

‘Jewish Communists’ or ‘Communist Jews’?

The Communist Party of Great Britain and British Jews in the 1930s.

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British Jews and Communism – slow recognition

The Jewish contribution to the history of the CPGB was out of all proportion to the size of the Jewish community in Britain¹, yet that contribution has only slowly been given recognition. Early accounts of the Party, focusing, as one would expect, on class rather than ethnicity, rarely mention the Jewish involvement. For example, Fred Copeman’s *Reason in Revolt* (1948) which is largely built around his service with the International Brigades makes no mention of the high proportion of Brigaders who were Jewish². Two exceptions to this can be found in Phil Piratin’s *Our Flag Stays Red* (1948), and Douglas Hyde’s *I Believed* (1951). Piratin’s account of the CPGB’s successes in mobilising Stepney rent payers in the Stepney Tenants’ Defence League (STDL) is, in effect, an account of the mobilisation of a significant section of the Jewish community in that borough, although this is implied rather than clearly stated. Hyde was clearer about the CPGB’s focus on the Jewish community in the context of anti-fascism: ‘Quite deliberately we used the Jewish fear of fascism and anti-semitism for our own political ends. It made the Stepney branch our strongest, with over 1,000 members. It was the Party’s greatest asset in Jewish areas all over Britain’³. Yet these were minor acknowledgements of the importance of Jewish support for the Party. Academic accounts of the relationship between Jews and the CPGB were not much more forthcoming either. Henry Pelling’s history of the Party, *The British Communist Party* (1958) was atypical in that it devoted some space to specific discussion of the issue, noting that ‘the Jewish population of the East End rallied to the party in fair numbers’⁴. Kenneth Newton’s, *The Sociology of British Communism* (1969), did address the issue of Jewish support, but Newton’s work was a contemporary study, and by the early 1960s the heyday of Jewish membership of the party

was long over. Nonetheless, Newton did make some interesting points about Jewish communism in the 1930s, stressing the combination of factors that underpinned that support, as well as arguing that, 'even without the pressures of Fascist anti-Semitism [in the 1930s], it is probable that a number of Jews in the East End [of London] would have joined the Party, for there are certain affinities between Communism and Judaism'⁵. This is an area that needs a good deal more work, but at least Newton addressed some issues that had linked British Jews to the party. By contrast, Noreen Branson in *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941* (1985), and, later, Willie Thompson in *The Good Old Cause* (1992), paid scant attention to the question. Finally, two notable works by Jewish Communists were Joe Jacobs' *Out of the Ghetto* (1978), which presented an important contrast to Piratin's account of the CPGB and anti-fascism in East London, and Raphael Samuel's reflections on his upbringing in a communist family which first appeared in *The New Left Review* (1985-87).

This lack of attention began to be addressed by two ground breaking historians, Elaine Rosa Smith, and Henry Felix Srebrnik, both of whom wrote doctoral theses on the subject and produced the first of a number of important articles during the 1980s⁶. Srebrnik, in particular, has continued to extend our knowledge of the relationship between Jews and British communism in a series of articles, and his writing has acted as a focus of debate, with Jason Heppell challenging some key elements of Srebrnik's analysis⁷. James Hopkins' study of the British contribution to the defence of the Spanish Republic, *Into the Heart of the Fire* (1998), recognised the contribution of British Jews, and noted the linkage between 'militant anti-fascism', particularly Jewish anti-fascism, in Britain and volunteering for Spain⁸. More generally, other historians have continued to add to our understanding of the communist experience in Britain, with, for example, Andrew Thorpe taking advantage of new archival sources to discuss CPGB membership, reinforcing our knowledge of the general pattern of membership, with areas where the Jewish community was relatively strong – particularly

east London, Manchester, Leeds, and Glasgow – also being areas of Party strength in the 1930s⁹. But while Thorpe discussed the gender, class and age profile of the Party, he failed to engage with the ethnic profile. Similarly, Thomas Linehan's richly textured account of communist lives in his *Communism in Britain, 1920-39* (2007), unfortunately provides no insight into the lives of Jewish party members 'from the cradle to the grave'¹⁰; while his account of communism activism, in which he conceptualises communists as belonging to a 'political religion' again makes no mention of Jewish influences and experience, despite Raphael Samuel's earlier exegesis of the linkage between religious faith and communism¹¹. However, Linehan has briefly noted the importance of Jewish anti-fascism in his recent discussion of communist culture¹². More usefully, Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn's landmark study of British communists, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991* (2007), devotes some space, and interesting reflections, on the relationship of Jews to the CPGB, and, in the process, suggested future research paths for the topic¹³.

A key issue that has emerged with regard to the Jewish contribution to British communism is the degree to which Jews in the Party separated themselves from their sense of ethnic identity. This is the central academic argument concerning the history of British Jewish involvement in the CPGB, and is an issue that has yet to be resolved. Jason Heppell has used the lack of interest in the work of the Jewish Bureau of the CPGB, which was established in 1936, to examine the question of what constitutes 'Jewish politics', and to argue that the overwhelming majority of Jewish members of the Party 'were Communist Jews not Jewish Communists', and that these members were 'Jews separated from their ethnic community by their Communist beliefs'¹⁴. Heppell's use of the terms 'Communist Jews' and 'Jewish Communists' is, perhaps, confusing, but has been used in this article as Heppell's arguments concerning the supposed separation of Communist Jews from their ethnic background lies at the heart of the debate. This view received support in Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn's work, where they argued that the 'non-Jewish Jew' was more typical of

