



# Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War

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International Brigades and the  
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Gerben Zaagsma



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## A Note on Translations

I follow the YIVO transcription system for Yiddish, while retaining the orthography found in the original sources. This means that the same words can be spelled differently, depending on how they were spelled in the original Yiddish. Titles of (newspaper) articles and books in Yiddish have not been translated in the notes. In cases where a title is particularly meaningful it is quoted in the main text in its English translation. Even so, the original titles often convey a meaning or message that inevitably gets lost in translation. Names are romanized except when they appear in quotes or titles of references in which case I adhere to transcription rules (thus one can find the name 'Weitz' in the text and 'Vays' in a note). Spelling or other mistakes in quotes have not been corrected but left as they were found in the original sources. Unless otherwise indicated all translations into English are mine.

## Abbreviations

APPP	Archive de la Préfecture de Police de Paris
CAC	Centre des Archives Contemporaines
CDH	Comités de Défense de L'Humanité
CGT	Confédération Générale du Travail
CGTU	Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire
CHAN	Centre Historique des Archive Nationales
CIAPE	Comité International d'Aide au peuple espagnol
Comintern	Communist International
CPUSA	Communist Party of the United States of America
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
FALB	Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade
IBA	International Brigades Association
JTA	Jewish Telegraph Agency
KPP	Komunistyczna Partia Polski – Communist Party of Poland
LICA	Ligue Internationale Contre l'Anti-Semitisme
LPZ	Linke Poale Zion
MML	Marx Memorial Library
MOE	Main d'Oeuvre Étrangère
MOI	Main d'Oeuvre Immigrée
PCF	Parti Communiste Français – French Communist Party
RGASPI	Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History
SCW	Spanish Civil War
SFIO	Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière – French Socialist Party
VALB	Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade



# Introduction: From 'Chosen Fighters of the Jewish People' to Jewish Resistance Fighters

## On Jewish volunteers

*All Jewish volunteers understand the importance of the mission they have to fulfil as chosen fighters of the Jewish people. They are also determined to turn the Botwin company into an example in all areas.<sup>1</sup>*

Y. Lekhter, 3 January 1938

*The International Brigades became the vehicle through which Jews could offer the first organized armed resistance to European fascism. Their combattant role in Spain proved that they could fight well, and that as early as 1936 they were actively resisting fascism. Not all went passively to the concentration camps and crematoria.<sup>2</sup>*

Albert Prago, 1980

On 17 July 1936 a major part of the army of the Spanish Republic revolted against the Popular Front government that had been elected in February of the same year. The ensuing civil war raged on until April 1939, when general Franco declared victory, resulting in the establishment of the Franco dictatorship that lasted until 1975. The Spanish Civil War did not only pit a coalition of anti-leftist parties and groups within Spanish society against the ruling Popular Front coalition; the support of Hitler and Mussolini for the so-called Nationalists headed by general Franco, and subsequent support for the republican Loyalists by the Soviet Union and Communist International, turned a civil war that was deeply rooted in internal Spanish strife into a conflict with significant international dimensions, against the background of rising tensions in Europe as a result of Nazi Germany's increasingly belligerent behaviour.

Before long, the first foreign volunteers could be seen fighting in different militias on the Spanish battlefields. Many were delegates to the Workers Olympiad that was to take place in Barcelona between 19 and 26 July 1936 and was organized in opposition to the Olympic Games in Berlin. Instead of joining an international sports event, however, the young athletes ended up in the middle of a burgeoning civil war and many decided to stay, volunteering to fight the rebels in the militias, anarchist, socialist or communist, that were organized in these early stages of the conflict. In September 1936 the Communist International (Comintern) decided to create an international

army in support of the Republican government, and its member parties began the recruitment of volunteers. The newly created so-called International Brigades, into which most foreign volunteers in the militias were eventually absorbed, began to be deployed in October 1936. In the course of the war at least 35,000 volunteers from more than fifty countries fought in the International Brigades. According to the most accurate figures, around 3,500–4,000 volunteers were of Jewish descent.<sup>3</sup> Both during and after the civil war, the participation of these ‘Jewish volunteers’ has been acknowledged and articulated, albeit in very different ways. Indeed, behind Y. Lekhter’s label ‘Chosen fighters of the Jewish people’ and Albert Prago’s characterization of Jewish volunteers as the first armed Jewish resistance fighters against fascism lie two highly particular sets of contexts, concerns and debates and, indeed, two very different groups of ‘Jewish volunteers’.

