

# **Jewish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War**

A case study of the Botwin company

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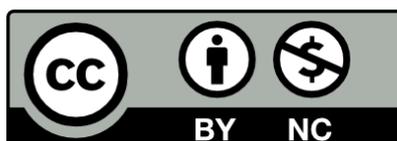
**MA in Yiddish Studies Program**

(dr. Gennady Estraiikh & dr. Michael Krutikow)

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA in Yiddish Studies of the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London)

**Gerben Zaagsma**

*september 2001*

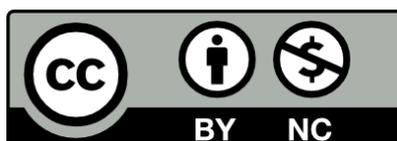


## Declaration

I undertake that all material presented for examination is my own work and has not been written for me, in whole or in part, by any other person(s). I also undertake that any quotation or paraphrase from the published or unpublished work of another person has been duly acknowledged in the work which I present for examination



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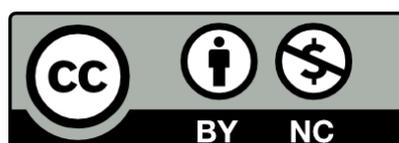
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# Abstract

This thesis deals with aspects of the history of the Botwin company, a Jewish military unit, that fought within the Ranks of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). The formation of the Botwin company, its composition and Jewish character are examined against the background of historiography on Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades, the Jewish participation in radical movements and theories of motivation.



# Acknowledgements

This thesis deals with Jewish volunteers who fought in the Spanish Civil War, specifically the Botwin company. The idea to write it grew out of a coincidental encounter with this subject in a class entitled ‘Yiddish for Historians’ at University College London. When dealing with memorial books (the so-called *Yizker bikher*) we came across a reference in the book *Belkhatov: yizker-bukh gevidmet dem ondenk fun a farshvundn Yidish shtetl in Poyln* to a Jewish volunteer from that place who went to fight in Spain. Being a historian and looking for a suitable subject to write my Yiddish Studies thesis about, I started to look for more material. It turned out there is a significant amount of Yiddish source material relating to this subject in the form of reference works, published memories, the Yiddish socialist and communist press and even some references in various *Yizker bikher*. The result of my research is this thesis about the Jewish Botwin company.

There are a number of people I would like to thank who have helped me in a number of ways. First of all, my teachers of the *MA in Yiddish Studies Program* at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, Gennady Estraiikh and Michael Krutikow, who have been my entry in the field of Yiddish Studies. It was in Helen Beer’s aforementioned course ‘Yiddish for Historians’ where I was introduced to the topic of Jewish participation in the Spanish Civil War. Her encouragement and help have been of great value.

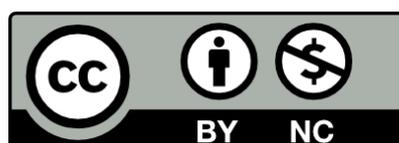
A number of other individuals have helped me during my research by sharing information and providing valuable suggestions and food for thought. In no particular order: Joris Smeets, Ben Gidley, Rajel Sperber (Hebrew University, Jerusalem), Martin Sugarman (Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women, London), the members of the ALBA (Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives) mailing list, prof. dr. Rena Fuks, Arieh Lebowitz (Jewish Labor Committee, New York), Leo Greenbaum (YIVO), Olga Zienkiwicz (Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw) and Carol Jochnowitz (Jewish Currents). David Leach brought me in contact with Sol Frankel, a British veteran of the Spanish Civil War, who was willing to share with me his story.

Last but not least, I thank Benni Leemhuis and Nathan Brinkman, who were my proofreaders and provided valuable comments and feedback.

**Gerben Zaagsma**

*Groningen, september 2001*

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## Introduction

In July 1936 a large part of the army of the Republic of Spain revolted against the democratically elected government. The resulting Spanish Civil War raged on from 1936 to 1939, when general Franco's troops secured victory, resulting in the establishment of the Franco dictatorship that lasted until 1975.

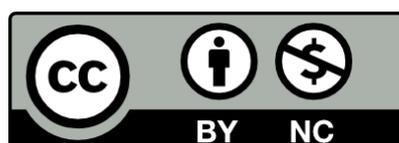
During the Spanish Civil War at least 35.000 volunteers from more than 50 countries went to fight in Spain on the side of the republican government, the great majority of whom served in the so called International Brigades. Roughly estimated, 5.000 of these volunteers, coming from various countries, were of Jewish descent. In December 1937, a Jewish company was formed in the Palafox batallion of the 13<sup>th</sup> Polish Dombrowsky Brigade. The company was named "Botwin", after the young Polish-Jewish communist Naftali Botwin who was executed in Poland in 1925. The Botwin company also published its own front newspaper, simply called 'Botwin'. The Botwin company has come to symbolize the Jewish presence in Spain, since it was the only company where Jews fought as a distinct group, although their number was only small, compared to the total number of Jewish volunteers.

The (relatively) large percentage of Jews that took part in the IB's triggers different questions: why did so many Jews go and what role, if any, did Jewish identity play in the decision to go to Spain? Did Jews go to Spain to fight as Jews as some assert, or mainly as socialists or communists, or perhaps as Jewish socialists and communists? The underlying issues of identity and motivation are complex, as is the case with the motivation of volunteers for Spain in general. It is clear that for a lot of volunteers and surviving veterans, including Jews, the issue of nationality was and is irrelevant. For others it was less so. Nonetheless, given the diversity in background of Jewish volunteers, one has to be extremely careful not to treat these volunteers as equals just because they happened to be Jewish. In addressing this issue, we not only have to take into account the rise of Jewish socialist and communist movements in (Eastern) Europe and external factors like Hitler's rise to power in Germany and the aid provided by Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy to the Franco side. We also have to look on the individual level to gain a balanced view of how the abovementioned factors influenced a person's life and his or her decision to go to Spain.

In this thesis I will deal with the history of the Botwin company because it provides a good opportunity to address some of the issues that are related to the role of Jewish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War. It seems obvious at first sight to view the existence of the Botwin company as a clear symbol of the Jewish fight against fascism in Spain, and a choice on behalf of its members to fight that battle as Jews, and as such it is often treated. However, the picture is more complicated and the theories about the formation of a specifically Jewish company are diverse: for some it is an obvious sign of the wish of the Botwinists to fight as Jews, others see it as the logical outcome of the way the IB's were organised, according to country or language. And still others emphasize propagandistic reasons. The main questions to be dealt with are therefore how, and why, the Botwin company was established and in what way Jewish concerns played a role.

This topic, however, cannot be sufficiently addressed without providing a context that deals with both historiographical issues and theories about the motivation of Jewish volunteers in general. Given the limited space of an MA thesis I cannot pretend to offer an in-depth survey on these questions but I aim at providing a contextualization that is sufficient to understand and situate the role and significance of the Botwinists.

Following the outline above, this thesis consists of two main parts. In the first part I will deal with some historiographical and statistical issues as well as review the various explanations that have been offered about the motivation of Jewish volunteers. In the second part I will analyze the formation of the Botwin company and its Jewish character.



## Backgrounds

### Historiography

In 1986, a commemoration took place in Spain, 50 years after the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. During this event an unofficial meeting took place in honour of the Jewish volunteers, organised by the Belgian veteran Dov Liebermann. During the meeting three issues were discussed:

“first, that not all Jews went like sheep to the Nazi crematoria, for it was in Spain that thousands of Jews took up arms against fascism;  
second, that Jews were particular targets of fascism and that this was a major reason why a disproportionate percentage of the volunteers were Jews ...;  
 and third, that brigade historians have regrettably failed to record Jewish participation [underlining GZ]”<sup>1</sup>

These points of discussion form a useful framework for further exploration of some important issues that will have to be taken into account when dealing with the Jewish participation in Spain. The second issue involves the motivation of Jewish volunteers and will be discussed in a separate paragraph later. The first and third point have a direct link with historiography and will be dealt with now.

#### *Jewish participation in Spain in view of the holocaust*

It is important to realise that the Jewish participation in Spain has, in the work of some historians who have dealt with the matter, acquired a new significance that is directly related to the holocaust. The statement cited above clearly reflects this connection. The Jewish experience in Spain has been described as the “prehistory of the holocaust, essential to the story of Jewish resistance to fascism.”<sup>2</sup> The evaluation of the Jewish contribution to the fight against Franco’s Nationalists in Spain has thus been influenced by the later events of the holocaust. The Jewish participation has become a symbol, not only of resistance against the Francoists and their fascist supporters abroad, but also against the Nazi policies that led to the extermination of European Jewry in WW II.

Rothenberg, for instance, refers to Jewish volunteers as the “sons, and some daughters of a people who so often have been alleged to be timid and non-combative”<sup>3</sup> and makes the following comment: “Theories have been advanced that Jews did not resist the Nazi murderers because their history is a history of submission, that submission is in their national character. How these theories measure against the phenomenon of nearly ten thousand armed Jewish volunteers in Spain, many hundreds of whom never came back, is obvious.”<sup>4</sup> This quotation clearly shows how the holocaust has influenced the perception of the relevancy of the Jewish role in Spain. Furthermore, as will be discussed in more detail later, it has also influenced the perception of the motivation of the Jewish volunteers that went to fight in Spain and thus, at times, has given rise to an anachronistic approach of this issue.

#### *IB historians and the failure to record the Jewish participation in Spain*

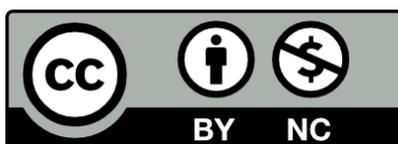
There is a vast amount of literature and scholarship about the role of volunteers in the International Brigades. These works focus mostly on the role of volunteers in general or those who came from a specific country. Specific subgroups have been studied to a lesser extent although there are works about,

<sup>1</sup> Albert Prago, ‘Fifty long years later. Commemorating the Spanish Civil War’, *Jewish Currents* (march 1987) pp. 4-8, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Comment by Carey Nelson as quoted in: Jeffrey Sharlet, ‘Troublemakers’, *Pakntreger* (fall 1998). See: [http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/pakn\\_treger/archive\\_Fall98/feature.shtml](http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/pakn_treger/archive_Fall98/feature.shtml)

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Rothenberg, ‘The Jewish Naftali Botwin Company’, *Jewish Frontier* 47/4 (1980) pp. 14-19, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Rothenberg, ‘The Jewish Naftali Botwin Company’, p. 19. Basically the same view is adopted by Albert Prago in his ‘Jews in the International Brigades: 2’, *Jewish Currents* (march 1979) pp. 6-27, 9.



for example, the role of African-Americans and women. A number of historians have asked the question why, in their view, so little attention has been paid to the Jewish participation in the SCW. This question, and the answers provided, merit some discussion because they raise a number of issues relevant not only to historiography, but to the topic of the motivation of Jewish volunteers as a whole.

Has there really been written so little about the Jewish participation in the SCW? One should make a distinction here between general works that mention the role of Jews in the SCW, and works that deal specifically with this topic. The role of Jews is not often referred to in general works. This is probably due to a focus on the countries where volunteers came from and, furthermore, because the struggle in Spain is often perceived and treated as a politically motivated battle against international fascism. This might be called the traditional perspective. In as far as foreign volunteers are concerned, it implies a focus on national background (in terms of citizenship) and politics rather than the specific ethnic backgrounds of volunteers.

The role of Jews who fought in the SCW has been discussed in a number of works, ranging from Yiddish memoirs and journalism to different scholarly works. When we look at general works on the IB and the number of specific publications, both books and articles, in English, there is little information on the subject. By the end of the 1970s only a few articles had been published. However, if we look at works in other languages, notably Yiddish, the number of publications is not so small. David Diamant's *Yidn in Shpanishn krig* was published in 1967<sup>5</sup> and was preceded by a number of memoirs and collected articles by Jewish journalists who were present in Spain, many of them published in the early 1960s.<sup>6</sup> A German study, Arno Lustiger's *Schalom libertad! Juden im spanischen Bürgerkrieg* was published in 1989. In addition, various articles have appeared dealing with different aspects of the experience of Jews in Spain, from statistical issues, Belgian-Jewish and Balkan volunteers to the Botwin company. Most of the existing historiography is the work of those who were either personally involved in the SCW, as volunteers or journalists, or were active in solidarity actions abroad during the war.