CPGB Jewish membership than that of the Jewish communist 'ethnic politician'¹⁵. Heppell supported his argument, in part, by arguing that in the 1930s and early 1940s, there was typically an intergenerational rift between the largely young Jews in the Party, usually second or third generation British Jews, and older members of their families and community, often immigrants into Britain¹⁶. Heppell advanced this argument in opposition to that of Srebrnik, who presents Jewish involvement in the communist movement in the 1930s and early 1940s as being a significant part of the working class Jewish experience of the time; with Jewish members of the CPGB being 'Jewish Communists', as opposed to Heppell's categorisation of 'Communist Jews'. Although Heppell does not engage with the work of Smith, it is worth noting that her approach more closely mirrors that of Srebrnik, with Smith arguing that 'the Communist Party provided East End Jews with a means of expressing their Jewish identity within the framework of a secular political culture. One contemporary witness has even suggested that East End Jewish Communists "were Jews before they were Communists"¹⁷. Smith's use of an interview with Bessy Weinberg – the 'contemporary witness' – points the way to the use of oral history work to add an additional dimension to research centred on the question of the nature of Jewish involvement with communism. Both Heppell and Srebrnik's work relies on party literature and records, but not on self-reflective testimony from Jewish members of the party.

It is the intention here to utilise an hitherto under-exploited source of British Jewish anti-fascist oral testimony to examine the experience of Jewish CPGB support and membership in the 1930s, and, in the process, to examine the 'Jewish Communists' or 'Communist Jews' argument. Sound archive holdings at the Imperial War Museum (IWM) provide the evidential base for this article, and the influences on Jewish membership of the CPGB are explored under two broad categories, being: 'external' factors, and 'internal' influences. Under the first heading, the tactics of the party itself will be considered, along with the lack of success of other political groups who were potential competitors for Jewish support; the role of fascism

and anti-fascism; socio-economic pressures; and territorialism will also be examined. Under the heading of internal influences, the questions of Jewish involvement in pre-Bolshevik radicalism; and Jewish family, sports and social life will be examined. The aim is to provide a textured account of the nature of Jewish support for the CPGB, with a particular stress on that experience in east London, which was, throughout the 1930s, one of the strongholds of British communism, the location of much working class Jewish life, and a key battleground between anti-fascism and fascism.

Jewish testimony and the CPGB

The Imperial War Museum (IWM) holds one of the largest archives of oral history material in the UK. Primarily focusing on military experiences, the sound archive also holds a great deal of material relating to the civilian experiences in the age of modern warfare. The archive includes a valuable group of recordings relating to the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39. The interviews form part of the IWM's Spanish Civil War oral history project, which began in 1976, stimulated by the 40th anniversary reunion of the International Brigade Association. The IWM described the purpose of the project as being 'to create a significant body of information where there were few specific documentary or written sources'¹⁸. The IWM's catalogue of this project indicates that there were at least 122 individuals who were interviewed who had served with a variety of Republican units¹⁹. Of the 122, 113 interviewees were British, including a small number who had dual nationalities. The interviews typically cover a good deal of the lives of the interviewees, both before and after the Spanish Civil War period. As a result, accounts usually provide detail of the interviewees' childhood and family background, their working lives, political development, active service (if applicable) in the Spanish war, experiences during the Second World War, and subsequent life. This includes material relating to fascism and anti-fascism in Britain and in Spain. In particular, there are 34 recordings of active British anti-fascists, including 24 men who fought

for the Spanish Republic. Of these 34 anti-fascists, 18 were Jewish anti-fascists, all of whom were members of anti-fascist parties in Britain, almost all being in the CPGB, the Young Communist League (YCL), or the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM). It is this group that forms the evidential basis of the current article. The collection is a valuable addition to the history of anti-fascism, and fascism, in Britain, as the interviewees were invariably involved in the fascist/anti-fascist struggle. Further, the 18 interviews provide important insights into Jewish membership and support for the CPGB, and represent a hitherto underutilised source that provides valuable primary data on the topic.

The oral history data used here is the product of interviews carried out largely by IWM interviewees, who built their interviews around a common set of themes designed to develop a picture of the experience of volunteering for the Spanish Republic²⁰, but also to build a picture of the wider lives of the interviewees. The interviewers carried out the interviews in a professional fashion, using open-ended questions based on a semi-structured model of questioning, allowing the interviewees to lead and develop the process. The reminiscences provide a valuable insight into the interviewees' perceptions of their early lives, family backgrounds, political engagement, and the meaning of these experiences to each interviewee. As such, the interviews, like all historical data sources, are subjective interpretations of history - in this case of personal histories by the interviewees. What is of particular value is that this personal reflection, and the attributing of meaning to past experiences by the interviewees, enables the question of whether they were 'Jewish Communists' or 'Communist Jews' to be addressed. Assessments of the impact of Jewish engagement with the CPGB on ties to family and community can be effectively explored using such personal history work. This is an attempt, adopting a micro-historical approach, to address the question of Jewish support for the party by giving 'a voice and the capacity to make meaning [...] to those who act[ed] out the practices [...] of everyday life'²¹ as communists.

External pressures and Jewish engagement with the CPGB

The CPGB and the Jewish community

The 1930s saw the steady growth of the link between significant sectors of the Jewish working class and the CPGB. Although the party had difficulties in defining its stance on Jewish ethnicity, its attitude to the Jewish community in Palestine (the *Yishuv*) and Zionism, difficulties that would eventually contribute to the weakening of links between British Jews and the CPGB²², the party developed a strategy for building its base among working class Jews. Srebrnik, Smith and Heppell have argued that the CPGB had a policy of attempting to build a core of solid support for the party in Jewish areas. The intention was to create 'Little Moscows', areas where the party would enjoy localised hegemony, and from which the CPGB could expand its influence. In east London, the party was able, in the early 1930s, to build upon the activism of the Stepney Communist Party (leading elements of which were Jewish) and Harry Pollitt's strong showing in the Whitechapel by-election of November 1930²³ (a month after the Labour government published its White Paper proposing restrictions on Jewish immigration into Palestine) to become a significant force within the Jewish community. The scope that the CPGB had to turn predominantly Jewish areas of east London (and Jewish areas of Manchester²⁴, Leeds, and to a lesser extent, Glasgow) increased as international events developed over the decade, especially following the Nazi victory in Germany, and the consequent realigning of Comintern policy in 1935. The combined effect of the attempt to create 'Little Moscows', the consequent focus on Jewish concerns, and the emergence of the Popular Front strategy, all contributed to a situation where 'through sustained agitation based upon the set of issues informing Jewish concerns, Jewish Communism for a brief period gained political hegemony within the East London Jewish community'²⁵.