Y. Lekhter (whose real name was Pesach Kohn) was a correspondent for the Parisian Yiddish daily *Naye Prese*, which had been published by Jewish migrant communists in Paris since 1934.<sup>4</sup> Lekhter actually referred to those Jewish volunteers that were members of the Naftali Botwin company, a Jewish military unit that was created within the Polish Dombrowsky Brigade in December 1937 following lobbying efforts of the Parisian Jewish communists, and he would soon become the editor of its journal *Botvin*. What we have here, then, are Polish-Jewish communists endorsing and propagating the struggle of a Jewish military unit on the Spanish battlefields in the Yiddish daily they edited in Paris in the latter half of the 1930s. Writing forty years after the Spanish Civil War, American-Jewish veteran Albert Prago was not so much concerned with a specific group of Jewish volunteers as with the broader pan-European context in which the war took place and in which they ultimately found themselves. Grounded on the basis that the many volunteers in the brigades had not only come to Spain to fight against Franco but also, and especially, to fight against his fascist allies Hitler and Mussolini, Prago presented the struggle of volunteers of Jewish descent as the first act of Jewish resistance against fascism, Hitler and, ultimately, against the Nazi extermination policy that culminated in the Holocaust.

As Prago’s comments show, the Holocaust has fundamentally shaped the way in which the participation of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades has come to be seen. Against the background of post-Holocaust debates about wartime Jewish responses and behaviour, their participation is inscribed in a larger Jewish resistance narrative that aims to counter the myth of Jewish passivity in the face of the Nazi onslaught. To put it succinctly: ‘Spain’ serves to prove that Jews did not go like ‘sheep to the slaughter’ as they already resisted Hitler there, during the Spanish Civil War. As debates about Jewish responses against fascism move between the polarities of alleged Jewish passivity on the one hand, and assertions of armed Jewish resistance on the other, the participation of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War is presented as an example of the latter. To be clear, the aim of this book is not to emphasize Jewish military prowess by using the participation of Jewish volunteers as a case study. Nor is it to counter claims of wartime Jewish passivity by highlighting Jewish armed resistance; if anything, this book aims to complicate, contextualize and critically examine such interpretations. Rather, the intention here is to focus on the question of how a particular set of Jewish military experiences, both

actual and remembered, became an expression of processes of emancipation and validation that were so integral to the project of Jewish modernity.

Taken together, Lekhter's and Prago's remarks illustrate the broad parameters within which representations of Jewish volunteers can be and have been situated, and the decisive shift in emphasis that has occurred in the post-Holocaust period. It is the aim of this book, then, to explore the participation of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades and understand its symbolic meaning both during and after the conflict. On the one hand theirs is a story about the manifold experiences of Jews in the contemporary Left, and the varying degrees to which Jewishness influenced or was relevant to those experiences. On the other hand, the fact that these experiences took place in the context of what many saw as the first great confrontation between 'fascism and democracy' in the interwar period, and as such as the prehistory of the Second World War, seems to inevitably raise the question of whether Jewish participation should be evaluated as a particular *Jewish* response to fascism and the Nazi onslaught. More than a peculiar footnote in pre-war Jewish history, the participation of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War can thus serve to illuminate two major debates in Jewish historiography: first, debates about Jews and the Left, particularly the activities of Jews in the communist movement; and, second, that of Jewish responses against fascism, and particularly Nazism, as they took shape in Europe from 1933 onwards.

Before proceeding it is important to be clear about what it means to speak about 'Jewish volunteers' and how that description will be used in this book. During the Spanish Civil War, the phrase was mostly employed by East European Jewish communists and socialists, in Eastern Europe as well as migrant communities elsewhere, as a way to describe those volunteers who had come from their midst. Its use primarily reflected a self-identification that was natural to East European Jews who considered themselves to be part of a Jewish national minority in their home countries, or were regarded as such. In many post-Second World War publications however the epithet 'Jewish' does not simply indicate background: all volunteers of Jewish descent are categorized as 'Jewish volunteers' and their Jewish background is often assumed to have had a decisive bearing upon the reasons for which they volunteered, and the consciousness with which they subsequently fought on the Spanish battlefields. In short, the implication is always that being Jewish mattered *beyond* descent; to highlight this specific use of the phrase 'Jewish volunteers' I will sometimes speak of '*Jewish* volunteers'. As will become clear, then, assumptions about Jewish self-identification, consciousness, or concerns can only be discussed by using the phrase Jewish volunteers in a neutral sense, in other words, based upon descent.

Indeed, the question of what being Jewish actually meant for volunteers of Jewish descent who joined the International Brigades is difficult to answer. In the following pages, then, the phrase 'Jewish volunteers' will only be used to refer to those volunteers *that were born Jewish* without implying or suggesting that their Jewishness carried over into the motivation with which they went to fight, and subsequently fought, in Spain, or indeed signified a particular level of Jewish consciousness underpinning their participation. It is precisely the various ways in which the qualification 'Jewish' was and has been imbued with meaning, both during the Spanish Civil War, as well as after the

Second World War and the Holocaust, that lie at the core of the analysis. This book, then, is about how volunteers of Jewish descent during the Spanish Civil War became *Jewish* volunteers after the Holocaust.