The issue under discussion here, "the failure to record the Jewish participation in Spain" is more complex than the mere question how much attention the role of Jewish volunteers has received from Brigade historians. As Rothenberg points out: "Most of those on the left, both old and new, have for various reasons - some ideological and some nefarious - been uninterested in singling out the Jewish role in the war. The mainstream of Jewish political thinking is not inclined to dwell on this chapter of history either, again for ideological reasons."<sup>7</sup> Lustiger points out that "German historians have left it to the Jews to seek the evidence of resistance while they have concentrated their efforts on the documentation of the Jews as victims of nazism. But even Jewish historiography has been tardy."<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, none of the most important Yiddish works on the role of Jews in the SCW, that have been available since the 1960s, have been translated into English. As Shindler remarks: "In 1986, the Jews who fought in Spain are regarded solely as unidentified internationalists by the Eastern bloc and as Communists by Jewish communal organizations."<sup>9</sup>

It is interesting to see the emphasis being placed on the Botwin company in the writings of those who try to 'make up' for this perceived lack of attention.<sup>10</sup> This is not surprising of course; the Jewish participation in Spain remained anonymous to a certain degree in all the military units, except for the Botwin company, and thus it can serve as, and has indeed become, the key symbol for the Jewish struggle in Spain. But in

<sup>5</sup> David, *Yidn in shpanishn krig, 1936-1939* (Paris 1967). A French version was published in 1979 entitled: *Combattants Juifs dans l'Armée Republicaine Espagnole 1936-1939* (Paris 1979).

<sup>6</sup> This was not a conscious choice to write for a specific audience (which had become much smaller after the holocaust), but most likely a mere choice to write in one's native language.

<sup>7</sup> Rothenberg, 'The Jewish Naftali Botwin Company', p. 14. See for this view also: Colin Shindler, ' "No pasaran"; the Jews who fought in Spain', *Jewish Quarterly* 33/3 (1986) pp. 34-41, 34.

<sup>8</sup> Lustiger, 'German and Austrian Jews in the International Brigades', *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 35 (1990) pp. 297-320, 297.

<sup>9</sup> Shindler, 'No pasaran', pp. 34-35.

<sup>10</sup> Prago contends, in his article 'The Botwin company in Spain, 1937-1939', that the role of the Botwin company has been largely ignored in the United States and contends that what has been published is largely based on Diamant's book. He does not specifically mention Rothenberg's article, based on Diamant, several memoirs and all issues of the Botwin newspaper.



the process, the Jewish volunteers in other companies, battalions and brigades, whose recognition is being sought for, are still being overlooked. Albert Prago, on more than one occasion, confirms that Jewishness did not play a major part in the motivation of many Jewish volunteers from the United States. In other words, during the first occasion where Jews actively ‘fought against fascism’ their Jewishness was not all-important. This too explains the emphasis on the role of the Botwin company. It also explains the ambiguities we encounter sometimes when dealing with the issue of motivation which I will discuss later. First, however, let us take a closer look at the role of volunteers and the International Brigade in Spain.

## The International Brigade

Already before the beginning of the formation of the International Brigade, foreigners were involved in the defense of the Spanish Republic. Most of them were delegates who had come to participate in the Workers Olympiad in Barcelona in July 1936, which was organised in protest to the Olympic Games in Berlin. When they were there, the rebellion broke out, and a number of these foreigners decided to stay and subsequently fought in different militias, anarchist, socialist and communist, that were organised in the early stages of the conflict. The formation of the International Brigade came later, in October 1937, and was an initiative of the Comintern, whose member parties began the recruitment of volunteers, according to quotas assigned to them.<sup>11</sup> Volunteers came from more than 50 countries. Although the majority of them were communists, others (socialists, anarchists or non-politically affiliated persons) joined as well. All had to undergo a physical health check, and were interviewed about their political affiliation, before taking off for Spain. Women were mainly allowed as nurses, pharmacists or doctors. The Brigade command did not encourage women to come as fighters and local communist parties did not actively recruit them.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, women did go to Spain to fight, allegedly sometimes dressed as men. An interesting case is that of Fani Sheynheyte, a Dutch woman, and probably the only female political commissar.<sup>13</sup>

Following the Comintern’s Popular Front policy that had been adopted in August 1936, the IB was presented as a struggle of the world’s democratic forces against the world’s fascists. In reality, the front was less united, and the underlying policies reached beyond the boundaries of the war itself. Veteran Alexander Szurek contends in his memoirs: “Feuds between various workers’ movements existed from the very beginning of the war. As the Spanish War proves, the period of the Popular Front was no example of closing ranks against the common enemy, fascism, but was a constant struggle not only to win a war but also to win over the masses and to assure the form of any future government”.<sup>14</sup> Volunteers were also seen as future cadres for the party and the revolutionary cause at home.<sup>15</sup>

In some cases people were ordered by the party to volunteer. Some went to Spain independently. The center of the infrastructural system that operated to bring the volunteers to Spain was Paris. From there, the volunteers were brought to Spain, either by boat or train, to the IB base in Albacete, and assigned to battalions (initially) and later different brigades, organised along linguistic lines. The organisational structure of the Brigades consisted of a military command as well as a political commissariat.<sup>16</sup> Thus, each unit within the Brigades had a military commander and a political commissar

<sup>11</sup> Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (3rd ed.; London 1977) pp. 454-5. See for an elaborate discussion of the logistics of the International Brigades: Dan Richardson, *Comintern army. The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington 1982) 31-47.

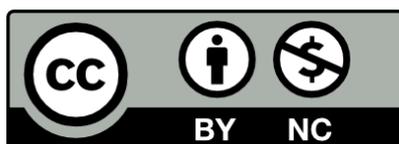
<sup>12</sup> See for example some details in: Van Doorslaer, ‘Tussen wereldrevolutie en joodse identiteit. Joden uit België in de Spaanse burgeroorlog’, *Cahiers-Bijdragen* 17 (December 1995) pp. 13-87, 44-45.

<sup>13</sup> S.L. Shneiderman, *Krig in Shpanyen* (Warschau 1938) p. 83.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Szurek, *The shattered dream* (Boulder 1989) p. 188.

<sup>15</sup> Richardson, *Comintern Army*, p. 93-94. See as an example a speech given by general Walter, commander of the Dombrowski Brigade and later the 35<sup>th</sup> Division of the Republican Army, as cited in: Szurek, *The shattered dream*, p. 244-5.

<sup>16</sup> The commissar’s involvement with practical affairs could overlap with the responsibilities of the military command and sometimes caused confusion. See: Richardson, *Comintern Army*, pp. 119-136.



who was supposed to guard the official Party line and maintain internal discipline, keep up morale and look after a number of practical matters.<sup>17</sup>

The strong emphasis on discipline could cause problems for volunteers who came from Western Europe and the United States who had expected a more democratic structure: “Many Brigade men became embittered by the contrast between the democratic, revolutionary fraternity of equals which they had expected an army run by Communists to be and what the International Brigades were in fact”.<sup>18</sup> Some volunteers with anti-militaristic principles also struggled with themselves.<sup>19</sup>

Reformations of battalions and brigades took place during the whole period of two years that the brigades operated, until their dissolution in September 1938 and subsequent withdrawal in October, as part of an agreement between the Republican government and the League of Nations. In the end, 7 Brigades existed. The Brigades played an important role in the battles around Madrid that lasted from November 1936 to March 1937. After that battle, a change took place. The building up of a large Republican army meant a relatively smaller military significance for the IB, that now formally became a part of the Republican army (in practice, the IB remained an independent part). Furthermore, from Spring 1937 onwards, the number of IB soldiers started to decline, because of high casualties (they were usually used as shock troops) and a decrease in the number of recruited volunteers, for several reasons.<sup>20</sup> To an increasing extent Spaniards now refilled the ranks of the Brigades. Efforts to recruit more volunteers abroad were reinforced by the IB command as well as a more rigid discipline to counter the decline in morale among certain units.<sup>21</sup> The maintenance of the morale of the troops was also an important function of the Brigade press. All Brigades, battalions and even some companies had their own newspapers. There were also frequent broadcasts on Radio Madrid in different languages.<sup>22</sup>

A number of Jews were already in Spain before the IB was founded and decided to actively engage themselves when the army rebellion broke out. They consisted of Jews who lived in Spain already; refugees from Germany and Polish Jews who had come through Belgium and France and had been given asylum. Another group consisted of the aforementioned participants of the Workers Olympiad who were in Spain at the time the rebellion broke out and decided to stay. Men from these groups joined in the so-called Telman Centuria, the first foreign militia to be organised.

After the International Brigades were founded, Jewish volunteers were among the many volunteers who came to Spain. Especially strong were the numbers of Jewish volunteers from Poland, France, Belgium, Palestine and the United States. They served in all Brigades. Quite a number of them

<sup>17</sup> The popularity of a commissar depended not only on his political role. As veteran Irving Weissman writes with regard to the American Lincoln Brigade: “... while they knew from the start what they were fighting for, they demanded to know what was going on at the moment. Knowledge, discussion and understanding were critical for their morale. However, the commissar who limited himself to speechifying soon earned the epithet “comic star”. On the other hand, one who soldiered in accordance with the rule, “The commissar is the first to advance, the last to retreat,” earned respect.” See: Irving Weissman, ‘The volunteers in Spain’ (review - Our fight: writings by veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Spain, 1936-1939/ The Lincoln Brigade: a picture history), *Jewish Currents* 45/1 (January 1991) pp. 22-24, 23-24.

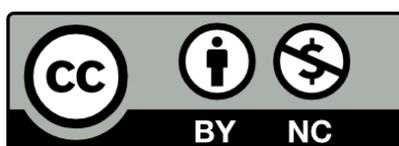
<sup>18</sup> Richardson, *Comintern Army*, p. 132.

<sup>19</sup> Van Doorslaer points out the “inner struggle” that resulted from the “antimilitaristic conviction and the new situation that had arisen because of the struggle against fascism” that troubled some young radicals. See: Van Doorslaer, ‘Tussen wereldrevolutie en joodse identiteit’, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> As Richardson has put it: “No doubt also the reports of disillusioned Brigade men who had managed to get out of Spain, the reports of the Communist terror, and the gradually growing awareness that joining the Brigades was less a romantic adventure than a good way to die young played a part in reducing the number of men who might otherwise have been tempted to join”. See: Richardson, *Comintern Army*, p. 88.

<sup>21</sup> A problem was that often no distinction was made between political and military discipline, a lack in the latter thus often being interpreted as a lack of the former. See: *Ibidem*, p. 135.

<sup>22</sup> The journalist Gina Medem took care of a broadcast in Yiddish on 24 July 1937. See her account in: Gina Medem, *Lender, Felker, Kampfn* (New York 1963) pp. 295-301.



either spoke, or could understand Yiddish to some extent.<sup>23</sup> Most Polish Jews served in the 13<sup>th</sup> Polish Dombrowski Brigade that consisted of four batallions (Mieczkewicz, Rakoshi, Dombrowski and Palafox).

There are not many references to anti-semitism within the Brigades, but there were incidents sometimes.<sup>24</sup> Sigmund Stein recalls anti-semitic incidents when he was evacuated to the French border with other sick and wounded men, after the battle at the Estramadura front. Rumours of Jewish traitors to the cause reached such a point that Stein was ordered to give a lecture for the men on anti-semitism (the audience included Joseph Brodsky, better known as Tito).<sup>25</sup> Some Jewish volunteers had doubts to serve together with Poles, given anti-semitism in Poland in that period.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the acquaintance with Jews in battle served to counter prejudices, especially among these Polish and other Slavic volunteers.

## Statistics

The exact number of volunteers that came to Spain is difficult to assess. Estimates for the total number of volunteers run from 35.000 to around 60.000. Most authors cite figures of around 35.000 to 40.000 men and women. The numbers for Jewish volunteers run from approximately 5.000 up to 10.000. Joseph Toch provides the number of 7.758.<sup>27</sup> Sichon however has argued convincingly why this count is too high (because of double counts and other factors). He arrives at a considerably lower number, around 5.000 Jewish volunteers.<sup>28</sup> Some authors, however, seeking to demonstrate the important part that Jews played in the Spanish Civil War, tend to exaggerate the numbers without questioning these statistics. This, of course, does not diminish the basic fact that Jews were overrepresented in the various brigades if one considers the percentage of Jews in the total population of their countries of origin (for example the United States, France and Poland) and the percentage of Jewish volunteers from those countries as compared to the total amount of volunteers those countries provided.