The evidence of the IWM interviewees provides a clear underpinning to the picture of the CPGB's policy of focusing on Jewish concerns, particularly in east London. In terms of the 'Jewish question', the party presented a class analysis of the problems faced by Jews throughout the world, argued that a Zionist solution would simply strengthen British imperial interests in the middle east, and that 'separatism' was not a viable solution to anti-Semitism. At the same time, much emphasis was placed on the creation, in 1934, of the autonomous area of Birobidzhan in the Soviet Union, which, it was claimed, added a specifically Jewish dimension to the Soviet utopian project. The belief that anti-Semitism had been eradicated in the Soviet Union, and that it was a model for working class Jews to aspire to, was part of the explanation for the failure of other potentially competing groups to extend their influence among east London Jews. Jack Louis Shaw, who joined the YCL, aged 17 in 1934 and worked as an office boy with the *Daily Worker*, remembered that as a young Jewish boy prior to joining the party:

'For a lot of us, Russia was the utopia. It was the utopia for the working class. Although we belonged to no political party, we were always attending meetings. At the corner of Wallace Road and Whitechapel there were always speakers on platforms. There were the Zionists, which we didn't take notice of, there was the Communist Party, which we did take notice of, there was the Socialist Party of Great Britain, which we never took notice of, and there were the Trotskyists, who we thought were terrible people.'²⁶

This view was also stressed by Maurice Levitas, an Irish-Jewish anti-fascist who moved, with his parents, to east London in 1931, aged 12, joined the YCL in 1936, and noted that Jews 'knew that the Soviet Union had abolished anti-Semitism, and was against anti-Semitism. So there was a natural sympathy for the Soviet Union if you happened to be a Jewish worker'²⁷.

Indeed, the post-war revelations that, in fact, the Soviet Union had not 'abolished anti-Semitism' proved to be a key moment in the dissipation of the links between sections of the Jewish community and communism²⁸.

The sense that the interviewees regarded the Soviet Union as 'the utopia' is strong, but, interestingly, there are no mentions of Birobidzhan as a specific 'solution' to the Jewish national question. What is also interesting in Shaw's statement is that among the groups that he and his young friends 'didn't take notice of' were the Zionists. Other interviewees also note the lack of purchase that Zionism had on young Jews drawn to the CPGB, with, for example, Louis Kenton²⁹, a member of Stepney YCL, claiming that he knew nothing at all about the Zionist anti-fascist group 'The Legion of Blue and White Shirts' (founded in 1936³⁰), while Shaw commented that it 'was too Jewish', and that, therefore, he was not attracted to it. Historians, such as Paul Kelemen have argued that the CPGB consistently over-estimated the attraction and influence of Zionism for British working class Jews in the 1930s, and the interviews seem to bear this out³¹, yet the focus of the party on Jewish concerns incorporated consistent attention to the Zionist project in Palestine, analysing it in a framework of British imperialism, and the class interests of the Jewish bourgeoisie. There was no sense that the party was able to see that Zionist sectarianism in Palestine incorporated the Jewish working class, via its trade unionism, into the Zionist national project. However, the strength of working class Jewish support for the CPGB ensured that the party continued, throughout the 1930s, to focus on issues of concern to the community.

Fascism and anti-fascism

If there was one over-riding issue of concern in the period, that was the struggle against fascism, both in Britain and abroad. As Louis Kenton, a member of the Stepney branch of the YCL said, 'in the early 1930s, the movement against fascism became the main thing in

the life of most political people in east London, certainly of my group'³². The focus of the IWM interviews is the Spanish Civil War, but the 18 interviewees all talk about the anti-fascist struggle in Britain, which they saw as being part of the wider struggle that took them to Spain. The accounts are dominated by a number of themes: the CPGB's role in challenging fascism in the form of the British Union of Fascists (BUF); involvement in the party's attempts to build its presence in Jewish areas, but also in other areas, like Bethnal Green, where the BUF was strong; the role of street meetings and demonstrations; physical clashes at BUF meetings; and casual street violence at other times that was seen as part of the fascist/anti-fascist struggle.

Some of the material in the interviews is of particular interest. For example, Maurice Levitas was instrumental in attempting to challenge the BUF in its stronghold of Bethnal Green:

'At that time [1936], we had quite a large organisation in Stepney, but we had very little in Bethnal Green, so the comrades decided that I should go to Bethnal Green and see if I could develop a branch there. Well, Bethnal Green was a hotbed of fascism, the BUF were very active in Bethnal Green. And we were at loggerheads with them, when they saw me alone on one occasion they set about me. Eventually, I built up quite a strong Young Communist League in Bethnal Green.'³³

The CPGB led the struggle against the BUF, although other groups, like the Labour League of Youth (LLOY), and the Independent Labour Party (ILP) were also involved in active opposition to the BUF. In east London, and, in particular, in Stepney, the anti-fascist field was left open to the CPGB partly because of the ambivalent attitude of the local Labour Party. A good deal has been written about the ethnic dimension of politics in east London

and the difficulties created in relation to the fascist/anti-fascist struggle. The strength of the Labour Party in Stepney was built on the ethnic Irish vote, and Catholic issues loomed large. In consequence, the fear of communism, both at home and, from 1936, in Spain, meant that the Stepney Labour Party resisted being drawn into the anti-fascist struggle³⁴. Indeed, one of the comments made by Jack Shaw was that in ‘the Labour movement in Stepney there was more anti-Semitism than anywhere else’³⁵.