## The Spanish Civil War as a Jewish concern

In early August 1936 the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) reported that the Spanish rebels 'had issued a proclamation declaring that when they came into power they would expel all the Jews from Spain'.<sup>5</sup> In the days and weeks that followed, a number of JTA reports discussed the plight of Jews in Spain and Spanish Morocco, relating stories about imprisonment, extortion, expulsions and anti-Semitic propaganda in rebel-held territories. These reports were soon picked up in Jewish newspapers around the world. Thus, in a summary of the rebellion and its consequences for Spain's Jews in late August 1936, the main French Jewish newspaper at that time, *L'Univers Israélite*, described the rebels' attitude as 'clearly hostile to Judaism'.<sup>6</sup> It would continue to relate JTA dispatches about Spain's Jews, which at that time roughly consisted of two main groups: up to 12,000 Sephardic Jews in Spanish Morocco and a couple of thousand Jews in mainland Spain, many of whom were post-1933 German-Jewish refugees and resided in Barcelona.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, German-Jewish newspapers like the orthodox *Der Israelit* and the *C.V.-Zeitung*, the organ of the Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens (Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith), expressed deep concerns. At the same time the *C.V.-Zeitung*, addressing the fate of German Jews that had fled to Spain after 1933, also tried to counter allegations that Jews could somehow be faulted for the war's outbreak. Thus it felt compelled to note that 'we do not deny the collaboration of Jewish-uprooted elements in communism [but cannot see why] their actions or motives are called Jewish'.<sup>8</sup>

There can be little doubt about Nationalist 'antisemitic diatribes directed at the Republican leaders and their external allies'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, there was no shortage of anti-Semitic propaganda in Nationalist newspapers or remarks by some of the generals who were involved in the revolt.<sup>10</sup> Such propaganda was a mix of traditional Catholic anti-Semitism and contemporary theories about a world Judeo-Freemason-Bolshevik conspiracy. Perhaps the best-known example was the following remark by military commander Quiépo de Llano, whose anti-Semitic stabs in his Radio Sevilla broadcasts made headlines in the Jewish press worldwide: 'Our struggle is not a civil war, but a war for Western civilisation against the Jews'.<sup>11</sup> Much of this anti-Semitism had its roots long before the civil war but general support in the Jewish press for the Republican side did not go unnoticed and was keenly exploited. Anti-Semitic attitudes were also fuelled by Nazi propaganda, which claimed that the Nationalists 'had taken up arms in order to destroy the evil forces of Bolshevism and Judaism'.<sup>12</sup> The fascist Falange, in particular, was influenced by anti-Semitic conspiracy theories spread by the German regime as part of its broader anti-communist and anti-Semitic propaganda campaign.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, ultimately, anti-Semitism was one of many facets of rebel propaganda, and not its central tenet, nor were Jews its most important target. Systematic persecution of the relatively few Jews under Nationalist control did not take place and a coherent

anti-Semitic policy never developed, neither in the Nationalist zone in Spain nor in Spanish Morocco. This is not to say that no anti-Jewish actions occurred, especially in Spanish Morocco where Jews were extorted and jailed, and a number of killings took place. But the Nationalists were eager not to let these excesses get out of hand and did not allow such events to develop into a full-scale anti-Jewish campaign for fear of a negative image abroad as well as for financial reasons.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Franco even asked the Jews of Tetuan to disregard anti-Semitic broadcasts on radio Seville, though he confirmed they had been asked to make a 'voluntary contribution'.<sup>15</sup> Franco also seems to have been less preoccupied with Jews than with Freemasons or communists.<sup>16</sup>

Together with the relatively small number of Jews in Spain at the time, this situation shaped Jewish reactions to the conflict to a large extent. Though generally supporting the Republican side, the war aroused few passions in non-leftist Jewish publications. Robert Singerman, who analysed American-Jewish reactions to the Spanish Civil War, even spoke of 'Jewish apathy'.<sup>17</sup> For most Jews, Spain was simply of less concern than 'efforts to publicise the Hitler terror in Germany or the partition plans of the British in Palestine' especially after most Spanish and Spanish-Moroccan Jews had fled the Franco-controlled areas.<sup>18</sup> The same, by and large, held true for Europe. In addition to Nazi Germany and Palestine, many newspapers were also deeply concerned with the plight of the Jews in Poland where anti-Semitic violence and pogroms, an economic boycott and other anti-Jewish measures severely affected an already impoverished Jewish population. While anti-Semitic Francoist propaganda and anti-Jewish actions in Spanish Morocco were recognized, they were, in the final analysis, of only relative importance as compared with the predicament of Jews in Germany, Poland and Palestine. This was not helped by the fact that many mainstream Jewish publications felt little political affinity with the Spanish Republic's Popular Front government.