## Jews in the socialist and communist movements

For some authors, the high proportion of Jewish volunteers for Spain indicates that a Jewish concern must have played role. However, this high proportion was largely a reflection of the Jewish overrepresentation in the socialist and communist movements.<sup>29</sup> If we look, for example, at the percentage of Jews among the total amount of Polish volunteers most authors arrive at a figure of 45%. Schatz estimates that the percentage of Jews in the Polish Communist Party (KPP) fluctuated between 22 and 26% throughout the 1930s. In the larger cities, however, this percentage was often much higher, amounting to 50 or 60%.<sup>30</sup> Although there are no definitive data relating to the places Jewish volunteers came from, most references that do mention this relate to cities like Warsaw, Lublin, Bialestok, Lodz and Lvov. It seems logical,

<sup>23</sup> Shindler even contends Yiddish served as a lingua franca. See: Shindler, 'No pasaran', p. 37. This is partly true, but it has to be remembered that a lot of volunteers from Western Europe and the United States could not speak or read their parent's language anymore. A number of Balkan Jewish volunteers with a Sephardic background knew Ladino. Loker contends this gave them an advantage in acquiring higher ranks within the Brigades, because of the closeness of Ladino to Spanish. See: Zvi Loker, 'Balkan Jewish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War', *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 6/2 (1976) pp. 71-82, 74. Many Jewish volunteers from the United Kingdom had Yiddish speaking parents with an Eastern European background. The children themselves usually did not speak Yiddish anymore. See: interview with Sol Frankel, London, 14-07-2001. See also: Szurek, *The shattered dream*, p. 197.

<sup>24</sup> See Shindler, 'No pasaran', p. 40 and: Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck, and Grigory Sevostianov eds., *Spain betrayed. The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven 2001) p. 448.

<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Stein, *Der birger-krig in Shpanye. Zikhroynes fun a militsoner* (Paris 1961), p. 238.

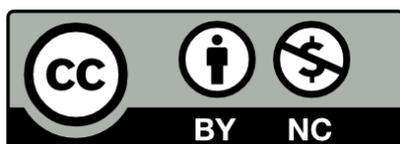
<sup>26</sup> See an account of a volunteer in: Diamant, *Yidn*, pp. 173-4.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Toch, 'Juden im Spanischen Krieg', *Zeitgeschichte* 1/7 (april 1974), pp. 157-171, 158.

<sup>28</sup> G.E. Sichon, 'Les volontaires juifs dans la guerre civile en Espagne: chiffres et enjeux', *Les temps modernes* 44/507 (1988) 46-62.

<sup>29</sup> See for example: Toch, 'Juden im Spanischen Krieg', p. 158.

<sup>30</sup> Jaff Schatz, *The Generation. The rise and fall of the generation of Jewish communists of Poland* (Oxford 1991) p. 96.



therefore, that the exceptional percentage of Jews among Polish volunteers is a reflection of the percentage of Jews active in the Polish communist movements.

The high proportion of Jews in radical movements in Europe as well as the United States is sometimes explained by arguing that Jews have an inherent radical inclination, that the fight against injustice and oppression is an intrinsically Jewish trait, a theory that is the opposite of the abovementioned theory of submissiveness.<sup>31</sup> However, as Schatz has stated, “it is important to keep in mind that extreme radicals formed but a tiny minority among Jews as a whole.”<sup>32</sup> The more relevant question then is if the partaking of Jews in radical movements was a matter of Jewish concern. This topic is complicated, and an extensive investigation is beyond the scope of the present study, but some comments can and should be made.

Jews who engaged themselves in radical movements had three options. They could become a member of the socialist and non-zionist *Bund* (founded in 1897), the socialist-zionist *Poale Tzion* (founded in 1906) or enter one of the various communist parties that existed in the different European countries. While the *Bund* conceived of Jewishness in secular and cultural terms by strongly supporting Yiddish culture, the Jewish identity of the *Poale Tzion* lay in its zionist beliefs. Within the different communist parties where Jews were active the pressure for assimilation was often strong. However, both in the US and Europe, there was support for preserving Yiddish culture. Moreover, communism gained popularity among Jews for its consistent opposition to anti-semitism and promoted a feeling among Jews that equal rights could be obtained.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Schatz poses the theory that a number of features of Marxism corresponded to the Jewish cultural heritage: “The moral affirmativeness, longing for justice, and universalist ethos shared by the Marxist vision and Jewish tradition appear to be among the major sources of the appeal exercised by the former on radical Jews”.<sup>34</sup>

Anti-semitism was one factor of the Jewish predicament for which Jewish youngsters tried to find relief by engaging in radical political parties. Hitler’s rise to power in Germany was not a major factor however: “German National Socialism had little influence on these peers as a motive force: most of them had embarked on the road to communism before 1933. However, the growing specter of Nazism became a factor that further strengthened their attachment to Communist ideals. When the Spanish Civil War broke out, they were already committed Communists.”<sup>35</sup> Some Jewish communist volunteers felt that Jewishness was a capitalist remainder that would disappear together with “Franco-racism and capitalism”.<sup>36</sup> In general, Polish communists were very disciplined, because they were used to working in an underground organisation (the KPP was illegal). Most communists served time in prison and a number of Polish Jewish volunteers in Spain had been imprisoned in the infamous camp Kartuz-Bereza. In this respect, Schatz contends “prison functioned as a sort of Communist academy”.<sup>37</sup> The resulting dedication and discipline might account for the good reputation of Polish volunteers on the battlefield.

<sup>31</sup> A theory that, in anti-semitic circles, has led to the myth of Judeo-communism, the idea that communism is a Jewish conspiracy. See for a more elaborate investigation of this topic: André Gerrits, ‘Jewish communism’ in East Central Europe: myth versus reality’ in: André Gerrits and Nanci Adler eds., *Vampires unstaked. National images, stereotypes and myths in East Central Europe* (Amsterdam 1995) pp. 159-179.

<sup>32</sup> Schatz, *The Generation*, p. 13.

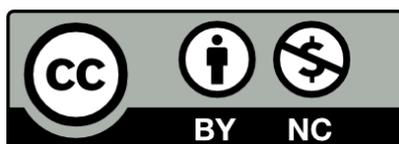
<sup>33</sup> Ibidem. See also: Szurek, *The shattered dream*, p. 162.

<sup>34</sup> Schatz, *The Generation*, p. 50. It should be noted that Schatz’ book is probably the only study that provides a systematic and in-depth investigation on a sociological level of the appeal of radical movements for Jewish youth in Poland, specifically communism.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 54. See also Van Doorslaer’s comment on the success of the communists in Belgium on the “Jewish street”, who presented the fight against fascism as a fight against anti-semitism: Rudi van Doorslaer, ‘Joodse vrijwilligers uit België in de Internationale Brigaden. Portret van een vergeten generatie?’, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 18/1-2 (1987) pp. 165-185, 171.

<sup>36</sup> See: Stein, *Der birger-krig*, p. 78. According to him this was a prevalent idea among German and Austrian Jewish volunteers.

<sup>37</sup> Schatz, *The generation*, p. 87. See pp. 128-149 for a description of the effect of imprisonment in the process of becoming for many Polish communists. See also: Medem, *Lender, Felker, Kampfn*, p. 290. Medem contends that taking revenge for their still-imprisoned comrades was one part of the motivation of Polish-Jewish volunteers. See pp. 317-318.



## Motivation

The possibility to fight against fascism in Spain was probably a major factor that motivated most volunteers. The struggle in Spain was presented by the Comintern as a struggle for freedom and democracy as opposed to the fascist forces of Franco. For communists the party demand to enlist could be decisive. However, the decision to go to Spain was often a mix of political, social, economical and psychological circumstances. The importance of these factors varied from individual to individual. Not all volunteers had a clear political affiliation. The possibility of regaining dignity and self-respect played a part for those who lived in poor and difficult circumstances.<sup>38</sup> And there were also some who sought adventure.

In a number of cases, volunteers did not come to Spain directly from their country of origin but from other countries where they had migrated to earlier. A good example is Belgium where both a considerable number of Poles and Polish Jews came from, who fled from the always present threat of persecution.<sup>39</sup> The specific psychological and social-economical circumstances of these political and economic emigrées in their new countries, their immigrant experience, sometimes created a situation where 'Spain' could provide a useful escape, for example from the continual fear of being expelled in the case of some professional revolutionaries.

When studying the motivation of volunteers, all these circumstances have to be taken into account. This means that treating and studying the Polish volunteers, to take one example, as one group is highly problematic unless these migration issues are taken into account. But even within a single group of communist volunteers from a given country there were differences, for example between those who had volunteered themselves and those who had been ordered by the party to go, or between those who left a family behind and those with unmarried status.

The same is perhaps even more true when Jewish volunteers are studied: they came from various countries and specific backgrounds and their motivation cannot be studied and explained sufficiently by considering them as one specific group or nationality. As stated earlier, regardless of what view on statistics one has, it is a basic fact that Jews were overrepresented as volunteers in Spain. The question is, however, how to evaluate this fact. As Van Doorslaer comments: "First, one can ask the question whether it is historically advisable and correct to count "all" Jews together and then proceed to show that the Jewish "nationality" had the strongest representation in Spain, which in the case of some authors is the underlying intention. What makes sense for Palestinian or Eastern European - including Polish - Jews with their own language and identity, is already much less significant for Jews of British, American, French and German nationality (even though many were second or third generation Eastern European migrants)."<sup>40</sup>

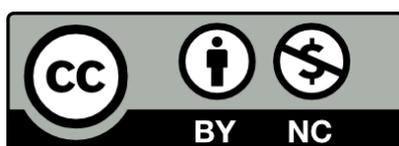
Van Doorslaer has also posed the key question regarding the motivation of Jewish volunteers clearly: "... did the Jews come to Spain to fight for their communist ideals (together with all other communists) or did they come because, as Jews, they wanted to take issue with the motor of anti-semitism - fascism?"<sup>41</sup> Was there indeed a heightened general Jewish sensitivity regarding fascism because of anti-semitism (especially in Germany and Poland)? And if so, how important was this factor in motivating these volunteers? Let us first take a look at the theories that have been advanced on the issue of the motivation of Jewish volunteers.

<sup>38</sup> Van Doorslaer, 'Tussen wereldrevolutie en joodse identiteit', pp. 29-30.

<sup>39</sup> Frank Caestecker, Rudi van Doorslaer, 'Poolse vrijwilligers uit België in de Internationale Brigaden', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 18/1-2 (1987) 215-241; Van Doorslaer, 'Joodse vrijwilligers uit België', and Van Doorslaer, 'Tussen wereldrevolutie en joodse identiteit'. Approximately one third of the volunteers from Belgium were emigrées.

<sup>40</sup> Van Doorslaer, 'Tussen wereldrevolutie en joodse identiteit', p. 84. As has been pointed out earlier in the paragraph on historiography, this issue is also connected to other concerns.

<sup>41</sup> Rudi van Doorslaer, 'Joodse vrijwilligers uit België', p. 169.