The fascist/anti-fascist struggle in east London was frequently punctuated by violent confrontation between the two elements. The CPGB did not have, in fact, a single view on the best way to combat the BUF, something that was highlighted by the contrasting accounts by Phil Piratin and Joe Jacobs. Piratin’s recollections in *Our Flag Stays Red* (1948) stressed the importance of political action on a wide front, whereas Jacobs, in *Out of the Ghetto* (1978) was an advocate of the physical force policy. It is clear that whatever the official CPGB line, violence was a key element in the party’s anti-fascism. An example was that given by Joe Garber in relation to the BUF rally at Olympia in 1934. As Garber explained, the violence was not limited to the meeting itself, or to Blackshirt stewards:

‘Then someone said, “Look, there’s a building site nearby”. We [communists] broke it open, and there were all sorts of things in there, bricks, scaffold poles, and there was a lorry, a small lorry. And we waited, and a load of Blackshirts from the provinces, all the county, and the counties, all in their coaches [...] and, all of a sudden, one brick went, and a [scaffold] pole, right through the bleeding coach window, and there were screams [from inside]’³⁶.

The use of bricks and scaffold poles is also a reminder that weapons were a far from unknown feature of anti-fascist violence, and appear to have been more frequently used by anti-fascists, compared to fascists³⁷. Piratin's account of his struggles within the Stepney party focused on the need for a much broader approach to anti-fascism. In his account, after watching a large crowd of BUF supporters in Bethnal Green, some of whom 'wore trade-union badges', he argued that fascist support in the area came from people who:

'were living miserable, squalid lives. Their homes were slums, many were unemployed. Those at work were often in low-paid jobs. Therefore we urged that the Communist Party should help the people to improve their conditions of life, in the course of which we could show them who was really responsible for their conditions, and get them organised to fight against their real exploiters.'³⁸

Piratin claimed successes in this strategy, with BUF members switching their allegiance to the CPGB thanks to the rent strike movement organised by the communists. However, the evidence is that, despite this, the majority of Stepney communists were drawn from the Jewish community, who suffered the same socio-economic conditions.

Socio-economic conditions

Poor housing conditions, unemployment, underemployment and sweating were all dominant features of life for many in the Jewish community in east London. As Max Colin explained about his parents' experiences, 'and they lived in Stepney, in very poor circumstances [...] and went through a pretty rough time'³⁹. The CPGB was to the forefront in opposing landlord abuses, and attempted to tackle the conditions of sweated labour that characterised the garment and cabinet-making industries in particular. Sweating also created hostility among

Christian East Enders, as it was seen to be an endemic Jewish issue that was characterised, by the BUF and others keen to make anti-Semitic capital, as an example of unfair competition. The Stepney YCL activist, Louis Kenton noted that the CPGB ran 'a continuing battle in the tailoring industry, which was very, very badly exploited'⁴⁰. All these conditions acted as yet another influence on Jews, and references to socio-economic pressures feature throughout the IWM interviews. The effect was, in Louis Kenton's view, that: 'In east London it [the CPGB] was a very widespread movement and conditions in east London were such that most people gravitated to the Labour Party and the Left, it was a natural result of the conditions of the period.'⁴¹. However, the Labour Party was, as we have seen, dominated by other ethnic interests in Stepney, and, in consequence, the main political choice on offer for Jews was, in the 1930s, the CPGB⁴², both in terms of anti-fascism, and in relation to pressing socio-economic issues.

Territorialism

The east London Jewish community was a product of the emigration of refugees from Russia and Romania following a series of pogroms from 1870 to the aftermath of the 1905 revolution in Russia, which latter exodus saw the largest number of Jewish refugees enter Britain⁴³. The nature of the emigration, the background of violent anti-Semitism, and the poverty of the refugees combined to create a Jewish presence in Britain that was quite different from the existing Anglo-Jewish population, characterised by dispersal, and relative socio-economic prosperity and status. Instead, the Jewish community that emerged in east London (and, to a lesser extent, in Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow and Dublin) effectively re-created the ghetto environments of Russia and Romania. As Srebrnik has argued, 'by almost any criterion developed by scholars of ethnicity, the Jews of East London in the first half of the twentieth century were a distinct, highly visible, homogenous ethnic group [...] They were a community with social solidarity and subjective self-awareness, and they were

perceived as such by outsiders'⁴⁴. This strong sense of community and the associated sense of neighbourhood and territorialism was replicated among Christian East Enders, and in the distinct, pre-Blitz, pre-regeneration geography of the east London, that universal sense of community and territory fed into ethnic tensions. Benjamin Lammers has argued that the 1930s saw a slow erosion of this sense of competing ethnic communities thanks to generational changes among Jews, the impact of the cinema (which appealed across cultures), and anti-fascism, in particular the experience of Cable Street⁴⁵. However, the picture presented by the IWM interviewees is of a strong sense of territory, something that was mirrored in accounts by their fascist opponents⁴⁶. Louis Kenton, who was born in Mile End, explained in his interview that people had a clear sense of which streets they could, and could not, safely walk down, noting that 'there were always a few streets that were totally non-Jewish, and one or two Blackshirts who lived there would attack us. But it wasn't a thing that happened very often'⁴⁷. This territorialism based upon ethnic concentrations was intensified by ethno-political loyalty. Jack Shaw remembered an occasion when he and others attacked unsuspecting fascists who were unfamiliar with the ethno-political geography of the area:

'One lot [of fascists] had a meeting in the Mile End Arena, in Mile End, Blackshirt meeting. And when they came out, they got on the tram, and they didn't realise they were going right into enemy territory, and we got on the tram as well [...] quite a few of us. And we beat them up. This was in 1935.'⁴⁸

It was this combination of urban territorialism, concentrations of differing ethnic populations in particular streets, associated political loyalties, and youth that helped create a situation where casual violence was far from infrequent.