### During the Spanish Civil War: Jewish volunteers and Jews in the Left

While the non-leftist Jewish press spoke of the conflict in terms of a fascist uprising, and Jews generally favoured the beleaguered Republic, it was also restrained in advocating active support for the Republican side, especially in terms of lending support to campaigns for the International Brigades and its volunteers. Indeed, only the Jewish Left went beyond a stated concern for Spain's Jewish communities and analysed the events in Spain in terms of a political conflict between fascism and democracy in which the Spanish Republic should be actively supported. Soon after the Spanish army revolt began, and news broke of the support of Hitler and Mussolini for the rebels, reports in Jewish leftist periodicals began to emphasize its specific historical dimensions and context. By invoking a specific Jewish historical framework that referenced the medieval Spanish Inquisition and the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian peninsula in 1492, the importance of the Spanish conflict was underscored in order to engage and mobilize Jewish audiences. Thus Adam Rayski, editor of *Naye Prese*, described the Spanish generals Franco and Mola as heirs to the medieval Inquisitors in one of his first editorials on Spain, an analysis that was expressed by many on the Jewish Left.<sup>19</sup>

This historical framework was also used to explain the participation of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades as a form of posthumous reckoning and righting of historical wrongs. Thus, *Naye Prese* cast Jewish volunteers as the heirs of Maimonides, 'the first Jewish fighter who had fought in Spain against backwardness, darkness and barbarism.'<sup>20</sup> Similarly, David McKelvey-White, chairman of the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a support organization for American volunteers, asserted in 1939: 'During the 15th century the over-civilized barbarians of Spain – far ahead of Hitler in efficiency as in time – drove the Jews from this country with fire and violence. Surely they little thought that five centuries later Jews would return from a continent as yet unknown to help defend Spain from a fresh outburst of the old terror.'<sup>21</sup>

As Lekhter's remarks illustrate, however, writers in *Naye Prese* also emphasized the importance of fighting fascism in Spain *as Jews* when discussing the experiences of Jewish volunteers. Having successfully lobbied for the formation of a Jewish unit, the Parisian Jewish migrant communists presented the Botwin Company as the prime symbol of this Jewish engagement. At the same time, the company became an important tool to mobilize and maintain support for the Spanish cause and promote the Comintern's Popular Front strategy on *der yidisher gas* (the Jewish street).<sup>22</sup> This strategy, adopted by the Comintern in 1935, 'involved a postponement of revolutionary objectives in favour of a broad anti-fascist alliance with Socialist and liberal bourgeois parties,'<sup>23</sup> and the International Brigades became a crucial propaganda tool to showcase its successful application in practice. For Jewish communists in Paris this was no different and the International Brigades were a key tool to promote a Jewish Popular Front. It might seem, then, that the invocation of a specific Jewish historical framework by these Jewish communists, and their promotion of the participation of Jewish volunteers, were merely functional ways of explaining the importance of 'Spain' to Jewish audiences in order to incite their support for what was essentially a much bigger political cause.

Yet Jewish communist engagement with 'Spain' was decidedly more complicated. To be sure, there can be little doubt that propaganda was a major part of the story; the readership of *Naye Prese* consisted of Yiddish-speaking migrants in Paris and France and their moral and financial support was crucial as many a campaign was waged to collect money to support both volunteers and their families. And 'Spain' was indeed an integral part of the political struggle waged by Jewish communists in Paris as they sought to implement the Popular Front locally. They did so at a time when immigrant Jews in France faced tremendous challenges, however. In addition to economic hardship and a general rise of xenophobia and anti-Semitism, the fall of Léon Blum's second government in April 1938 augured trouble. The decree laws introduced by the new government of Edouard Daladier imposed restrictions on immigrant labour and heightened the risk of expulsion for many paperless (Jewish) immigrants.

Within this context, emphasizing 'Spain' and the joint struggle of Jewish volunteers in the brigades served to drive home the message that united action was possible, constituted the only possible defence against the threats that immigrant Jews faced, and could also be achieved in France. Labelling Jewish volunteers as 'chosen fighters of the Jewish people' was of course a clever case of employing religious references that would resonate with a Jewish audience in order to try to bind them to the communist and

Spanish cause. And having a Jewish military unit, the Botwin Company, certainly made that task easier. Another much more important trope, however, would emerge in *Naye Prese's* coverage of Jewish volunteers and the Botwin Company: the idea that fighting fascism in Spain as Jews and 'Jewish heroism', as it was often called, disproved stereotypes and accusations of Jewish cowardice (in Yiddish: *pakhdones*) that had surfaced in the brigades as well as in the Polish immigrant press in Paris. Such representations of Jewish volunteers were related to Jewish communist concerns with relations between Polish and Jewish immigrants, as well as the position of Jewish workers in the French labour movement and France in general. It was within this context that *Naye Prese* fashioned the participation of Jewish volunteers as a model of Jewish action to be emulated by Jewish immigrants in Paris, a moral compass and means of empowerment for many of those who found themselves in such dire circumstances.

