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Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War by Gerben Zaagsma (review)

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BOOK REVIEW

Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War

By Gerben Zaagsma. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 264 pp.

During the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), some thirty-five thousand volunteers from more than fifty countries traveled to Spain to join the International Brigades in order to defend the republic against the military uprising supported by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. At least three thousand volunteers, and perhaps as many as seven thousand, were Jewish. However, as Gerben Zaagsma makes clear, it is no easy task to determine how many *brigadistas* were of Jewish descent, let alone what being Jewish meant to the self-consciously internationalist and predominately communist volunteers. Zaagsma puts this question of identity at the center of his study of a small subset of the Jewish volunteers: the Polish Jewish exiles in France who organized and fought in the brigades' only explicitly Jewish unit, the Naftali Botwin Company. Situating the history of the Botwin Company at the intersection of histories of the Jewish Left and of Jewish resistance to Nazism, he focuses on the changing “symbolic meaning” of Jewish involvement in the Spanish Civil War (3). He finds a “decisive shift” in representations of the Jewish volunteers in the wake of the Holocaust, when historians and veterans alike increasingly characterized their participation in the brigades as “a particular *Jewish* response to fascism and the Nazi onslaught” (3).

Zaagsma divides the book into three parts, and each tells the story of the Botwin Company and Jewish volunteers from a different perspective. In part 1, “Jewish Volunteers in the International Brigades,” he places the establishment of a Jewish company in the Thirteenth (Dobrowski) Brigade in the context of the Comintern’s goals and the volunteers’ political affiliations, which were predominately communist. Organized and promoted by Polish Jewish exiles in France, the Botwin Company

was formed in December 1937 and named after a Polish Jewish communist who murdered an alleged provocateur. The organizers' motives, Zaagsma argues, had more to do with the specific challenges faced by communist exiles of Jewish descent in France—a context he sketches with admirable nuance—than with “Jewish consciousness” (29). For communists, the pressing concern was the symbolic value of a Jewish unit that could be used to promote the Popular Front among Jews and to combat the “myth of Jewish cowardice” among Poles (43). That the company was largely a propaganda gesture is supported by the fact that, although commanded by Jews, it was never predominately Jewish. At its founding, it consisted of about seventy-five men: twelve Jews, ten Poles, and the rest Spaniards.

In part 2, Zaagsma focuses on the representation of the Jewish volunteers, and particularly the Botwin Company, in Paris's Yiddish press. He again begins at the beginning of the war and meticulously traces the coverage of the Spanish Civil War and the Jewish volunteers in the communist-affiliated *Naye Presse* and, in a separate chapter, in the unaffiliated but Labor Zionist-oriented *Parizer Haynt* and the Bundist *Undzer Shtime*. The comparison reveals that only the communists paid much attention to the war and the volunteers, linking their service in Spain to the larger cause of fighting fascism and antisemitism. When *Naye Presse* emphasized Jewish heroism specifically, it did so in order to counter accusations of Jewish cowardice that soured relations between Jewish emigrants and other Polish emigrants, as well as the French labor movement in general.

In part 3, Zaagsma takes the story from the withdrawal of the International Brigades in 1938 to the 1980s in order to examine how memories and commemorations of the Botwin Company shifted over time. Drawing on published histories of the Botwin Company in Yiddish and English and uncovering the networks that connected Spanish Civil War veterans in the United States, Great Britain, France, and Israel during and after World War II, Zaagsma traces the international circulation and reworking of representations of the Botwin Company. He emphasizes the agency of veterans, journalists, historians, and Israeli politicians who turned “Botwin” into a “catch-all phrase for Jewish volunteers”

(113) and, despite strong disagreements, constructed by the mid-1980s an influential collective memory of the company that downplayed the volunteers' communist affiliations and foregrounded Jewish identity.

Although Zaagsma's largely thematic organization creates some repetition, it allows him to tease out the national, international, and transnational contexts that shaped the Botwin Company, the Polish Jewish emigrants who organized and fought in it, and the Jewish veterans and journalists who contested and constructed the meaning of Jewish participation in the Spanish Civil War. The emphasis on this multilayered context is particularly clear and powerful in his discussions of how the Jewish communists in France "became embedded in new national and local contexts while simultaneously operating in and creating particular transnational networks and communicative spaces that linked them to their countries of origin as well as migrants elsewhere" (8). In the chapters on the Spanish Civil War, he effectively analyzes the "variety of push and pull factors" (27)—communist political loyalties, rising antisemitism in Poland and France, and economic hardship in migrant communities—that brought volunteers to Spain. However, in his discussion of how the postwar scholarly debate on Jewish resistance during the Holocaust interacted with and fundamentally reconfigured the memory of Jewish participation in the International Brigades, he largely ignores the post-Stalin context. Zaagsma does not consider key "push" factors—the revelations of Stalin's crimes and the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia—that drove so many communists out of the party in this period and that created a need, among Jewish and non-Jewish veterans alike, for a means of protecting their "heroic" struggle in Spain from the taint of Stalinism. This gap notwithstanding, the book provides a fascinating and complex analysis of the shifting interplay of communist and Jewish identities. Zaagsma's account of how many communist volunteers of Jewish descent came to insist on their status as Jewish resistance fighters will appeal to scholars interested in the International Brigades, in the politics of memory, and in the construction of modern Jewish identity.

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Lisa A. Kirschenbaum is a professor of history at West Chester University. She is the author of three books: *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932* (Routledge, 2001); *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941–1995: Myth, Memories, and Monuments* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); and *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). She is also the editor and translator of Soviet poet Olga Berggolts’s memoir *Daytime Stars* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2018). Her current research focuses on the relationship between Russian Americans and the Russian Revolution.