

LETTERS

WHAT ABOUT THE IRISH JEWS?

As a Jewish woman who is also second generation Irish, I was extremely disappointed that Brid Boland's article on Irish women made no mention of Jewish people at all. I would not expect to have to point out in your magazine that Jews are everywhere. The relationship between Irishness and Jewishness is made very complicated by the context of English imperialism, and it is beyond the scope of a short letter to explain the ways they combine to oppress. However, I did want to point out that such a problem exists and deserves to have been sensibly explored in an issue of *Jewish Socialist* which was claiming to make connections between different struggles.

Yours in solidarity
Naomi Levy
London N16

A SPECIAL SPACE

I read your magazine for the first time yesterday, and loved it. My background is of an assimilated Jew of Eastern Europe; none of my Hungarian relations admit to being Jewish and my English side is Christian. As a marginal, I find Zionism and antisemitism both terrifying, so a paper like yours that holds a special space open is wonderful.

Love and solidarity,
Amanda Sebestyen
London N4

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NO PASARAN

The number of Jews who fought in Spain was greater proportionately than any other minority or nationality. Mike Gerber salutes their contribution to the fight against fascism.

The Jewish radical tradition is long and proud, surfacing at all levels of left consciousness. Great numbers of Jews have been active in the anarchist, communist, syndicalist and trade-union movements from the earliest days. With this background, there is no doubt whatever that the Jewish presence in the Spanish republic during the revolutionary civil war years would have been formidable in any circumstances. However, with the filthy streak of antisemitism inherent in any fascist "crusade" against the left, many unpoliticised Jews participated simply in order to fight fascism. This is a statement by General Queieppo de Llano in a radio broadcast on 10 October 1936: "Our war is not a Spanish civil war, it is a war of Western civilisation against the Jews of the entire world." Epic words for such craven deeds! With this sentiment all too typical of an age in which Jews were to experience a level of cruelty unsurpassed in their long troubled history, surely even the most assimilated Jewish-born radical must have been as conscious of fighting as a Jew against fascism as for any revolutionary ideal.

That Jews figured prominently in Spain should therefore come as no surprise. Yet the extent of Jewish participation is not widely realised. To my knowledge, Dr Albert Prago's nineteen-page pamphlet, *Jews in the International Brigades in Spain** is the only literature available on the subject in the English language, and therefore, the basis of all the information used for this article.

It is estimated that, of the 40,000-50,000 volunteers in the International Brigades, 7,000-10,000 were Jewish. That is, not less than 15.5% and perhaps as much as 25%. A national breakdown of

Jewish volunteers shows the following: Poland - 2,250; USA - 1,250; France - 1,043; Britain - 214; Palestine - 267. There was a further estimated 1,095 from a combination of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Canada, Italy, Scandinavia, Germany and Russia, plus 1,602 from 40 other countries. A total of 7,758. To this must be added the many exiled Jews whose national origins were difficult to ascertain, and who were randomly distributed among the battalions. The figure for the Palestinian contingent may have been even higher. One source puts it at not less than 500.

Several sources claim that Jews accounted for 45% of all Polish participants, and 30% of the Americans. Even if the lowest estimates are taken, it is clear that the number of Jews who fought in Spain was greater, proportionately, than that for any other minority or nationality.

These figures do not include medical staff. Data supplied by Nurse Fredericka Martin informs us that of the 124 personnel from the American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy, 59 were Jews. She also notes that most of the Polish nurses, nurses' aides and doctors were Jewish.

In fact Jews were active in Spain well before the formation of the International Brigades. The Workers' Olympiad was being held in Barcelona, as a protest against the forthcoming Berlin Olympics, when the uprising began. Among the athletes were many Jews who stayed to fight the fascists. Most of the athletes from the Palestinian *Hapoel*, for instance, immediately joined the Popular Militia fighting in Barcelona. Other volunteers were political refugees then resident in

Spain. Two Jewish garment workers from the East End of London, Sam Masters and Nat Cohen, were cycling in France when they heard the news of the revolt and immediately crossed the border, soon founding the Tom Mann Centuria (named after the famous Libertarian-Syndicalist) in Barcelona. Other groups and individuals joined them in the months prior to the formation of the first brigades, after which their numbers rapidly grew.