All of this raises several questions about the Parisian Jewish communist engagement with Spain. First of all, how did Spain fit into the communist Popular Front policy and in what way was it linked to a more outspoken Jewish Popular Front policy? In other words, how was Spain linked to the political interests and strategies of the Jewish communists on the Jewish street in Paris? Another question is whether the presentation of the war in *Naye Prese* simply reflected the accepted Comintern stance on the conflict, in this case communicated to a particular audience, or signified more? Did the Spanish struggle also have a more particular symbolic meaning for the Parisian Jewish communists that went beyond political strategies and objectives? Was it of special importance because of the rising tide of anti-Semitism in Europe and the support of Hitler and Mussolini for Franco's Nationalists? To summarize: did Jewish communists in Paris simply toe the party line in using Spain and the International Brigades to promote unity on the Jewish street, or did the communist Popular Front agenda coincide with particular Jewish communist concerns? And to what extent did communist and Jewish allegiances overlap and/or shift during the war?

The first two parts of this book will analyse the questions posed above and, more broadly, underscore a fundamental point: the experiences of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades were first and foremost part of the manifold histories of Jews in the Left. In Part One, the participation of Jewish volunteers in the brigades and the Botwin Company will be contextualized and analysed. Chapter 1 provides the backgrounds and contexts that are necessary to understand the participation of Jewish volunteers and the Botwin Company. First of all, the creation and history of the International Brigades will be outlined, before a general overview of the participation of Jewish volunteers will be provided: who were they, where did they come from, what political backgrounds did they have and in what numbers did they join? As the relatively high proportion of volunteers with Jewish origins is often interpreted as proof of a special *Jewish* motivation, attention will be paid to the meaning of these statistics and their possible explanations. Theories of motivation as well as the question of self-identification will then be analysed with a view to establish to what extent it makes sense to actually speak of Jewish volunteers. As will be shown, the phrase 'Jewish volunteers' is useful to denote descent but cannot be used to describe a specific *category* of volunteers who went to fight, and subsequently fought, in Spain with a specific *Jewish* motivation or consciousness.

The chapter closes with a concise examination of Jewish migrants and politics in Paris in the interwar period, focusing especially on the Jewish migrant communists who, after all, were responsible for the Botwin Company's formation. Their activities should be seen in the broader context of nationality politics in the communist movement and the way in which it dealt with anti-Semitism in the Popular Front period. The engagement of the Parisian Jewish communists with Spain, and the history of the Botwin Company, cannot be understood without considering the local as well as broader inter- and transnational contexts from which it emerged. Indeed, while local context was important, Jewish communist activity in Paris can only be properly understood by reference to the transnational dimensions of modern Jewish history and political behaviour. Jewish mass migration from Central and Eastern Europe from the late nineteenth century onwards was characterized by a continuous movement of people and a concomitant transfer of organizational structures, ideas, social, cultural and political practices. In the process, Jewish migrants became embedded in new national and local contexts while simultaneously operating in and creating particular transnational networks and communicative spaces that linked them to their countries of origin as well as migrants elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Jewish migrant radicals did not only operate in a particular social space as constituted by the Jewish migrant populations of which they formed a part; they simultaneously created specific transnational networks and spaces of political activity, communication and shared practices across borders.<sup>25</sup> Such spaces and networks were an integral part of the dynamics of pre-war Jewish history. Migration thus needs to be problematized as a constitutive factor in any analysis of local and/or national Jewish histories and its transnational dimensions will have to be accounted for.<sup>26</sup> Of particular importance here is the question of how migration shaped and transformed the political practices of Jewish migrants as they confronted their new environments and negotiated their place in new national and local contexts.

Chapter 2 will be devoted to the Botwin Company and explains its formation and short-lived history on the Spanish battlefields. The reasons for the company's creation will be analysed against the background of the role of the brigades in the Comintern's propaganda for the Popular Front as well as, crucially, nationality politics in the brigades and the occurrence of anti-Semitism within its ranks. If propaganda was one important reason for the company's formation, so was another, and perhaps even more so: the existence of anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jewish cowardice. These stereotypes had a long history. As Derek Penslar has succinctly noted, 'classic antisemitic thinking associated Jewish men with physical weakness, cowardice, and an unwillingness to risk their lives for the peoples among whom they lived.'<sup>27</sup> In Eastern Europe such thinking was grounded, among other things, in allegations of Jewish draft evasion. The Botwin Company, created within the Polish Dombrowski Brigade, thus served to emancipate Jewish volunteers as worthy soldiers, equal to their Polish comrades in arms, just as Jewish soldiership in general had always been linked to the project of emancipation.<sup>28</sup> It should be noted that the idea of achieving equality and emancipation through battle was not unique to Jewish volunteers, but also applied to the struggle of African-American volunteers in the International Brigades, though the underlying issues were very different.<sup>29</sup>