The Jewish community and choosing the CPGB

In addition to those factors which can be seen to be external influences on Jewish support for the party, there were factors that helped propel many Jews towards the CPGB. These latter factors can be seen to be internal to Jewish life in the period. The evidence provided by the IWM interviewees indicates that family and community histories of radicalism were strong influences that effectively prepared the ground for the appeal of the CPGB. In addition, the IWM data suggests that Heppell's argument that young Jews who supported the CPGB did so at the price of distancing themselves from family and community life was, at the least, a far from universal experience. Instead, the interviewees' evidence indicates that Jewish communal and family life was often integral to their communism. It was also the case that being part of the communist movement enabled many Jews to look outside of their ghettoised existence, but not at the expense of their Jewish identity or life. Instead, key Jewish organisations, such as Jewish sports clubs and the Jewish Lads' Brigade were essential institutions in the building of Jewish support for the CPGB. In consequence, this evidence supports the contention of Srebrnik and Smith, that these communists were 'Jewish Communists', as opposed to 'Communist Jews'.

A history of radicalism

A constant in the majority of interviewees' accounts of their backgrounds is the radicalism of their parents' generation. Fifteen of the interviewees were the children of immigrant Jewish parents, most of whom had come from Russia. They had brought with them histories of involvement with radical politics – anarchism, revolutionary socialism, and Bundism. The majority of the interviewees' parents were no longer active in politics, but family life was marked by political awareness. The interviewees gave very similar accounts of their parents' backgrounds and political beliefs, but with some interesting family history 'twists' to their

stories. For example, Max Colin's father had been in the Russian army, but his experience of Tsarist anti-Semitism had led him to emigrate to London to avoid service in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905; his wife joined him from Russia the following year and family tensions coloured family politics:

'My father professed to being a communist. Actually, he was an anarchist, but, there you are, he got *The Daily Worker* [...]. We didn't like our father very much, so we took our mother's side, and we used to say, "Well, if you are a communist, to hell with communism!"'⁴⁹

Nonetheless, Max Colin joined the YCL after experiencing police anti-Semitism at the time of the BUF's 1934 Olympia meeting, and went on to serve as a mechanic and ambulance driver in Spain.

Maurice Levitas's father had a radical political background that was a little closer to east London. Originating in Lithuania, he had emigrated to Dublin at the end of the nineteenth century along with Levitas' Jewish Latvian mother. In Dublin, Levitas senior was involved with the socialist wing of the Irish Republican movement, and was an acquaintance of James Connolly. The family then moved to east London, via Glasgow, and his father suffered from under-employment, with Maurice Levitas noting that the family was 'poverty stricken'.

Maurice Levitas went on to be the secretary of the Bethnal Green branch of the YCL, and served as a rifleman in British Battalion of the International Brigades. He remained a communist, and worked as a school teacher in the German Democratic Republic from 1985-1991⁵⁰. A further example of this early exposure to radical politics via family life is provided by the parents of Louis Kenton, who said of his parents 'they were both, of course, Jewish,

but they were also involved in the Social Democratic movement at that period [prior to the 1905 pogroms] in Kiev'⁵¹. Kenton noted that, once in east London, his parents 'didn't take a very active part' in politics, but that he, like others, were affected by the general family and community background of radicalism:

'Living in the East End there was a natural radical element throughout my whole youth, so, without being aware of it, I found myself sympathising with the Labour section of the movement, and later the Communist movement [...] When I was about 19, 20 [1927 or 1928] I seemed to gravitate naturally towards the [Communist] movement, and I joined the Young Communist League.'⁵²

The radicalism of the older, first generation Jewish immigrants, was a product of the Jewish experience of life in the Russian Empire, characterised for most of them by a powerful mix of ghettoisation, anti-Semitism, poverty, and consequent involvement with radical politics focused on social and economic emancipation and a solution to the 'Jewish question' of ending anti-Semitism. It was this background, and the knowledge of it that was transmitted to a new generation of British-born Jews, that made the working class Jewish community in east London such an obvious focus for the CPGB.

Jewish life: family, leisure and culture

Raphael Samuel gave a rich account of his communist childhood and youth, which revealed family life that combined elements of communist and Jewish culture, and one that was not characterised by generational division resulting from the younger family members' allegiance to communism. For example, Samuel remembered, 'my grandmother, a religious woman, was tolerant of this family Communism, and the Passovers which we held out of respect for

her would begin with Hebrew prayers and end with Soviet songs'⁵³. Among the IWM interviewees there is no sense either of generational divisions as a result of younger family members' communism. In part, this may be a result of the bias of the interview sample, with interviewees coming from families that already had a history of radicalism; however, there is no sense that the interviewees did not regard themselves as Jewish. Only one interviewee, the Slough-born, Frank Frankford, who was a member of the Hackney branch of the CPGB and the NUWM, said that, 'unfortunately, I can't claim to be Jewish because my mother was a Gentile. My father was a Jew, he was on the Manchester Jewish Board of Guardians'⁵⁴. Interestingly, Frankford left the CPGB because, 'I got fed up with the Communist Party, because they didn't seem to have any opinion until they'd read the next day's *Daily Worker*'⁵⁵. He went on to fight for the Spanish Republic as part of the ILP contingent with the POUM, and had a somewhat controversial history there, becoming embroiled in dangerous intra-left rivalry⁵⁶. By way of contrast, another interviewee, Julius 'Jud' Colman, came from an Orthodox Jewish background, his parents being émigrés from Lithuania and Latvia. Colman made no mention of inter-generational tensions in his account of communism in Cheetham, Manchester, where he joined the YCL as a 15 year old in 1932⁵⁷.