Rothenberg divides Jewish volunteers in two large groups: “those who came from countries where the notion of Jews belonging to a separate nationality was not known or accepted, and those from the countries of Eastern Europe where Jews considered themselves and were officially considered to belong to a Jewish nationality.”<sup>42</sup>

The first group includes countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, France and The Netherlands. In the United States Jews did not live under the direct threat posed by Hitler for Germany’s Jews. American volunteers, in general, did not go to Spain “out of Jewish concern”<sup>43</sup> according to Rothenberg. This is probably true in general, but for some there was a clear Jewish concern, most poignantly phrased by Hyman Katz, who explained in a letter from Spain to his mother, he went to fight against the “persecutors of my people - the Jews - and my class - the Oppressed”.<sup>44</sup> In this respect, it is interesting to see the discussions that have arisen in the American-Jewish magazine *Jewish Currents*, following some of Albert Prago’s articles.<sup>45</sup> There was thus a varying degree of Jewish consciousness among US Jewish volunteers.<sup>46</sup>

The presence of the Botwin company seems to have caused certain feelings of guilt among some US veterans and historians. Prago, for instance, comments: “It appears that we were not Jews as much as we were “internationalists.” That we could and should be Jewish internationalists - as were the men of the Botwin company - did not occur to us.”<sup>47</sup> However, the fact that many volunteers from the US did not have a clear Jewish consciousness does not, of course, diminish the value of their engagement and sacrifices in Spain.<sup>48</sup>

Following Rothenberg one would assume that the second group, Eastern European Jews, had a much clearer ‘Jewish’ motivation. In his view Eastern European Jews “had a keen awareness of their Jewishness and a loyalty to the Jewish people.”<sup>49</sup> But again, the picture is more complicated. Loker states, for example, that many Balkan Jewish volunteers “did not view themselves as Jews but as cosmopolitans and universalists” with the exception of Zionist youth.<sup>50</sup> For them, volunteering for Spain provided a suitable outlet for their revolutionary and leftist fervor, the possibility to meet “a desire for immediate and practical action, as against the inevitable, and often long and frustrating, wait for emigration permits.”<sup>51</sup> It must be observed here that even within this Zionist group, where one would expect the clearest ‘Jewish concern’, practical reasons influenced the decision to volunteer for Spain. The same was true for some of the Palestinian volunteers who were banned from Palestine because of their

<sup>42</sup> Rothenberg, ‘The Jewish Naftali Botwin Company’, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, 15. See also: Albert Prago, ‘A fortieth anniversary in Florence. Reunion of International Brigades in Spain’, *Jewish Currents* 31/2 (february 1977) pp. 5-9/ 37-39, 6-7, and Prago, ‘Jews in the International Brigades’, *Jewish Currents* (february 1979) pp. 15-21, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Hyman Katz and Michael Feller, ‘Letters from the front in Spain, 1937-1938’, *Jewish Currents* (april 1986) pp. 5-9/ 32, 6.

<sup>45</sup> See for instance: Irving Weissman, ‘A flawed book on International Brigades’ (review - International solidarity with the Spanish Republic), *Jewish Currents* 32/4 (april 1978) pp. 35-38, 37-38; Alvah Bessie, Albert Prago and Morris U. Schappes, ‘Readers’ forum on Jews in the International Brigades’, *Jewish Currents* 34/2 (february 1980) pp. 20-25/ 34-35, 20; Hyman R. Cohen, ‘Spanish Civil War and Jews’ (letters from readers, includes answer by Albert Prago), *Jewish Currents* (february 1988) pp. 38-42, 38-39.

<sup>46</sup> Saul Wellman, ‘Jewish Vets of the Spanish Civil War. Personal observations of the Spanish Civil War’, *Jewish Currents* 27/6 (june 1973) pp. 8-13, 11.

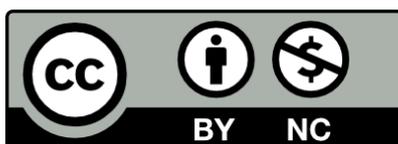
<sup>47</sup> Prago in: Edward Lending, Edward, Molly C. and Albert Prago, ‘Readers’ forum on Jews in Internationale Brigades’, *Jewish Currents* (may 1981) back cover/ 31-34, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Intriguingly, Jewishness was sometimes used in propaganda in the United States, by the main support organisation of the American volunteers, the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. An example is the account of veteran William Herrick. Upon his return to the United States, he was interviewed by the magazine *Life*: “When asked why he had gone to Spain he was answered that he had gone as a member of the Communist party. At that point the representative of the Friends [who was present during the interview] told Herrick to change his statement and say that he had volunteered because he was Jewish and wanted to join to fight against fascism”. See: Richardson, *Comintern Army*, p. 155.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>50</sup> Loker, ‘Balkan Jewish volunteers’, pp. 73-74.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem, p. 75.



communist activities<sup>52</sup> or were disappointed and found Palestine too capitalistic.<sup>53</sup> Conversely, some of the Jewish volunteers from Palestine thought that a successful revolution in Spain could help to establish the future Jewish state.<sup>54</sup>

Joseph Toch does not rule out a specific Jewish concern but predominantly sees their willingness to enter the SCW as an effort to bring about the socialist turn that would relieve their life circumstances.<sup>55</sup> Sichon acknowledges that the difficult situation for Polish Jewry, their social and economic hardship and anti-semitism, was an incentive for young Jews to enter the radical left.<sup>56</sup> But he also claims that for many Jewish volunteers from Poland, Jewish origin was of secondary importance.<sup>57</sup>

Another question is what the role of anti-semitism, both as an integral part of fascism in general and in the form of anti-semitic declarations on behalf of Franco and his companions, played as an incentive for Jewish volunteers. There was a rise of anti-semitism in Europe in the 1930s, in Germany and Italy in various Eastern European countries. Anti-semitism as part of the motivating forces of Jewish volunteers is thus often mentioned.<sup>58</sup> Rothenberg goes one step further by considering anti-semitism not only as an integral part of the motivation of Eastern European Jewish volunteers, but also as an incentive to fight openly as Jews on the battlefields of Spain: “Most of these volunteers wanted it to be known to all, friend and foe, that *they* fought Hitler, Mussolini and Franco as Jews.”<sup>59</sup> As we have seen already, this is clearly a simplification. And if even in the case of the Botwin company, it cannot be simply stated that all its Jewish soldiers had a Jewish concern.

During a conference in Tel Aviv in 1972, where the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Botwin company was commemorated, a discussion took place how to counter the theory of submissiveness, of supposed Jewish passivity during the holocaust, a question now asked by young Israelis. Israeli veterans responded to this question by stressing that the SCW was “the first serious international expression of military resistance to Hitler, a struggle in which thousands of Jews took part”.<sup>60</sup> There is an anachronistic element in this explanation, but it also points to the difference between the perception of motivation during the Civil War period, and the reconstruction of that motivation afterwards. In this respect, Colin Shindler has made an interesting comment: “It may be that many brigaders felt that their Jewishness was simply one reason among many for their presence in Spain and that to emphasize it was unnecessary. As the years have passed, however, many have realized in retrospect that unacknowledged Jewish reasons for volunteering were important.”<sup>61</sup> He does not elaborate on that comment any further and the question remains in what sense “Jewish reasons” played a role. A similar conclusion is also drawn by Schatz who contends that “in retrospect, their Jewishness [of his interviewees, GZ] appears to them as a factor that strongly influenced their lives”.<sup>62</sup> We have to be very careful here as this points to a basic methodological problem of (oral) history: as people look back on their lives their interpretation of past experiences is influenced by the later course of their lives and their personal narrative reconstructed accordingly.

<sup>52</sup> Diamant, *Yidn*, p. 103.

<sup>53</sup> Stein, *Der birger-krig*, p. 80.

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>55</sup> See: Toch, ‘Juden im Spanischen Krieg’, p. 168: “Nun wurde die Teilnahme am Spanischen Krieg für sie zum großen (und wie sich schließlich zeigte, letzten) Akt ihres Glaubens an den sozialistisch-kommunistischen Internationalismus als menschheitliches und damit auch (wie sie annahmen) als Gebot für die Lösung ihrer speziellen jüdischen Misere. Daher gingen sie nicht mit einem speziellen jüdischen Defensiv-Anliegen nach Spanien, sonder als Kommunisten, Sozialisten oder schlechthin Antifaschisten. Natürlich konnten sie nicht umhin, die *besondere* Bedrohung zu empfinden, welche ein Sieg des Faschismus in Spanien - an dem der Hitlerismus so stark interessiert und beteiligt war - für sie als Juden bedeuten würde.” This was of course especially true for those German Jewish communists who had been imprisoned by the Nazis.

<sup>56</sup> Sichon, ‘Les volontaires juifs’, p. 59.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, pp. 59-60.

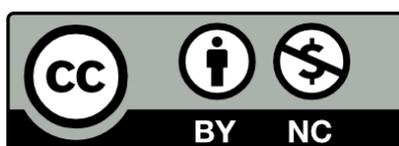
<sup>58</sup> Joseph Toch is careful on this. See: Toch, ‘Juden im Spanischen Krieg’, p. 167. More outspoken is Arno Lustiger. See: Lustiger, ‘German and Austrian Jews’, p. 298.

<sup>59</sup> Rothenberg, ‘The Jewish Naftali Botwin company’, p. 14.

<sup>60</sup> Wellman, ‘Jewish Vets of the Spanish Civil War’, p. 10.

<sup>61</sup> Colin Shindler, ‘No pasaran’, p. 34.

<sup>62</sup> Schatz, *The generation*, p. 314.



## Preliminary conclusions

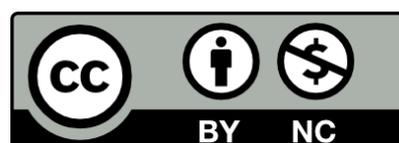
In the previous paragraphs I have tried to show some of the complex issues involved when looking at the historiography about, and motivation of, Jewish volunteers. In the end, these theories are assumptions that can only be confirmed by looking at the volunteers themselves. A significant problem is however the idea that it is possible to look at Jewish volunteers as a distinct category, separate from other groups of volunteers. If the variety of backgrounds, both political, social and geographical, shows anything, it is that only a thorough contextualization, and the study of specific groups of Jewish volunteers that take these backgrounds into account, can provide useful answers.

Generalizations about the background and the motivation of Jewish volunteers can hardly be made. Patterns in motivation can be discovered but this requires in-depth research, as has been done for the group of Polish Jews that came to Spain from Belgium.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, one must be careful to look at the circumstances that motivated volunteers then, without anachronistically reconstructing this motivation in view of the holocaust. Finally, it should be said that, while the radical engagement of Jews might have had a Jewish context (anti-semitism or specific social circumstances), this does not imply automatically that Jewishness was the key factor triggering the decision to go to Spain, nor that Jewish volunteers had a clear Jewish consciousness and identified themselves mainly as Jews in Spain.

In light of these backgrounds, we can now examine the Botwin company itself.

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<sup>63</sup> Van Doorslaer, 'Tussen wereldrevolutie en joodse identiteit'.



## The Botwin Company

### Early initiatives

The idea of creating a Jewish military unit was first suggested by Albert Nahumi (real name Arieh Weits) to Luigi Longo, one of the IB organisers.<sup>64</sup> Nahumi was a French communist who was part of a group of 14 Jews who left from Paris in October 1936.<sup>65</sup> Nahumi had been given an assignment from the Jewish Commission of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party.<sup>66</sup> Longo conveyed his enthusiasm for this proposal in his introduction to Gina Medem's *Los judios voluntarios de la libertad en la guerra civil en Espagna*, published in 1937. His apparently positive attitude derived from his feeling that a debt existed towards the "Jewish heroes" who had been fighting in Spain. He discussed the idea with André Marti, the French communist and commander of the IB base at Albacete. They permitted Nahumi to issue a call to Jewish volunteers in all fighting units to form a Jewish unit.<sup>67</sup> According to Longo, due to language difficulties and lack of time this idea could not be realized and Nahumi died during one of the battles for Madrid in January 1937.

Apart from Longo's account we do not know, however, how the idea of a Jewish fighting unit was perceived in Albacete. Longo's account itself has to be treated with great caution. A separate Jewish unit was not in line with communist ideology that did not appreciate emphasizing nationality or ethnic background.<sup>68</sup> The existence of Jewish committees in the communist parties in Eastern and Western Europe might seem contradictory in this respect. However, as Estraikh argues, these were a "temporary compromise" maintained mainly for pragmatic reasons, for example in Poland "where the communist parties did not want to let the Jewish contingency defect to the 'more Jewish' movements [the *Bund* and the *Poale Zion, GZ*]"<sup>69</sup>.

Why then, did Longo write these words? The answer appears to lie in the increased propaganda effort of the command of the IB, that suffered from decreasing numbers of volunteers from spring 1937 onwards. The Medem booklet, that contained Longo's introduction, was not a coincidental publication. In the first half of 1937 the IB command established a Historical Commission<sup>70</sup>. As part of the commission's work, Medem was asked to write the booklet, provided with materials by the Commission.<sup>71</sup> Its purpose was, according to Medem herself, to counteract fascist anti-semitic propaganda by providing the Spanish people with the story of the heroic struggles of the Jewish volunteers. It is therefore not surprising that Longo wrote his glorifying remarks. Whatever his true beliefs, the book was issued in the first place for internal propaganda reasons. Medem sent the book also abroad. If it received much attention from Yiddish newspapers and political organisations is unclear.