Part Two of the book focuses on representations of Jewish volunteers in the Parisian Yiddish press, in order to find out what the symbolic meaning of their participation was during the Spanish Civil War period itself, and how it contrasted with post-Holocaust discourses and debates. Through a comparative discourse analysis of Paris's two major Yiddish dailies, *Naye Prese* and *Parizer Haynt*, its aim is to reveal the specificities of Jewish communist engagement with Spain. Chapter 4 provides an introductory background to the Yiddish press in Paris in the interwar period, focusing on *Naye Prese* and *Parizer Haynt*. Chapter 5 will then analyse how Jewish volunteers and the Botwin Company were represented on the pages of *Naye Prese* and what these representations reveal about the Parisian Jewish communists and their political interests and strategies among Jewish migrants. In order to find out what was unique about Jewish communist representations of Jewish volunteers, Chapter 5 will analyse how the Spanish Civil War and the participation of Jewish volunteers figured on the pages of *Parizer Haynt*, which was not politically affiliated but had a moderate Labour-Zionist orientation. The Bundist periodical *Undzer Shtime* will also be briefly discussed here.

By framing the analysis in a comparative way, it is possible to analyse how Jewish communists and other actors on the Jewish street in Paris interacted with each other, using their newspapers as a vehicle to promote their interests and voice their concerns. An important aspect is of course how their concerns were shaped by this interaction and how they were communicated to their respective readers. Although this comparative approach will allow me to draw some conclusions about relations on the Jewish street in Paris, it is not in the first place intended to contribute to debates on Jewish responses to internal and external threats in the years prior to the Second World War. Reducing the history of Jews in Paris in the 1930s to the question of how their actions or attitudes contributed to an awareness about the dangers of Nazi anti-Semitism amounts to presentism. Jewish pre-war history, even in the difficult years just before the Second World War in Paris, was not a dress rehearsal leading up to the events of the Holocaust but should be assessed in its own right.<sup>30</sup>

Seen from a broader methodological perspective, the discursive construction of the struggle of Jewish volunteers in *Naye Prese*, and its relation to Jewish communist politics and strategies on the Jewish street in Paris, are a highly illuminating example of the 'symbolic constitution of politics', and thus the usefulness of cultural approaches to political history.<sup>31</sup> It also represents a prime example of an often overlooked historical phenomenon in Jewish history: the constitutive role of the Jewish press in shaping modern Jewish life. Yiddish newspapers not only reflected Jewish social, cultural and political life but also acted as agents in creating it. Ideological newspapers such as *Naye Prese* illustrate this particularly well, as their *raison d'être* was so clearly connected to the realization of a political programme. Since the early 1990s the introduction of Habermas's notion of the public sphere in the field of media studies has influenced studies of the Jewish press.<sup>32</sup> Though not unproblematic, this has been important in focusing attention on their role in shaping modern Jewish life instead of passively reflecting it. In this context Sarah Stein has argued that 'scholars have turned to popular newspapers in Jewish vernaculars for the events they chronicled, but have virtually ignored the press as an agent of historical change'.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Susanne Marten-Finnis has noted that the

Jewish, and by extension Yiddish, press did not only reflect reality but also wanted to ‘contribute to its constitution and so create new reality.’<sup>34</sup> And as she observed elsewhere, ‘Speech and other forms of communication are practical interventions in social life, which have effects on, and help to constitute and shape social life.’<sup>35</sup>

Yet if we accept that Yiddish newspapers and periodicals were agents in their own right, and focus on their performative role in Jewish life, than how do we conceive of the relationship between content and reader or, more precisely, discursive and social structures? In several publications in recent years Marten-Finnis has argued for the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in studying the Jewish press as it draws attention to how it helped to constitute reality.<sup>36</sup> One of the premises of CDA is that ‘discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped.’<sup>37</sup> CDA, however, focuses on issues of power and ideology, and their reproduction through discourse, and is explicitly political and emancipatory.<sup>38</sup> This is not *per se* problematic, and its advocates in fact insist on a commitment to self-reflexivity, but it makes CDA less suitable for historical newspaper analysis in which the prime focus is not on issues of power and dominance. Moreover, CDA does not have a clear answer to the question of how discursive practices influence society and vice versa.

To address this problem, socio-linguist Teun van Dijk has introduced the notion of social cognition and proposes a focus on the role of people’s shared ‘aims, beliefs, knowledge and opinions’, or shared social representations as they are constituted through discourse.<sup>39</sup> Van Dijk’s approach is useful to understand the relationship between a newspaper and its readership and helps to focus our attention on the production and consumption of news and the role of shared beliefs and representations in both processes. Newspapers draw upon these shared representations and simultaneously constitute them. A specific example of this is the way in which *Naye Prese* invoked a Jewish historical framework, referring to the period of the Spanish Inquisition and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, to explain the importance of the Spanish Civil War to its readers; subsequently the newspaper built upon this framework to promote the struggle of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades.