Although there is no evidence in the interviewees' accounts of inter-generational division caused by allegiances to communism, there is a sense that, for some, at least, of the interviewees, communism was welcomed, in part, because it was a way of making contacts outside the Jewish community. For example, Jack Shaw made a strong point about his preference for a broad alliance, based on class and anti-fascism, rather than on Jewish interests alone:

'I joined the YCL because that was the only organisation that was fighting fascism, and we got an education [in that] we learned how to mix with Christian people, not to

be suspicious of them. [...] There was a Jewish organisation called the Blue and White Shirts, but, to me, it was nothing. To me it was too Jewish. And I didn't believe in it. We should be, not just Anglicized, but the Christian people are with us, not just one Jewish section.⁵⁸

A very similar point was made by interviewees in relation to anti-fascists involved in the Cable Street demonstration, and, more generally, in terms of the CPGB, with, for example, Maurice Levitas noting that although 'a lot' of the CPGB and YCL members in Bethnal Green were Jews, 'some of them were not, these were non-Jews who understood what fascism meant'⁵⁹.

The other common experience of the interviewees was their involvement in youth clubs, which were centres of Jewish community life, sport and culture, and politics. Foremost among these clubs were those formed by the YCL, but also by groups like the Jewish Lads' Brigade (JLB). The clubs provided places to enjoy boxing, athletics, cycling, and the interviewees also describe how they were, in effect, foci for young Jewish social and political life. Charlie Goodman remembered, 'at that time [mid-1930s] there were 18 Jewish youth clubs in [...] Stepney, Poplar and Bethnal Green [...] and we were all into boxing and football'⁶⁰. The same applied in Cheetham, Manchester, according to Julius Colman, who was in the local Jewish Lads' Brigade. Colman explained that almost all of the members of his local brigade joined the YCL club too⁶¹. The CPGB appears to have taken advantage of the potential for comparatively large-scale recruiting among Jewish youth clubs. Colman explained that in Cheetham, most of the Jewish Lads' Brigade were also members of the local branch of the YCL, and, together, they formed the core of a wider anti-fascist group that was active not only in anti-fascist politics, but also in other campaigns:

'We used to sell *Challenge*, the [YCL's] newspaper, we used to have meetings a lot, we used to chalk, political campaigns [...] When the fascists got stronger, we formed what was called the "Youth Front", a group, all anti-fascist, communist controlled, naturally [...] it was a Jewish area, [and] a mixed area, a lot of politics [...] there were non-Jews in it, but mostly Jews'⁶².

Maurice Levitas also gave an account of how important the Jewish Lads' Brigade was to the YCL in Bethnal Green, with the membership of the JLB forming a leading element in the CPGB's attempts to challenge the BUF in its east London heartland. Levitas noted that winning over the JLB was,

'one of the big beginnings of the YCL [in Bethnal Green]. In fact, we had the whole of the Jewish Lads Brigade bugle band [...] who came over to the YCL. And that bugle band headed our marches down from the Salmon and Ball [public house] down to BUF headquarters in Roman Road'⁶³

These Jewish youth groups proved important for the CPGB, not only as recruiting centres, but also for the potential they represented for quickly mobilising young anti-fascist activists. Max Colin remembered how he and other members of his largely Jewish YCL club were mobilised for the BUF Olympia meeting in June 1934. Colin was in the YCL club (although not at that time a member of the YCL) for social and sporting reasons, and, in fact, met Blackshirts in his job as a mechanic as he was responsible for servicing the BUF vans:

'I was very non-political. But, a particular night in the club one of the other chaps said, "Don't forget boys, all out at Olympia! Against Mosley! All out at Olympia against Mosley!" So, [me and] my mate, who also wasn't very political [went]'.⁶⁴

For Colin, the Olympia meeting was 'an eye-opener', not because of the BUF as he did not see any of the violence, but because of anti-Jewish remarks made to him and his friend by two policemen who told them to 'get back to the fucking East End, you Jew bastards'⁶⁵. That incident, in addition to seeing police horses being ridden at anti-fascists near Olympia, pushed him into the YCL.

The picture created by the IWM interviewees is one where there was a close intermingling of Jewish youth clubs and organisations and the Young Communist League. There is no sense that being a member of the YCL, or the CPGB, had any negative impact on membership of Jewish youth organisations. The young Jewish members of the JLB, or a Jewish sports club did not sacrifice their standing among their Jewish peers by joining the YCL, or the CPGB, rather they appear to have enhanced it.

Conclusions

The Jewish contribution to the CPGB, particularly during the 1930s, and for much of the 1940s, was out of proportion to the size of the British Jewish community. Indeed, Srebrnik has argued that the limited successes of the CPGB were tied closely to the involvement of Jews with the party: 'Communism thrived for a time as a specifically ethnic means of political expression, to the point where it might legitimately have been regarded as a variety of left-wing Jewish nationalism'⁶⁶. That contribution was built upon a cluster of factors that both drew, and propelled, many working class Jews towards the CPGB. These factors included the CPGB's desire to create 'Little Moscows' as stepping stones to wider influence and the creation of a mass party; the failure of potential political competitors to take advantage of the needs of working class Jews; the centrality of the fascist/anti-fascist struggle in the 1930s, both at home and abroad; and the nature of life in the key working class Jewish enclave in east London. In addition, Jewish family and community histories, marked by east European

anti-Semitism and Jewish radicalism, plus the role of Jewish youth organisations, helped propel many Jews into the communist movement.

A key issue in interpretations of Jewish support for the CPGB revolves around the degree to which such supporters were 'Jewish Communists' as opposed to 'Communist Jews'. The evidence considered here is largely drawn from the oral history holdings at the IWM, and while it is the case that 'no single source or combination of them can ever give a picture of the total complexity of reality'⁶⁷, this source allows a textured and detailed picture of this group of Jewish activists' account of their lives, their communism, and their anti-fascism, in an important historical era. As a result, it is argued that although 'the ethnic identity of Jews [is] fluid, formed in interaction with other forms of identity and in a process determined by specific social and historical conditions'⁶⁸, for very many working class Jews, particularly in east London (but also in Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow), their contribution to the CPGB was as 'Jewish Communists'.