The idea of forming a Jewish unit was not abandoned however. It was discussed during a reunion of volunteers at Albacete in May 1937 among the Jewish volunteers present.<sup>72</sup> The Dombrowski Brigade, previously a battalion, was formed by August 1937. The communist Max Stark, born in Galicia in 1907

<sup>64</sup> He was part of a group of three (the others were the Polish communist Stephan Wisniewski and the French communist Pierre Rebière) who negotiated on behalf of the Comintern with the Spanish government about the formation of the International Brigades. See: Thomas, *The Spanish civil war*, pp. 453-454.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph Toch was part of this group. See: Toch, 'Juden im Spanischen Krieg', p. 161.

<sup>66</sup> Diamant, *Yidn*, pp. 191-2.

<sup>67</sup> See his version of this story in: Gina Medem, *Los judios voluntarios de la libertad en la guerra civil en Espagna* (Madrid 1937) as quoted in Toch, 'Juden im Spanischen Krieg', p. 162.

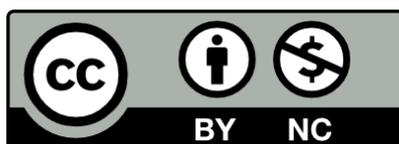
<sup>68</sup> According to Lubelski, Jewish volunteers, especially those from Palestine, had to be careful to call for a Jewish unit, because of the anti-Jewish riots in Jerusalem in 1936. The Comintern supported the Arab Palestinians, seeing their acts as a revolutionary fight for self-determination. See: Benjamin Lubelski, *Yidn in Shpanishn birgerkrig, 1936-1939. Fartseykhenungen fun a Yidishn frayvilikn* (Tel-Aviv 1984) pp. 196-197

<sup>69</sup> Private correspondence with Gennady Estraikh, 24-09-2001.

<sup>70</sup> Richardson, *Comintern Army*, p. 97/149.

<sup>71</sup> Medem, *Lender, Felker, Kampfn*, p. 326.

<sup>72</sup> Sichon, 'Les volontaires juifs', p. 51.



when it was still a part of Austria<sup>73</sup>, conveyed his ideas, and those of his fellow Jewish fighters in the Telman battalion, to Gina Medem in July 1937.<sup>74</sup> The idea was also subject of discussion among different Jewish volunteers, who differed in their opinions.<sup>75</sup>

### The creation of the Botwin company

The actual formation of a Jewish military unit took place on December 12, 1937. The Botwin company was formed within the Palafox battalion of the 13th Polish Dombrowski Brigade. The company was not new but basically a renaming and reformation of the already existing 2nd company within the Palafox battalion into an officially Jewish unit. In the process that led to this reformation different factors need to be distinguished. It is important to realize that decisions on these matters could be 'prepared' within the command of a brigade, but that the decision always had to pass the general command of the IB base in Albacete. As mentioned before, the IB was not a purely military affair, but also a political one, and military as well as political concerns were involved in the decision-making process, the latter being supervised and directed by the central political commissariat in Albacete.

Given the earlier initiatives and their outcome, and the incompatibility of forming a Jewish unit with Comintern internationalism, there were apparently new reasons to allow the Botwin company to be founded by the end of 1937.<sup>76</sup> In this process, an important role was played by the French communist party and its Jewish committee in Paris, that maintained close contacts with the Jewish volunteers in Spain. The communist Yiddish daily newspaper *Naye Prese* played an important role in maintaining these contacts with its frequent articles on the Jews that fought in Spain. Some editors became engaged in Spain as volunteers and Jewish volunteers also published accounts in the paper. In Paris the idea of a Jewish company was discussed in July/August 1937 and it was decided that Jacques Kaminsky, a French Jewish communist leader, would go to Spain to discuss the matter, with the general staff of the IB, as well as with Jewish military commanders.<sup>77</sup> These talks came at the right time. During the same period a general reform of the IB took place, finally granting the Poles their wish for a separate brigade. Thus, the Dombrowski battalion became the Dombrowski Brigade. The Poles had already envisaged separate military units within their future brigade for the largest minorities within the group of Polish nationals, the Ukrainians and Jews.<sup>78</sup>

The motives for the French communists to intervene on behalf of the Jewish volunteers need further exploration, because they seem to be the key impulse in the formation of the Botwin company. Sigmund Stein suggests, in his memoirs, three reasons that the Jewish committee of the French CP might

<sup>73</sup> Stark came to Spain from Belgium. See his biography in: Van Doorslaer, 'Tussen wereldrevolutie en joodse identiteit', pp. 25-6.

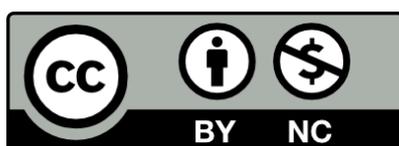
<sup>74</sup> As reported by Medem in an article in *Naye Prese*, 3 January 1938, as cited in: Diamant, *Yidn*, pp. 192-3.

<sup>75</sup> Gershon Dua-Bogen, a Polish Jewish communist who worked in the political commissariat of the IB base in Albacete, describes an interesting discussion between some Jewish volunteers in his memoirs. One volunteer contends it is not a coincidence that Jewish volunteers discuss the formation of a Jewish fighting unit, given the Jewish historical experience in Spain during the time of the Inquisition. But opinions vary. Another volunteer sees great value in the fact that Jews, Poles and others fight together in the same companies: it has an educational effect and connects anti-fascists from all over the world. Furthermore, "the Polish Brigade has been more effective in the fight against anti-semitism than a thousand brochures and articles" and separation could weaken this effect. Yet other volunteers disagreed for basically the same reason. The fight against racism was "one of the most important moments in the fight against fascism" and "a Jewish military unit, which should demonstrate for the world the contribution of Jewish volunteers [to the struggle] against fascism, will have a political and educational meaning." Still someone else feels that it is time others start talking about the contribution of Jews *as Jews*, and not as part of other nationalities. And yet another one feels the Polish Dombrowski Brigade should symbolize in its structure all the peoples that live in Poland. He feels such a Jewish company should be mixed, like all brigades and units, but with a Jewish command and name. See: Gershon, Dua-Bogen, *Oyf di shpuren fun gvure* (Warsaw 1964) pp. 204-206.

<sup>76</sup> Shindler, 'No pasaran', p. 38, and Rothenberg, 'The Jewish Naftali Botwin company', p. 15. Shindler contends that the same ideological reasons played a role in denying the Irish volunteers their own unit.

<sup>77</sup> Diamant, *Yidn*, p. 193.

<sup>78</sup> Sichon, 'Les volontaires juifs', pp. 51-52.



have had to encourage the formation of a Jewish company. First, it would have an important propaganda effect for Jews all over the world and it would make it easier to collect money for the Spanish cause and, also, to spread the message of communism among Jews. Second, the Jewish communists in Paris regarded the large amount of political emigrants, mainly young Jewish communists from Poland, as unwelcome competitors. A Jewish company would provide an opportunity to send them away. And third, Spain provided a career option (for French Jewish communists): the volunteer experience in Spain would increase their star in the ranks of the Paris Jewish communist organisation.<sup>79</sup> Let us take a closer look at these contentions.

Given the general problems of the IB by the end of 1937, the propaganda value of a Jewish fighting unit, would indeed be important.<sup>80</sup> The enthusiasm for Spain in the major Jewish workers centers waned as repatriated volunteers told their stories of the harsh control of the political commissars and the discipline that was demanded.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the International Brigade was one of the Comintern's most powerful propaganda tools and, in promoting its Popular Front policy and maintaining support in the world, it was essential to maintain an image of a strong international brotherhood of men that fought fascism in Spain, even though the military significance of the IB was already decreasing. Thus, for varying reasons, related to the immediate needs of the Brigades as well as to more general political-strategic concerns, it was important to mobilize support abroad. Given the high proportion of Jews in the various communist parties, a Jewish fighting unit was a powerful propaganda tool.<sup>82</sup>

The second reason Stein gives cannot be confirmed or rejected without detailed study of the archives of the French CP and its Jewish committee, as well as the newspaper *Naye Prese*, which was not possible within the framework of the present study. It is, however, interesting to note that there are some accounts of doubt regarding the reasons why certain volunteers came to Spain. Stein mentions the case of a Paris communist, who was nicknamed Abraham 'Komintern', a very popular speaker and well-known man, but also someone with very bad eyesight. Interestingly, Abraham 'Komintern' is mentioned in the same context in the memoirs of Alexander Szurek (the personal adjutant of general Walter<sup>83</sup>) who tells us "Abram was so nearsighted I could not understand how he could be a soldier in Spain".<sup>84</sup> Did Abraham go to Spain by his own wish or was he given an order by the Party which would have been hardly possible to reject? It seems indeed strange to send someone to battle who was clearly unfit to fight, but we can only speculate about the exact reasons for doing so. Regarding the third reason, the same applies as to the second one. Only detailed biographical analysis can reveal the personal motivation of volunteers.

It should be noted that Stein was a communist who, due to his acquaintance with the Stalinist terror in Spain, returned to France a disillusioned man. The Soviet secret service NKVD operated in Spain and actively persecuted 'Trotsky-ists', the preferred term for anyone who was suspected of not conforming to the official Stalinist party ideology.<sup>85</sup> This activity prompted the British Labour MP John McGovern to state there were two Brigades in Spain, "a military unit of that name and a horde of Comintern gangsters and gunmen".<sup>86</sup> When Stein joined the Botwin company, one of the first persons he met was a man named Shiler. Stein had met him earlier in Spain when Shiler was working in the IB base in Albacete. Stein describes him as "the censor", "the great man, for whom thousands of Jewish fighters trembled and who had on his conscience not one terminated human life", referring to his apparent involvement in the

<sup>79</sup> Stein, *Der birger-krig*, p. 214.

<sup>80</sup> Stein's statement is supported by Efraim Wuzek, also a Botwinist, who speaks in this context of "the need to concentrate and mobilize the attention of the Jewish masses to the fight against fascism, to alleviate the mass-action of the Jewish solidarity committees etc.". See: Efraim Wuzek, *Zikhroynes fun a Botwinist* (Warsaw, 1964) p. 9.

<sup>81</sup> Lustiger, *Schalom Libertad!*, p. 306.

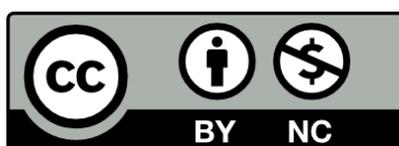
<sup>82</sup> See also veteran Benjamin Lubelski's contentions in his *Yidn in Shpanishn birgerkrig, 1936-1939. Fartseykhenungen fun a Yidishn frayvilikn* (Tel-Aviv 1984) p. 198.

<sup>83</sup> Walter and Szurek visited the Botwin company before the Ebro offensive. See: *Botwin* 4 (12-06-1938) p. 14.

<sup>84</sup> Alexander Szurek, *The shattered dream* (Boulder 1989) p. 75.

<sup>85</sup> According to Stein, Jewish administrative personnel at the IB base in Albacete were among the first victims of the purges that general Gomez (the German communist and Comintern executive Wilhelm Zeisser) conducted when he became base commander in the winter of 1938. Many Jews worked there because of their intellectual background. See: Stein, *Der birger-krig*, p. 79.

<sup>86</sup> McGovern as quoted in: Richardson, *Comintern Army*, p. 163.



persecution of political dissenters. Now this Shiler, a Polish Jewish communist, was demoted to an ordinary soldier. He had become a suspect himself, being a Polish communist (Stalin became increasingly suspicious of the Polish communists, who tended to disagree with Comintern policies; this led to the formal dissolution of the KPP by the end of 1938). Shiler was, in Stein's view, a clear example of those who were quite unhappy finding themselves on the battlefield, either because they had been sent to Spain by the CP or were there for career motives.<sup>87</sup>

The reasons cited by Stein and Wuzek for the establishment of the Botwin company are partly different from the more common, perhaps 'traditional', view that one encounters. Diamant, whose book is a prime example of the 'heroic perspective' that often can be found in the IB literature, sees the good reputation and high number of the Jewish soldiers as the prime reason for the founding of the Botwin company.<sup>88</sup> Another reason often cited is the wish of Jewish volunteers themselves to fight in a Jewish unit. Rothenberg contends that "the Jewish volunteers who fought so hard to fight in a distinctly Jewish unit were well acquainted with such views [the idea of submissiveness as a Jewish trait, GZ] among non-Jews (as well as some Jews). They were fearful that their armed resistance might be submerged in anonymity unless they made it unmistakably Jewish".<sup>89</sup> This wish might have been very real, but the question is what role it played exactly. These volunteers did not make the decisions themselves and pushing too hard for their cause was certainly not without danger in the politicized environment of the IB.

