primary materials, I have been able to explore how nationalism played into volunteers’ experiences of communism. This project has allowed me to understand how historical research is carried out, and how historians are able to pull together a variety of source material in order to build a coherent narrative.