¹ It is difficult to be precise about the relative over-representation of Jews in the CPGB at any one time. One key problem is the flow of people in and out of the Party, which frequently resembled a bath being filled by running taps – but with the plug missing. Nonetheless, it has been estimated that around 7% of the CPGB's full-time activists in the mid 1940s were Jewish - Jason Heppell, 'A Question of "Jewish Politics"? The Jewish section of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1936-45', in Christine Collette and Stephen Bird (eds.), *Jews, Labour and the Left, 1918-48* (Aldershot, 2000), p.95 - and that even as late as 1965, long after the heyday of Jewish association with the CPGB, Jews made up 10% of the membership of the Party - Tony Kushner, 'Jewish Communists in twentieth-

century Britain: the Zaidman Collection', *Labour History Review*, 55 (1990), p.66. These are overall estimates, but the contribution of Jews was much greater in key areas for the CPGB, such as East London, and Manchester.

² Estimates of the number of British volunteers who were Jewish range from three to 22 per cent; see, Henry Felix Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism, 1935-1945*, (London, 1995), note 5, p.202; Srebrnik cites Bill Alexander, *British Volunteers for Liberty: Spain, 1936-1939* (London, 1982), Albert Prago, *Jews in the International Brigades* (New York, 1979), and Tom Wintringham, *English Captain* (London, 1939). Wintringham gave the estimate of three per cent, but Srebrnik argues that this was intentional as Wintringham may have been trying to avoid providing ammunition to anti-Semites who claimed that 'bolshivism was Jewish'. More recently, Thomas Linehan has suggested that up to 22 per cent of British volunteers were Jewish, in his 'Communist culture and anti-fascism in inter-war Britain', Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz (eds.), *Varieties of Anti-Fascism; Britain in the Inter-War Period* (London, 2010), p.50.

³ Douglas Hyde, *I Believed* (Kingswood, 1951), pp.187-8.

⁴ Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party; A Historical Profile* (London, 1958), p.83 (1975 paperback edition).

⁵ Kenneth Newton, *The Sociology of British Communism* (London, 1969), p.80.

⁶ See, in particular, Henry F. Srebrnik, 'The Jewish Communist Movement in Stepney: Ideological Mobilization and Political Victories in an East London Borough, 1935-1945', University of Birmingham Ph.D. thesis (1984); H.F. Srebrnik, 'The British Communist Party's National Jewish Committee and the fight against Anti-Semitism during the Second World War', in Tony Kushner and Kenneth Lunn (eds.), *The Politics of Marginality: Race, the Radical Right and Minorities in Twentieth Century Britain* (London, 1990); and H.F. Srebrnik, 'Communism and Pro-Soviet feeling among the Jews of East London, 1935-45', *Immigrants and Minorities*, 5 (1986). Elaine Rosa Smith, 'Jewish responses to political anti-semitism and fascism in the East End of London, 1920-1939', in Tony Kushner and Kenneth Lunn (eds.),

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(Manchester, 1989); and Elaine Rosa Smith, 'East End Jews in Politics, 1918-1939; A study in class and ethnicity', University of Leicester Ph.D. thesis (1990).

⁷ See, in particular, Jason L. Heppell, 'A question of "Jewish Politics"?' (2000); and Heppell, 'A Rebel not a Rabbi: Jewish Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 15 (2004), pp.28-50.

⁸ James K. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire; the British in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford, 1998), pp.143-144. Hopkins also made use of the Imperial War Museum's Spanish Civil War sound archive collection, which forms the core data source for this article.

⁹ Andrew Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', *The Historical Journal*, 43 (2000), pp.777-800.

¹⁰ Thomas Linehan, *Communism in Britain, 1920-39; from the cradle to the grave* (Manchester, 2007).

¹¹ Thomas Linehan, 'Communist Activism in Interwar Britain; motivation, belonging and political religion', *Socialist History*, 32 (2008), pp.1-17; Raphael Samuel, 'The Lost World of British Communism'.

¹² Linehan, 'Communist culture and anti-fascism in inter-war Britain', p.49.

¹³ Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen, Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991* (London, 2007), particularly pp.184-196.

¹⁴ Heppell, 'A question of "Jewish Politics"?', p.108.

¹⁵ Morgan, Cohen, Flinn, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991*, p.190.

¹⁶ Heppell, 'A question of "Jewish Politics"?', pp.95, 109-110.

¹⁷ Smith, 'East End Jews in Politics, 1918-1939', p.221.

¹⁸ Imperial War Museum, *The Spanish Civil War Collection; Sound Archive, Oral History Recordings* (London, 1996), p.ii.

¹⁹ Also included in the archive are civilian reminiscences of the war, women involved in Spain or in the Aid Spain movement, journalists and a small number of volunteers with the

Nationalists. The catalogue is a little unclear in some ways, with double counting, for example, of men who fell under more than one category of interview. Further, a few additional interviews have been added to the sound archive since the publication of the catalogue.

²⁰ The themes are listed in *The Spanish Civil War Collection*, p.ii.

²¹ John Brewer, 'Microhistory and the histories of everyday life', *Cultural and Social History*, 7 (2010), p.99.

²² See, Paul Kelemen, 'British Communists and the Palestine Conflict, 1929-1948', *Holy Land Studies*, 5 (2006), pp.131-153; and Henry Felix Srebrnik, 'Sidestepping the Contradictions; the Communist Party, Jewish Communists and Zionism, 1935-1948', in Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman, Kevin Morgan (eds.), *Opening the Books; essays on the social and cultural history of the British Communist Party* (London, 1995), pp.124-141.