So the question remains: why did the IB base in Albacete agree to founding the Botwin company "although the initiators were ardent Stalinists, who denied the very existence of a Jewish people and Jewish national questions"?<sup>90</sup> Did Luigi Longo finally manage to turn the obligation he had felt into practice? It seems that pragmatic reasons were decisive, in view of the aforementioned problems for the IB and its political concerns. It is also important in this respect to consider the fact that this was not a new company, but a reformation of an already existing one. There is certainly no argument to support the view that the wish of Jewish volunteers themselves led to its creation.<sup>91</sup> As Lustiger very carefully asserts: "Die Behauptung mancher Spanienkämpfer, daß die gründung einer jüdischen Einheit den Zweck verfolgte, neue Freiwillige nach Spanien zu locken, entbehrt nicht jeder Grundlage."<sup>92</sup>

## 12 december 1937

On december 12, 1937, Mietek (political commissar of the Dombrowski Brigade) and Gershon Duabogen went to the trenches at Tardienta (Aragon front), where the Botwin company had its positions. Their coming had been announced by a telephone call to Karol Gutman, commander of the 2nd company of the Palafox battalion. The official founding ceremony took place in the trench of the company's section headed by Shloyme Elboym. Apparently, while Gutman gave orders through the telephone because of fascist attacks, the order of the day was being read, that officially announced the reformation of the nameless 2nd company into the Jewish Botwin company:

"Emphasizing the great number and significance of Jewish volunteers in the Dombrowski Brigade, and honoring the memory of the Jewish fighters that fell [in the struggle for] freedom, we designate the 2nd company of the heroic Polish "Palafox" battalion as Jewish company in the name of Naftali Botwin."

<sup>87</sup> Stein, *Der birger-krig*, pp. 218-219, 222.

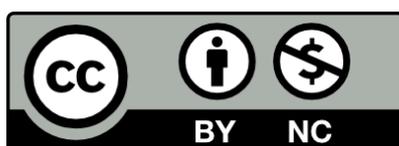
<sup>88</sup> Diamant, *Yidn*, p. 194.

<sup>89</sup> Rothenberg, 'The Jewish Naftali Botwin company', p. 19.

<sup>90</sup> Moshe Salzman, *Yosef Epshteyn (Kolonel Zshil). Der heroisher yidisher frayheys-kemfer* (Paris 1980) p. 36.

<sup>91</sup> This was stated as the main reason by Shlomo Shiloni, secretary of the Israeli Association of Volunteers of the International Brigades, in his address to the 1972 conference commemorating the establishment of the Botwin company 35 years earlier. See: Wellman, 'Jewish vets', p. 10.

<sup>92</sup> Lustiger, *Schalom Libertad!*, pp. 306-307.



“His name was a symbol and example of the heroic struggle of the Jewish masses for your and our freedom<sup>93</sup>, a symbol of international solidarity and the tie that binds peoples.”

The document was signed by Janek Barwinsky and Stakh Matustshak, commander and political commissar of the Dombrowski Brigade.<sup>94</sup> Following the reading of the order, Gershon Dua-Bogen gave a speech, containing the following words:

“You symbolize with your company the heroic struggle of the thousands of Jewish soldiers in Spain. You represent for the Jewish masses the most beautiful and heroic of the anti-fascist struggle.”<sup>95</sup>

## Composition & statistics

From its beginning, the Botwin company was a mixed company, in terms of nationalities, Jewish or non-Jewish background and political affiliation. The original company was formed by approximately 80 men, a majority of whom were Spaniards, with ca. 10 Jews and 10 Poles.<sup>96</sup> The number of soldiers during the formal existence of the company, until the dissolution of the IB in October 1938, of course varied constantly. During the battles the company fought in, many were killed or wounded, and subsequently new volunteers or Spanish soldiers filled its ranks. Some of those who were wounded did not return to the Botwin company, but were assigned to other units.<sup>97</sup> The majority of the Jewish Botwinists were Polish communists (some of whom were political emigrées who had come from Belgium or France).

The exact number of volunteers that fought in the Botwin company cannot be determined. Wuzek lists 153 names in his memoirs.<sup>98</sup> Adding names from other sources that are not mentioned in his list one arrives at between 160-170 persons. Most sources mention a number of up to 200 soldiers that fought in the company during its existence, which seems a low estimate. Wuzek's list, for example, only includes two Spaniards, but tens of Spaniards refilled the ranks after different battles.<sup>99</sup> During the existence of the company, it contained Jewish volunteers of different nationalities, Poles, Germans, a Greek and at least two Arabs, in addition to Spaniards. A most remarkable story is that of a German, who was originally sent to Spain to fight in Hitler's Condor Legion with Franco's troops, but then deserted and became determined to fight in the Jewish unit.<sup>100</sup>

On the day of the formation of the Botwin company, a meeting was held in Paris in the building of the Yidisher Arbeter Sport Klub (YASK - Jewish Workers Sports Association) with representatives of the different progressive Jewish organisations in Paris. The meeting was organised in honor of several volunteers that were to leave for Spain.<sup>101</sup> These and other new volunteers were sent to the training base of the IB in Casa Ibañez, where the 'reserve' Botwin company trained before going to the Estramadura

<sup>93</sup> This was the Polish credo in Spain, inspired by the Polish revolution of 1830.

<sup>94</sup> Diamant, *Yidn*, pp. 196-197. See also a photo of the Yiddish version of the order on page 235.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 198. It is not clear what the source of the speech is, most likely it is the first issue of the company's paper *Botwin* and Dua-Bogen's words are probably not a literal reproduction, but a rough one. They are however in line with the contents of the aforementioned order of the day.

<sup>96</sup> Wuzek, *Zikhroynes*, p. 15.

<sup>97</sup> As was the case with Shloyme Elboym, who was displeased with his assignment to another company upon his return from hospital. He obeyed the orders but wrote an article about his yearning for the Botwin company entitled: 'Mayn benkschaft', *Botwin* 4 (12-06-1938) p. 6.

<sup>98</sup> Wuzek, *Zikhroynes*, pp. 105-110.

<sup>99</sup> Some attention was being paid to the Spaniards in *Botwin* 4 (12-06-1938) pp. 12-13. These articles are printed both in Spanish and Yiddish.

<sup>100</sup> Diamant, *Yidn*, p. 204.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 199.



front in february 1938. Here, they received not only a short military training, but also political instruction. It was in Casa Ibañez that Sigmund Stein arrived.

According to Stein, the military training mainly consisted of long marches in the field, but no training in the use of rifles was given. Stein admits to doubts as to whether this was due to a lack of weaponry or perhaps to mistrust of some sort. He does not elaborate on that any further<sup>102</sup>, but his remarks point to the delicate situation for Polish communists in Spain. It has to be remembered that this was in the period just prior to the dissolution of the KPP and, in the words of Arno Lustiger, “ein jüdisches Mitglied der KP Polens zu sein war also ein doppelter Webfehler”.<sup>103</sup> In this politicized atmosphere, expressing doubts was not a healthy thing to do, and Stein describes the effect these conditions had on the volunteers of the Botwin company. He recalls a speech by the company’s political commissar Gershon Shir (*nom de guerre* Misha Reger) who called upon the men to watch out for traitors within the company’s ranks.<sup>104</sup> It is known there were also Bundists in the ranks of the company, but if they were watched more closely by Reger, or their fellow fighters, is unclear.<sup>105</sup>

There are, however, some subtle references to the work of political commissar Reger in the Botwin company’s newspaper. In an article on the front page of *Botwin* no. 4 (12 june 1938) Reger, by then political commissar of the Palafox battalion, wrote about the preparations for the Ebro offensive. He was sure these efforts, which included “replacing the unwanted cadre elements” would bring victory against the fascist armies.<sup>106</sup> In *Botwin* no. 5, a Botwinist recalled the fear for their political commissar: “And woe to him who had to appear before him [Misha] on report. When clarification did not help, he acted with the greatest rigour. Misha had a little book, which he used for making notes. The comrades did not use to like that book...”<sup>107</sup>

## The Botwin company in battle

It is not my intention to give a detailed overview of all the battles the Botwin company fought in, as the main concern of this study is not that of military history. What the record of the Botwins on the battlefield can show, however, is the fluctuation of its composition and the way its ranks were refilled.

After the training period in Casa Ibañez the reserve company went to the front to join the rest of the Botwin company in the beginning of february 1938. The new volunteers brought with them the Botwin flag that had been made in Paris. They then moved to the front at Estramadura, where they were to enter their first battle. The outcome of the offensive was disastrous and decimated the company. Many were killed and wounded, out of 120 men approximately 20 survived, according to the official organ of the 35th Division (of which the Dombrowski Brigade was a part).<sup>108</sup> The figure of 60 surviving men can also be found.<sup>109</sup> The most detailed eyewitness account of the role of the Botwin company in this battle is provided by Stein. According to Stein, shortly before the actual offensive, a Spanish commander replaced commander Karol Gutman. Only ten men could be provided with rifles, the rest would have to “grab them

<sup>102</sup> Stein, *Der birgerkrieg*, p. 221.

<sup>103</sup> See; Lustiger, *Schalom Libertad!*, p. 306. Stein recalls he was advised by another Botwinist to pretend he was a member of the Czech communist party. Stein could do this since he had worked in Prague for the *Geserd* (‘Gezelschaft far yidishe erdkolonisatsye in ratnfarband’), an organisation that collected funds for the Jewish autonomous region in Birobidzjan. See: *Ibidem*, p. 39 and Stein, *Der birger-krieg*, p. 220.

<sup>104</sup> Stein, *Der birger-krieg*, p. 226.

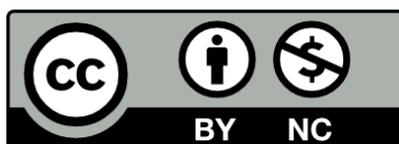
<sup>105</sup> Szurek recalls that in the French camp Gurs, where many volunteers were imprisoned after the final retreat, a “Company of Dissidents” existed. A *Bund* member, who had openly declared he was a Bundist, was “eased out of the collective” and transferred to this company. See: Szurek, *The shattered dream*, p. 234.

<sup>106</sup> Misha Reger, ‘Far naye kamfn’, *Botwin* 4 (12-06-1938), p. 1.

<sup>107</sup> ‘Komisar Gershon Shir (Misha Reger)’, *Botwin* 5 (03-11-1938), p. 14.

<sup>108</sup> This organ is quoted in: *Botwin* 5 (03-11-1938) p. 30.

<sup>109</sup> Wuzek, *Zikhroyes*, p. 23.



from the hands of the fascists”.<sup>110</sup> The lack of rifles is confirmed by Wuzek, who says the biggest problem when the new volunteers came was to provide them with weapons and clothing.<sup>111</sup> Lack of weapons and the role of the Botwin company in the center of the attack, in which they were confronted by Franco’s infamous Moroccan cavalry, led to the high number of casualties. IB units were often use as storm troops facing the first blows, and in general the losses were high. The Mieczkewicz battalion, like Palafox part of the Dombrowski Brigade, also suffered very high losses. Furthermore, reinforcements that had been promised, were not sent.

After the battle at Estramadura the company, according to Stein, contained about 15-18 Jews and a majority of Spaniards and Poles.<sup>112</sup> Commander Karol Gutman had died in the battlefield and was replaced by the Pole Tadeusz Shliakhta. The Botwin company then went to the front at Aragon, where a new commander, Leon Rubinstein, was appointed and new volunteers arrived, both Jews and (more) Spaniards. The Botwin company was then involved in battles at Belchite, Lesera and Kaspe. At Kaspe, commander Rubinstein and political commissar Misha Reger were wounded, and a new temporary commander, Galant, took the place of Rubinstein. After the battle at Kaspe the Botwin company took new positions near Lerida, where Moshe Safir, a captain from the American Lincoln Brigade, became commander. The Spaniard Isidor Graju became the new political commissar. New volunteers were also brought in, among them Emmanuel Mink, and by the end of march 1938 the company had reached again a number of ca. 120 men.<sup>113</sup> During the battle at Lerida, Safir was severely wounded and later died. Mink became the new commander, and later the former political commissar Reger returned from hospital to join the Botwin company. By the end of april the company had been moved to the front at the river Ebro and by the end of may a new position had been taken near Pradel. This very sketchy overview makes clear that, although most commanders and political commissars were Jewish, sometimes non-Jews occupied these posts also.