### After the Holocaust: Jewish volunteers as Jewish resistance

Part Three of this book focuses on the various ways in which Jewish volunteers have been remembered and commemorated after the Second World War and the Holocaust. The main question to be asked here is: **how, and why, did volunteers of Jewish descent eventually become Jewish volunteers?** This question, as already indicated, can only be answered by placing it within the broader context of debates on Jewish responses to fascism, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in the fateful period 1933–45. These debates have long moved between two extremes: interpretations that stress submissiveness and Jewish passivity on the one hand are countered by those that emphasize armed Jewish resistance on the other. As discussions about wartime Jewish behaviour erupted, the participation of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades would increasingly be framed as the first armed Jewish resistance against Hitler and a precursor to Jewish resistance in Europe during the Second World War. To be clear, in tracing the

development of post-Holocaust debates about Jewish volunteers this book does not seek to reify or foreground the importance of Jewish armed resistance. Rather, it seeks to understand why Jewish volunteers came to be commemorated as they did. Stressing Jewish volunteers as the first armed Jewish resistance fighters raises problematic issues, as it tends to devalue the full array of wartime Jewish responses, a point to which I will return in the Epilogue.

The argument in this final part of the book is largely based upon the social agency approach as advocated by Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the ideas of Alon Confino, who has argued that reconstruction of the past always involves and is shaped by processes of reception and contestation, were also important.<sup>41</sup> Winter and Sivan focus on what they call 'social agency' in relation to processes of 'collective remembrance', which they define as 'public recollection [...] the act of gathering bits and pieces of the past, and joining them together in public. The "public" is the group that produces, expresses, and consumes it. What they create is not a cluster of individual memories; the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.'<sup>42</sup> In centring on the individual, Winter and Sivan aim 'to examine collective remembrance as the outcome of agency, as the product of individuals and groups who come together, not at the behest of the state or any of its subsidiary organisations, but because they have to speak out.'<sup>43</sup> This is crucial in understanding how discourses about Jewish volunteers would take shape after the Holocaust and move away from a strictly national perspective. Indeed, one of the major aims of this book is precisely to disentangle the process by which representations of Jewish volunteers have been put forward over time in a variety of contexts, local as well as transnational.

Chapter 6 sets the stage for this exploration. It will begin by discussing the various post-war trajectories of Jewish volunteers, many of whom ended up in internment camps in southern France and eventually participated in resistance organizations during the Second World War. Following this, Yiddish publications about Jewish volunteers will be analysed as they appeared from the 1950s onwards, in book form or in the press, targeting a generation of readers that had either participated in, or consciously lived through, the events of the Spanish Civil War. As commemorations of the war were an integral part of the communist commemorative canon, Yiddish communist newspapers paid regular homage to Jewish volunteers. As the example of the communist newspaper *Folks Shtime* from Poland shows, though, their participation was tentatively linked to wartime Jewish resistance from early on. The journalist Samuel Shneiderman, writing about Jewish volunteers in the New York Yiddish newspaper *Forverts*, went a step further by explicitly framing the participation of Jewish volunteers as *Jewish* resistance against fascism. Crucially, he also decoupled it from its original communist context and thereby foregrounded the volunteers' Jewish identity. Shneiderman's writings about Jewish volunteers coincided with emerging debates about Jewish resistance in the 1960s that will be briefly discussed here too. The way in which this debate would frame discourses about Jewish volunteers from the late 1960s onwards concludes the chapter.

Chapter 7 is devoted to the period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, when a number of events took place that served to embed their experiences in a broader narrative of Jewish armed resistance against fascism and Nazism. The starting point for

this shift can be located in the years 1967–68 when an anti-Jewish campaign took place in Poland that resulted in the involuntary emigration of several Polish-Jewish veterans of the International Brigades, who thereupon lost their pension rights. The result was a small scale international campaign that brought Jewish veterans and International Brigades organizations in Israel, Great Britain, France and the United States in contact in a modest but determined drive to restore these pension rights. Though unsuccessful, the campaign shifted the focus to the veterans' Jewish identity and brought sharp divisions to the fore, particularly in the United States, as to the need to emphasize that identity, against the backdrop of the politically charged question of whether or not anti-Semitism in a 'people's democracy' like Poland could be possible. The Polish pensions campaign thus ultimately foregrounded the question of what it had meant to be a *Jewish* volunteer.