²³ Smith's comment on the by-election was that 'Pollitt aimed his campaign almost exclusively at Jewish voters', Smith, 'East End Jews in Politics, 1918-1939 (1990), p.194.

²⁴ Manchester had been a key area for Jewish involvement with the CPGB even in the 1920s; see, Morgan, Cohen, Flinn, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991*, pp.190-191.

²⁵ Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism, 1935-1945*, p.19.

²⁶ Jack Louis Shaw, IWM sound archive, 13547.

²⁷ Maurice Levitas, IWM sound archive, 16358.

²⁸ Thompson, *The Good Old Cause*, pp.93-4; Tony Kushner, 'Jewish Communists in twentieth-century Britain: the Zaidman Collection', *Labour History Review*, 55 (1990), p.71; Pelling, *The British Communist Party*, pp.167-9.

²⁹ Louis Kenton, IWM sound archive, 9374.

³⁰ Smith, 'East End Jews in Politics', p.271. The Legion had its headquarters in Whitehorse Lane, Mile End.

³¹ Kelemen, 'British Communists and the Palestine Conflict', pp.143-4.

³² Louis Kenton, IWM sound archive, 9374.

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- ³³ Maurice Levitas, IWM sound archive, 16358.
- ³⁴ See, for example, Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism*, pp.4-11; Henry Felix Srebrnik, 'Class, Ethnicity and Gender Intertwined: Jewish women and the East End London Rent Strikes, 1935-1940', *Women's History Review*, 4 (1995), pp.283-299; and Thomas P. Linehan, *East London for Mosley; the British Union of Fascists in East London and South-West Essex, 1933-40* (London, 1996), pp.80-4. For a more positive, and nuanced view of inter-ethnic relations and the fascist/anti-fascist struggle, see, Benjamin J. Lammers, 'The Birth of the East Ender: Neighborhood and Local Identity in Interwar East London', *Journal of Social History*, 39 (2005), pp.331-344.
- ³⁵ Jack Louis Shaw, IWM sound archive, 13547.
- ³⁶ Joe Garber, IWM sound archive, 12291. Garber served for a while as a machine gunner in the 15th International Brigade, then spent nearly two years as a secret policeman with the Servicio de Investigación Militar (SIM).
- ³⁷ Stephen M. Cullen, 'Political Violence: the case of the British Union of Fascists', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28 (1993), pp.245-67.
- ³⁸ Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red* (1978 edition), p.18.
- ³⁹ Max Colin, IWM sound archive, 8639.
- ⁴⁰ Louis Kenton, IWM sound archive, 9374.
- ⁴¹ Louis Kenton, IWM sound archive, 9374.
- ⁴² The Jewish community had a previous strong link to the Liberal Party, which dated back to formative experiences for east London Jews, particularly anti-alien agitation, and the 1904 Conservative government Aliens Bill, but, during the 1920s, the Liberal Party was a declining force.
- ⁴³ Catherine Jones, *Immigration and Social Policy in Britain* (London, 1977), pp.66-117.
- ⁴⁴ Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism*, p.4.

⁴⁵ Benjamin Lammers, 'The Birth of the East Ender: Neighborhood and Local Identity in Interwar East London'. For an introduction to debates surrounding Cable Street, see the essays in Tony Kushner and Nadia Valman, *Remembering Cable Street; fascism and anti-fascism in British Society* (London, 2000).

⁴⁶ Interviews with former East End members of the BUF, undertaken in the mid-1980s by the present author, also present the East End as an area characterised by community, neighbourhood, street, family, and, hence, a strong sense of territory. See, Stephen M. Cullen, 'The British Union of Fascists, 1932-1940; ideology, membership and meetings', University of Oxford M.Litt. thesis (1987), pp. 108-147.

⁴⁷ Louis Kenton, IWM sound archive, 9374.

⁴⁸ Jack Shaw, IWM sound archive, 13547.

⁴⁹ Max Colin, IWM sound archive, 8639.

⁵⁰ Maurice Levitas, IWM sound archive, 16358.

⁵¹ Louis Kenton, IWM sound archive, 9374.

⁵² Louis Kenton, IWM sound archive, 9374.

⁵³ 'The Lost World of British Communism', *New Left Review*, 154 (1985), p.50.

⁵⁴ Frank Frankford, IWM sound archive, 9308.

⁵⁵ Frank Frankford, IWM sound archive, 9308.

⁵⁶ Frankford was well known for his dislike of George Orwell, whom he met in Spain, and, more controversially, for his accusations (made under duress) that the POUM militia were a fascist 'Fifth Column'; on this, see, for example, Gordon Bowker, *George Orwell*, (London, 2003), pp.218 and 234; and Bernard Crick, *George Orwell; A Life*, (Harmondsworth, 1992 edition), pp. 346-348; this account also provides Frankford's version of events and the *Daily Worker's* subsequent interpretation of his statement.

⁵⁷ Julius 'Jud' Colman, IWM sound archive, 14575.

⁵⁸ Jack Louis Shaw, IWM sound archive, 13547

⁵⁹ Maurice Levitas, IWM sound archive, 16358.

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- 60 Charlie Goodman, IWM sound archive, 16612.
- 61 Julius 'Jud' Colman, IWM sound archive, 14575.
- 62 Julius 'Jud' Colman, IWM sound archive, 14575.
- 63 Maurice Levitas, IWM sound archive, 16358.
- 64 Max Colin, IWM sound archive, 8639.
- 65 Max Colin, IWM sound archive, 8639.
- 66 Henry Srebrnik, 'Sidestepping the Contradictions', in Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman, Kevin Morgan (eds.), *Opening the Books*, p.136.
- 67 Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History; a guide for the humanities and social sciences* (Walnut Creek, CA, 2005), p.21, quoted by R. Kenneth Kirby, 'Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History', *The Oral History Review*, 35 (2008), p.29.
- 68 Kelemen, 'British Communists and the Palestine Conflict', p.133.