At Pradel, a period of rest and preparation began for the Ebro offensive, that started in july 1938. Mink went to an officers school and was replaced by Moshe Halbersberg, a former member of the French Foreign Legion.<sup>114</sup> New volunteers, Jews and Spaniards, joined the ranks of the Botwin company. A picture of the “Jewish Botwinists prior to the Ebro offensive” shows 33 men.<sup>115</sup> If this was indeed the total number of Jewish Botwinists left is not exactly clear, but if so, they clearly constituted a minority. During the battle at the Ebro, Halbersberg fell and was replaced by Mink, who had returned from the officers school. In general, the losses where great.<sup>116</sup> Misha Reger, who had become the political commissar of the Palafox battalion, was replaced by the Spaniard Diego Mula. When Mink was wounded, he was replaced by Alexander Szerman. The fighting near the Ebro continued until the official demobilization of the IB, that began on september 23.

The Botwin company apparently had a reputation for its determinedness in battle that even earned them the nickname “di royte teyvelonim”, the red devils.<sup>117</sup> It is difficult, however, to ascertain its appreciation in the Brigades, and by the command at Albacete, since most authors emphasizing this ‘heroism’, base their contentions on the Brigade press, which is clearly not the most objective source available. However, it must be remembered that most Jewish Botwinists were Polish communists, who

<sup>110</sup> This led to great confusion among the men. During the speech of the Spanish commander a rumour started about the number of rifles. The soldiers spoke in Yiddish, so their concerns had to be translated to the commander, who then made his audacious remark. See: Stein, *Der birger-krig in Shpanye*, p. 230.

<sup>111</sup> Wuzek, *Zikhroynes*, p. 19.

<sup>112</sup> Stein, *Der birger-krig*, p. 237.

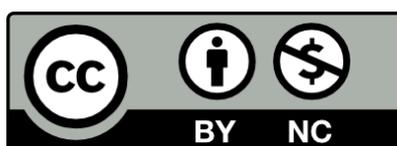
<sup>113</sup> Wuzek, *Zikhroynes*, p. 34.

<sup>114</sup> There was considerable suspicion towards ex-FL men, but Halbersberg appears to have become quite popular, despite this background.

<sup>115</sup> See: *Botwin 5* (03-11-1938) p. 31.

<sup>116</sup> Szurek, *The shattered dream*, p. 262. Szurek recalls that “the fascist penetrated the trenches of the Botwin and Shevchenko companies and the fight with hand grenades and hand-to-hand combat began”. See pp. 259-260.

<sup>117</sup> Wuzek, *Zikhroynes*, p. 56.



were among the most hardened and disciplined party members, due to their underground experience.<sup>118</sup> The Botwin company seems to have attracted Jewish volunteers from other Brigades, who wanted to join and were attracted to the company because of its reputation of heroism. Again, this information derives mainly from the IB press, so it's difficult to reach conclusions. According to the same sources, the company was important in countering anti-semitic prejudices among non-Jewish soldiers, both foreign volunteers and Spaniards. Moreover, it served as a powerful symbol abroad. The frequent articles in *Naye Prese* did serve propagandistic purposes but they clearly convey how important the existence of a Jewish military unit, fighting fascism and anti-semitism (this is mentioned often), was perceived to be.

### Communication with and support from the hinterland

The Jewish committee of the French communist party organised solidarity actions already before the founding of the Botwin company. In May 1937 a committee convened in Paris to discuss the creation of a museum dedicated to Jewish volunteers. As a preliminary outcome an exhibition was opened in September 1937.<sup>119</sup> The Jewish communist daily *Naye Prese* regularly reported on the vicissitudes of Jewish volunteers and was an important motor in the ongoing solidarity actions in France. NP published different appeals to the Jewish masses from Jewish volunteers in Spain. It is worthwhile to examine some of these calls and look at the image presented.<sup>120</sup> Diamant has published 5 appeals, released both before and after the demobilization of the IB. Those published before September 1938 (one undated, the others February and July 1938) all present the coming defeat of the Franco fascists, although in April the Republic effectively had been cut in two, and the situation had become extremely difficult by July. Of course these appeals were published for propaganda reasons and rallying support would work best when the picture of imminent victory could be presented to those whose support needed to be mobilized. But admitting to the severity of the situation, without maintaining hope, would have implied to admit to the irrelevance of the anti-fascist fight at that stage, something almost psychologically impossible for most Jewish volunteers themselves, and indeed all volunteers.

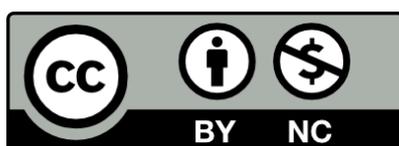
Four matters come up in all appeals. First, the fight in Spain was effectively a fight against the domination of fascism in Europe, a struggle for the preservation of democracy that was threatened by the rise of fascism. Second, there was a link between the fight in Spain and the fate of the Jewish people. The struggle in Spain was not only a fight for the freedom of the Spanish people and the freedom of all European countries, there was a specifically Jewish concern also. Fighting fascism in Spain would help the fight against fascism in Germany, Poland and Rumania, as well as anti-semitism: the appeals convey a clear sense of physical threat Hitler posed for the Jews, if allowed victory (a victory for Franco was seen, by extension, as a victory for Hitler). This concern is also expressed in the continuous references to the Jewish experience in Spain in the time of the Inquisition, that create a specific Jewish historical framework for their engagement in Spain.<sup>121</sup> Third, the Jewish struggle in Spain ended accusations of Jewish cowardice as Jews showed their readiness to engage in the anti-fascist struggle, as they had always done when freedom and democracy were at stake. And fourth, there was a call for unity among the Jewish masses. The unity displayed by the Jewish volunteers of various political backgrounds in Spain, should be an example for all Jews, since only unity could beat fascism.

<sup>118</sup> Reger explicitly links the discipline of Jewish volunteers, already before the formation of the Botwin company, to the underground and prison experience of many of its Jewish fighters. See his article: 'Yidishe militsionern - mutike kemfer', *Naye Prese* (08-10-1937).

<sup>119</sup> Diamant, *Yidn*, pp. 384-385.

<sup>120</sup> It should be noted that this kind of communication from volunteers themselves was seen as an essential part of propaganda by the IB commissariat. See: Richardson, *Comintern Army*, p. 156.

<sup>121</sup> This historical consciousness was present in Spanish Republican circles as well, as is evidenced in a speech of a Spanish political commissar, cited in: Diamant, *Yidn*, p. 202. It is interesting to note that sometimes, references were made also to the struggle of the Maccabees in the 2nd century BC.



Support from abroad, mainly organised in Paris, was provided both in material and moral forms. The Jewish-Spanish solidarity committee coordinated the different support actions. Transports were organised to bring clothing, food and cigarettes to the men, and money was collected. An ambulance had been sent already in April 1937.<sup>122</sup> In terms of moral support, *Naye Prese* played an important part in acting as the Botwin company's voice outside Spain, issuing both calls to help collecting goods and money, but also by publishing letters of volunteers as well as letters of family of volunteers. Immediately after the Botwin company was formed, a greeting from the company appeared in *Naye Prese*.<sup>123</sup> Support actions were organised in different countries, even as far away as Costa Rica.<sup>124</sup> The solidarity activities increased after the new French government, headed by Edouard Daladier, was installed, replacing the previous Popular Front government of prime minister Blum. The new government began to expel foreign political emigrées, who had come to France from German as well as Eastern Europe (especially Poland and Rumania).<sup>125</sup> As a reaction, the communist party increased its efforts to promote internationale solidarity and the united anti-fascist Popular Front for Spain.<sup>126</sup>

Letters were important for the morale of the volunteers. Diamant quotes a number of these letters, which reflect the support from families abroad. They appear, however, to have been selected to fit Diamant's heroic picture. The image they provide is that of strong women and mothers who fully support their husband's and children's struggle in Spain, because they realize the importance of the international struggle against fascism that had started in Spain.<sup>127</sup> This was only one part of the story, however. Many who stayed behind worried about the fate of their husbands and children. Sometimes they did not even know of their relatives' whereabouts until the first letter from Spain arrived. In this respect, an interesting account is given by the Alexander Szurek, who was on furlough in Paris in the summer of 1937. He recalls: "In Paris, many young women asked me about their husbands and fiancés. I did not know all of them and so could give them no news. I lied a little; I tried to calm them. In those women's eyes I could sometimes see pride, but more often worry. I sensed a certain nervousness. By then, news of the large numbers killed in action had already reached Paris".<sup>128</sup>

The journalist Shneiderman, who reported from Spain, mentions the existence of what he calls a "briv-bes-oylem", a letter graveyard in the mail center of the IB in Albacete. Here, letters to sons and husbands were kept, that had fallen without their families knowing it, or letters to the IB command requesting information about them.<sup>129</sup> Shneiderman also refers to cases where mothers came to Spain to look for their sons and stayed there as nurses, "relieving their anguish by providing help to the sons of other mothers".<sup>130</sup> Stein contends that letters of relatives in the Brigade press were often edited by the political commissariat. He recalls a letter in an IB press organ from the father of the Palestinian brothers Jaffe, who both died in Spain. The father apparently took pride in the fact that his sons had died for the good cause in Spain and he announced he would send his third son also. Indeed, the third son had left for Spain. Stein, however, knew some Palestinian volunteers who had known father Jaffe, a pious Jew who was bitter to see his sons leave for Spain to fight for a 'freethinking' cause.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>122</sup> See: 'Ambulans far Shpanye fun yidishn koordinir-komitet', *Naye Prese* (18-04-1937).

<sup>123</sup> 'A grus fun der Botvin-kompanye', *Naye Prese* (28-12-1937).

<sup>124</sup> In *Botwin* 4 (12-06-1938) p. 15, a short notice from *Naye Prese* is reprinted referring to this action.

<sup>125</sup> Such developments abroad were of course reflected in *Botwin*. See for instance the article 'Di frayhayt muz men oyskemfn', *Botwin* 4 (12-06-1938) p. 4.

<sup>126</sup> Diamant, *Yidn*, p. 302.

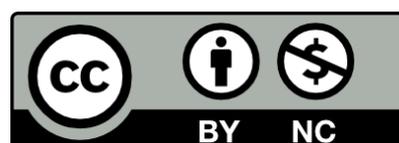
<sup>127</sup> See also a page of letters to and from Jewish volunteers in *Naye Prese* (18-07-1937).

<sup>128</sup> Szurek, *The shattered dream*, p. 210.

<sup>129</sup> S.L. Shneiderman, *Krig in Shpanyen* (Warschau 1938) p. 85.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86.

<sup>131</sup> Stein, *Der birger-krig*, pp. 80-81.



## Cultural and social life

The Botwin company was quite active culturally, mainly during the rest period at Pradel, when the IB prepared for the offensive at the river Ebro. Huts and houses were decorated in an attempt to create a nice living environment, turning it into “a kind of Yiddish shtetl” as Diamant calls it. One of the men even once dubbed the place ‘Kashrilevke’<sup>132</sup>, referring to one of the fictional town names of the Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem. Tables were arranged and decorated “in der Botvinishn shteyger”, in the Botwin manner.<sup>133</sup> There was an ongoing competition between different sections of the company in these activities.<sup>134</sup>

Furthermore, monuments were sometimes erected honoring fallen comrades. There were choirs<sup>135</sup>, sports activities and a steady production of wall newspapers<sup>136</sup> and the company’s own official newspaper *Botwin*, that reflected all these activities.<sup>137</sup> Interestingly, the use of typical Yiddish metaphors is also found in a description in *Botwin* no. 5 of the editorial ‘office’ in an old farmer’s house. Here, the busy activity of people creating a new wall newspaper is described as “a yarid”, a market.<sup>138</sup> The Botwin company also had its own marching song, composed by Olek Nus.<sup>139</sup> During one of the occasional concert evenings, something remarkable happened. A Hungarian chazan, Viktor Tulman, sang some liturgical melodies. The Spanish soldiers, who were present, were moved and wondered about the similarity between this Jewish music and their own musical heritage. Jewish Botwinists explained to them the Sephardic origins, and thus the ‘Spanish’ roots, of the music the chazan had sung.<sup>140</sup>

The first Yiddish newspaper in Spain that was made for distribution appeared on August 7, 1937, and was called *Frayhaytskemfer*.<sup>141</sup> Its stated purpose was to reflect the struggle between democracy and the “fascist barbarism, anti-semitism and Hitlerite racism”. Furthermore, the paper should function as a connection with the “Jewish masses of all countries”.<sup>142</sup> The creation of the official company newspaper *Botwin* coincided with that of the Botwin company itself. As Rothenberg points out: “It was the irony of history that the first Hebrew print to appear in Spain in more than four centuries was produced by a Yiddish speaking military unit”.<sup>143</sup> Seven issues were to appear, the last three after the formal dissolution of the Brigades.<sup>144</sup> The paper is especially interesting for the biographical and some of the factual information it provides.