The campaign was still underway when the International Conference of Jewish Fighters in the International Brigades in Spain took place in October 1972 in Tel-Aviv, bringing together Jewish veterans and researchers from many countries. The conference was organized on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the formation of the Botwin Company, which many participants discussed as a precursor to Jewish armed resistance during the Second World War. The conference also addressed the Polish-Jewish pensions affair. For the first time since the war, the question of what the importance of the participation of Jewish volunteers had been, and to what extent their Jewish origins had mattered, was now openly discussed in an international forum. In the following years several articles appeared that provided an overview of the participation of Jewish volunteers. These publications, in turn, would influence the work of Albert Prago, published in the American magazine *Jewish Currents*, which caused heated discussion in the late 1970s and early 1980s; if American-Jewish volunteers did not go to Spain with a strong Jewish consciousness as many, including Prago himself, claimed, then how could their experiences be framed as Jewish resistance against fascism and in what sense did it, or did it not, constitute a *Jewish* contribution to that resistance?

The Polish pensions affair, the Tel-Aviv conference and the debates among Jewish veterans surrounding them, can be seen as a transitional phase: they served to frame the participation of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades as a form of armed *Jewish* resistance against fascism and Nazism, especially in Europe and Israel. Indeed, by the time of the 50th anniversary of the start of the Spanish Civil War in 1986 commemorations of Jewish volunteers, and assertions of the importance of their role as armed Jewish resistance fighters, were firmly established and seemed no longer contested. A series of events, to be discussed in Chapter 8, firmly solidified this interpretation. In September 1986, then Israeli president Chaim Herzog gave a speech in which he hailed the struggle of Jewish volunteers in Spain, and many saw the speech as an official recognition by the Jewish state. Within the Israeli context it also meant a form of rehabilitation since Palestinian-Jewish volunteers had left for Spain at a time when Arab-Jewish fighting took daily casualties; as a result they often faced allegations of deserting the Jewish cause in the years after their return. Several days after Herzog's speech, a commemorative grove dedicated to Jewish volunteers was officially inaugurated in Beit Shemesh.<sup>44</sup> Herzog's words were also inscribed on the monument that was dedicated to Jewish volunteers in Barcelona in 1990, the

second monument to commemorate Jewish volunteers after a special plaque was also erected in Madrid in 1988. Several other meetings of Jewish veterans also took place in these years.

The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the work of German historian Arno Lustiger who published a book about Jewish volunteers in 1989, aptly entitled *Schalom Libertad!*. Aiming for a broad, but particularly non-Jewish, audience, Lustiger narrated the participation of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades as the earliest example of armed Jewish resistance against fascism and Nazism with the express aim to move away from the emphasis on Jewish victimhood, which, in his view, still dominated Holocaust debates in Germany.<sup>45</sup> The book was subsequently translated into French and Spanish and republished in a revised edition in 2001, while an English-language article Lustiger published in 1990 became a seminal article on the topic in the Anglo-Saxon academic world. *Schalom Libertad!* can be seen as the final, written, culmination of a process whereby Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades were established as the first armed Jewish resistance fighters against fascism and Nazism. Lustiger was also the first to make this case, with the explicit aim of informing non-Jewish audiences. Several studies have since followed, both in the form of academic scholarship and more popular histories, yet the ubiquitous image of Jewish volunteers as Jewish resistance fighters, if such a public image can be said to exist, had been fixed by the late 1980s. It is thus fitting to end my analysis of how volunteers of Jewish descent became *Jewish* volunteers here.

The Epilogue will discuss and contrast pre-Second World War and post-Holocaust representations of Jewish volunteers and the extent to which they actually differ. As will be clear by then, debates about alleged Jewish passivity during the Holocaust have been much more influential in shaping the image of Jewish volunteers than their actual experiences on the Spanish battlefields; as such their participation was evaluated in strongly moral terms. This shift away from the context of Jews in the Left in which the participation of Jewish volunteers was originally situated, is particularly well illustrated by shifting ideas of what the Botwin Company stood for and represented: in 1938 the company was mostly a symbol of Jewish valour and readiness to fight in Jewish communist circles. Come 1986 it was, for many, the prime example of a Jewish and Leftist contribution to armed Jewish resistance against fascism and Nazism in the dark years of 1933–45.

Before beginning the story, a final word is due on the scope of the analysis. This book is not exhaustive. For reasons that will become clear, it does not seek to establish in detail how many of the volunteers fighting in the brigades were Jewish as I believe such an endeavour misses the point. Nor is this book a biographical or prosopographical study; there are several important works that offer detailed information about individual volunteers. And while some events are explored in great detail, others are only outlined. As with so many topics in Jewish Studies, linguistic challenges also abound. The ideal historian of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades masters or has a working knowledge of Spanish, French, German, English, Dutch, Polish, Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew, to name just the most important languages. I am aware that a lack of knowledge of Hebrew, and especially Polish, adds certain limitations to

the scope of this study, even though the most essential sources in the Polish and Palestinian/Israeli cases were written in Yiddish. I have no doubt, then, that new material will shed more light on issues I only touch upon. Nonetheless, I hope and believe that the main outline and conclusions of the story that I present can stand the test of time.