For the volunteers from the central and Eastern European countries already in the grip of fascist or sympathetic reactionary regimes, the journey to Spain was especially perilous and difficult. It took Bobrus Nissenbaum, a Polish Jew, a record five months to get from Warsaw to Paris, through which most combatants passed en route to Spain. He was imprisoned twice and slept on park benches in winter before finally arriving at his destination. In Spain, he was killed fighting with the Palafox Battalion. Josef Rubenstein, after being imprisoned for seven months in his native Poland, crossed Europe with the aid of the underground. Whilst in Spain, he became editor of a Yiddish newspaper, and died fighting in Aragon.

Many volunteers were extremely young. When Eslanda Robeson was in Spain visiting the American volunteers

along with her husband Paul, she approached Maury Colow to ask his age. He was 18 and one of several young Jewish volunteers from the lower East-side slums of New York.

It was not until 12 December 1937 that a specifically Jewish unit was established. Named the Botwin Company, it formed part of the Polish Dombrowski Brigade, and consisted of about 200 combatants. They fought on the Extremadura Front, in the Aragon, at Sierra Quemada, Sierra Caballs, and Lérida, and were among the first units to cross the River Ebro in the famous and crucial battle of that name. Not all Botwins were Jewish. There were some Poles, one or two Arabs (depending upon the source of information), an Italian, a Greek. There was also a German who, to spite his Nazi father, chose to fight alongside Jews as comrades.

Later, with the coming of World War II, many veteran Jewish Brigadiers fought with the French partisans, or joined the partisans in their native countries. Often they had to contend not only with Hitler, but with antisemites among the partisans. Pinkus Kartin helped organise the heroic defence of the Warsaw Ghetto. Joseph Farber was assigned by the underground to a hazardous task in Birkenau concentration camp. Underground movements also operated somehow within the Nazi

death camps, and David Shulevitch took action photographs of the crematoria at Auschwitz, which were smuggled out in order to refute the pious denials of the Nazis. Isidore Springer and "Camille" (the alias of a Palestinian Jewish ex-Brigadier), played important roles in the Soviet "Red Orchestra" spy ring, which exposed Nazi military secrets throughout the war. Irv Gorf, one of three Americans chosen to fight with Spanish guerillas behind enemy lines, was later one of the five ex-Lincoln brigadiers, four of whom were Jews, who operated behind enemy lines for the OSS during the Second World War.

If one takes account of the strength of the Jewish radical tradition, and of the terrible implications for all Jews in a Europe daily cowering before the shadow of Hitler, then the extent of the Jewish contribution in Spain is not extraordinary. The point of this article is emphatically not to score points over other volunteers. No individual contribution counts for more than any other. The story needs recounting, however, because it provides the most eloquent answer to those who, ignorantly, and with complete lack of understanding, proclaim that Jews bowed passively to 'the greatest ever threat to their existence. □

* Available from Jewish Currents, 22 E17 Street, Suite 601, NY10003, USA.

Charlie Goodman, a
volunteer for liberty,
remembers

After 4 October (the battle of Cable Street) we felt the acute need for a continuation of an active fight against fascism. I wasn't a member of any political party at the time, just a confirmed anti-fascist. The struggle of the Spanish people caught the imagination of all those opposed to fascism. We had a feeling that fascism was getting closer.

I made an application through some people that I knew. I was told I was accepted but I would have to go to Paris for final confirmation. I had to take three guys over with me. I was about 21 at the time. I had to meet these three guys at a Lyons tea shop opposite Charing Cross Station — I would know them because there would be a packet of Swan Vestas standing upright on the table! I went in there and found them — three Scottish guys who were deserters from one of the Highland Regiments. They had been driven into the army because of the unemployment but they were quite progressive in their thoughts. When we got to Paris we were met at the station and taken to a place where we had a physical examination, and were asked various questions. The following evening we boarded a train for Perpignan, the last big town before Spain.

The frontier was closed and we had to climb over the Pyrenees, being shot at by French fascists in the mountains and also by Spanish fascists. Quite a number of the guys never made it. We looked down and our guide said that's Spain, get there as fast as possible! We scrambled down the hill to a little house.

I shall never forget a place called Fegeros, just inside the Spanish border. All people from all over the world went there first before they were sent to the training camp at Alberseti. I was there when all of a sudden I could hear singing in the distance. I rushed out to have a look. There were people of all different countries singing *The Internationale*. It was so thrilling; it seemed like the revolution had come at 10.30 in the morning!

The International Brigades who went from Britain were giving a warning that fascism was coming. It was summed up by a poem one of the Brigadiers wrote in our magazine *Volunteers for Liberty*, which was published monthly in different languages. It was Miles Tomlyn; he wrote: "Before me stand the homes of Spain, Behind me stands my own".



Frayhets kemfer — the first Yiddish frontline newspaper in Spain