Like all Brigade newspapers, *Botwin* was meant for internal propaganda, uplifting and maintaining morale and discipline, and was made under supervision of the political commissariat. Perhaps the best characterization of *Botwin* was given by the American Yiddish communist newspaper *Morgn Frayhayt*:

<sup>132</sup> Diamant, *Yidn*, p. 318.

<sup>133</sup> This reference was made in an article dedicated to a name-giving-ceremony for a machinegun in honor of a fallen comrade. See: ‘A koyln-varfer i.n. fun Y. Rubinshtayn’, *Botwin* 4 (12-06-1938) p. 6.

<sup>134</sup> See: ‘Oyf opru’, *Botwin* 4 (12-06-1938) p. 7.

<sup>135</sup> A description of the choir activities can be found in *Botwin* 5. See: ‘Undzer soldatn-khor’ and ‘Ven Botwintses vayln zikh’, *Botwin* 5 (03-11-1938) p. 12 and pp. 16-17.

<sup>136</sup> Wall newspapers could be found throughout the Brigades and were considered as important as the regular Brigade press. See: Richardson, *Comintern Army*, p. 137.

<sup>137</sup> See for instance: ‘A drang tsu kultur’, *Botwin* 4 (12-06-1938) p. 9.

<sup>138</sup> Aron Ginsburg, ‘Mir makhn a want-tsaying’, *Botwin* 5 (3 november 1938) pp. 16-17.

<sup>139</sup> Printed in: *Botwin* 4 (12-06-1938) p. 16.

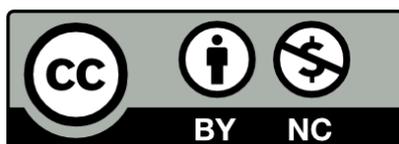
<sup>140</sup> ‘Ven Botvinistn vayln zikh’, *Botwin* 5 (03-11-1938) p. 16-17, 17. Szurek recalls a meeting with Tulman in 1975. Tulman, then a rabbi, told him: “You can’t imagine how much I suffered and how much I still suffer. They call me ‘The Red Rabbi’”. See: Szurek, *The shattered dream*, p. 287.

<sup>141</sup> This was the initiative of a Lithuanian Jew, called Brayer, who worked in the IB base in Albacete. See: Diamant, *Yidn*, p. 331.

<sup>142</sup> As was written in its leading article, quoted in: Diamant, *Yidn*, p. 335.

<sup>143</sup> Rothenberg, ‘The Jewish Naftali Botwin company’, p. 16. There were problems with printing the paper because of problems finding letter types. In *Botwin* 5 (3 november 1938) p. 3, a note from the editor appears, apologizing for spelling mistakes because of a lack of Yiddish typesetters. The paper was typeset by a Sephardic Jew from Turkey. See: “‘Toes hazetser’”, p. 27.

<sup>144</sup> I have been able to find issues 4 and 5 only. The first issues are unfortunately very difficult to find although copies do exist. It was not possible to locate them in time to use them in this study.



“A peculiar newspaper. From its pages shines a new type of Jewish hero, that has already during its life become a legend, the Jewish freedom-fighter”.<sup>145</sup> The optimistic tone in *Botwin*, always emphasizing the imminent victory in battle, sharply contrasted with the actual military situation. It is furthermore interesting to note that the influence of the Soviet Union was even clear on the level of orthography in *Botwin*: all Hebraisms were spelled phonetically, in accordance with orthographic reforms in Yiddish spelling that were implemented in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and 1930s.<sup>146</sup> There is a somewhat intriguing remark in *Botwin 5* by Misha Reger, who point out “how normal orders and military terms sound in the Yiddish language”.<sup>147</sup> Was this a way of emphasizing the supposed link between Jewishness and the fight against injustice?

*Botwin* was read by Jewish volunteers from different units and its editor, Lekhter, wanted it be the organ for all Jewish volunteers in Spain.<sup>148</sup> Rothenberg contends that “the “higher instances” did not want the Botwin paper to transcend the confines of one Jewish company: only occasionally were items about Jewish soldiers in other units printed. The I.B. leadership feared “Jewish nationalism”.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, references to other Jewish soldiers were little, and mainly mentioned Jewish volunteers in the Palafox battalion, of which the Botwin company was a part. We also have to remember, however, that the most important function of Brigade press publications was to strenghten the morale of the soldiers and their allegiance to their own unit. By allowing one Brigade press publication to transcend the confines of different companies, battallions and brigades, this strategy would have been undermined.

## Aftermath

Here this study of the Botwin company ends. Having served in different battles, the volunteers of the Botwin company ended up in Parafrael, near the French border, after the demobilisation of the IB. A number of Botwinists, as well as other men from the Dombrowski Brigade decided to take up arms once more and played their final role in covering the retreating Republican forces, and fleeing Spanish population, to the Spanish-French border. When the remaining Brigade units crossed the French border they were disarmed and put in camps. Those, who could return to their countries, were slowly repatriated. But others, for instance Poles and Germans, could not return because they would have been imprisoned immediately or simply had lost their civil status. They remained in the camps, some for years, others managed to escape and joined various resistance movements. Among them were many old Botwinists. Those who survived WWII stayed in France or Belgium. Others who returned to Poland or the Soviet Union faced difficult times. Many volunteers for Spain were sent to the Gulag by Stalin. Those who managed to pick up life in Poland were expelled from that country after the Six Day War in 1967.

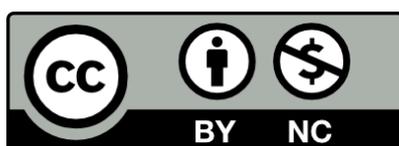
<sup>145</sup> Quote from *Morg frayhayt* as reprinted in: *Botwin 5* (03-11-1938) p. 31.

<sup>146</sup> See for a further exploration of Soviet Yiddish orthography chapter 5 of: Gennady Estraiikh, *Soviet Yiddish. Language planning and linguistic development* (Oxford 1999) pp. 115-141. Not surprisingly, this orthography can also be found in *Naye Prese*.

<sup>147</sup> Misha Reger, ‘“Palafoks” oyfn slakhtfeld’, *Botwin 5* (03-11-1938) p. 8.

<sup>148</sup> See his article ‘“Botwin”-organ fun ale yidishe kemfer!’, *Botwin 4* (12-06-1938) p. 2.

<sup>149</sup> Rothenberg, ‘The Jewish Naftali Botwin company’, p. 17.



## Conclusions

The picture I have attempted to present in this study is, of course, far from complete. Several complicated, and sometimes delicate, questions, interplay when looking at the topic of Jewish volunteers who fought in the Spanish Civil War. The contribution of Jews to the International Brigades deserves attention because it is an important part of the Jewish concern with, and experience in, the world's radical movements in the first half of the 20th century. It has become a symbol of Jewish resistance to the fascist movements in Europe. However, we should be careful not to interpret its importance in light of the holocaust, as some authors tend to do. This is an anachronistic reduction and it does not do justice to the complexity of this important part of Jewish political history. We should be equally careful, however, not too dismiss this tendency too easily, but instead recognize that it is part of the dramatic psychological condition of the post-holocaust era. The idea of Jewish non-resistance in WW II is a myth, but the question is in what sense the Jewish contribution to the Spanish struggle can be used to counter it. The connection lies in the many surviving Jewish volunteers who entered the resistance movements during WW II, thus continuing their fight.

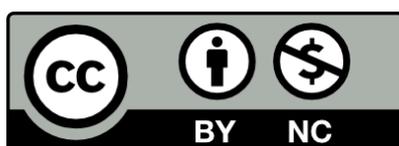
Jewish volunteers, as I have tried to show, went to Spain for a variety of reasons. For some, the motivational forces included the possibility to fight the anti-semitic threat posed by the Francoists and their foreign aides. But this was but one part of the motivation of some volunteers. In general, this motivation was influenced by an, often complex, mixture of party-political, social and economical factors. In the case of Polish Jews, for example, it was not so much the direct threat of anti-semitism that influenced Jewish volunteers. Rather, anti-semitism, as one part of the difficult living conditions for Polish Jews, played a part in the process of entering the radical left for a number of Jews. Moreover, Jews did not go only as Jews, but also as citizens of many countries and as activists with different political affiliations.

The Botwin company came into being at a time when the Comintern renewed its propaganda efforts abroad and the International Brigades were faced by growing internal problems. The high proportion of Jews in various left-wing movements in Europe, and the United States, only made it logical to appeal to the Jewish communities outside of Spain by creating a clear Jewish symbol and point of identification. The establishment of a Jewish company was thus a strategic move. This does not imply that Jewish 'heroism' was not recognized or valued in Spain nor that Jewish volunteers did not long for their own military unit. But these were simply not the decisive factors. Altruism did not exist in the Brigades and only when the IB command recognized its usefulness in the overall framework, was the Botwin company established, as a reformation of an already existing company.

The company did indeed arouse support and made it easier for Jews abroad to identify with what was going on in Spain. It is, however, difficult to establish its exact impact. This was only a small company within an international army of thousands. Although it became a symbol of the Jewish participation in Spain, we should not overrate this symbolic value. Many Jewish volunteers did not know of its existence. Being part of the Botwin company did not automatically imply a 'Jewish concern' on behalf of its fighters: its Jewish members might have taken great pride in fighting in it, but the decision to fight in a unit, in most cases, came from above. Furthermore, there were many Jewish volunteers who did not regard their Jewish background as being of any particular importance. It seems unlikely that they, if given the choice, would have joined the Botwin company.

There were frequent references to anti-semitism in both the *Botwin* newspaper and the Paris communist *Naye Prese*. Perhaps, this was indicative of a growing Jewish consciousness that developed in the course of the war. But we have to recognize also, that the fight against anti-semitism had become part of the communist tactic in the 'Jewish street' after the Popular Front policy was adopted.<sup>150</sup>

<sup>150</sup> Rudi van Doorslaer, *Kinderen van het getto. Joodse revolutionairen in België [1925-1940]* (Antwerp 1995) pp.117-122, 121.

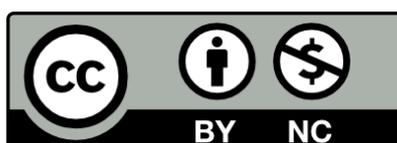


*Naye Prese* continued to present the company as a symbol of Jewish heroism, even at times when the company almost ceased to exist, and its composition was far from exclusively Jewish. This points to a general problem in press coverage and post Civil War literature and historiography: the heroic perspective. But heroism is not a very useful term for the historian because it's explanatory value is close to nil. Instead we find that often dramatic events are being disguised and presented as acts of heroism, and thus effectively denied. It also deprives the many volunteers for Spain, in a peculiar sense, of their humanity by reducing them to heroes that were wounded or killed for the good cause. And it does not allow for an empathic understanding of these volunteers nor those who stayed behind.

Richardson quotes *New York Times* correspondent Herbert Matthews, who once wrote the following about the volunteers in the Lincoln Brigade: "You cannot dismiss these youngsters with the contemptuous label of 'Reds'. They are not fighting for Moscow, but for their ideals".<sup>151</sup> The point was that most of these volunteers, in fighting for their ideals, were also fighting for Moscow, and it is this later realization, of having been part of a much larger political enterprise, that creates a sometimes dramatic psychological condition for veterans. This is especially true for Jewish veterans who suffered persecution immediately upon their return in most Communist countries, witnessed the purges in the early 1950s or the expulsion of Jewish communists from Poland during the Six Day War in 1967.

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<sup>151</sup> Richardson, *Comintern Amry*, p. 152.



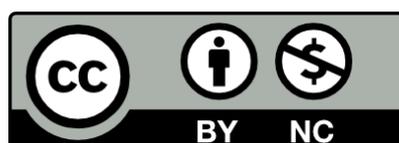
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