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Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War

by Gerben Zaagsma.

New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. ix, 250. ISBN 978–1–4725–4725–1.

Review by Samuël Kruizinga, The University of Amsterdam (s.f.kruizinga@uva.nl)

"You are history. You are legend." With those words, Dolores Ibárruri—better known by her nom de guerre La Pasionara ("The Passionflower")—hailed the foreign volunteers who had fought for the Republic during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) during their farewell parade through Barcelona (Oct. 1938).[1] Since then, the International Brigaders' history and legend have often been conflated or confused, complicating efforts to analyze their actual role in a seminal conflict of the twentieth century.[2] *Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War*, by comparison, is a breath of fresh air, offering a (mostly) impressive analysis of the history, appropriation, and myth-making of Jews fighting in the International Brigades.

Supported by Benito Mussolini and, crucially, Adolf Hitler, Gen. Francisco Franco's military uprising assumed an importance disproportionate to the political future of Spain. Moreover, the Spanish Civil War was, in hindsight, a last, best chance to stop the advance of Fascism and Nazism in Europe. The history of the Jews in the International Brigades, the volunteer fighting force assembled to combat Franco, portrays them as having seen the writing on the wall in 1936 and, in a show of incredible but futile bravery, attempting to forestall the Holocaust.

In a speech delivered on the fiftieth anniversary of the Spanish Civil War, Israeli president Chaim Herzog praised these Jewish volunteers as key members of the first wave of resistance against the political forces that produced the Holocaust: they had "used their bodies as a dam against a wave of evil" (146), foreshadowing the fighting spirit of Israel. Their lionization also firmly rebutted those who, like Hannah Arendt,[3] "bemoaned the relative scarcity of Jewish armed resistance" (122) to the Nazis.

Historian Gerben Zaagsma (Univ. of Luxembourg) now argues that framing Jews' participation in the International Brigades as *Jewish resistance* to Nazism is highly problematic, even though many of them continued to fight Fascism during World War II:

> even if one allows for the possibility that individual volunteers had a clear premonition about Nazi Germany's future extermination policies, and assumes their act of volunteering was predicated upon that premonition, one cannot conclude that a singular category of Jewish volunteers fought in Spain as *Jews* with a clear *Jewish* motivation. (28)

Interestingly, the author does not discuss why the titular "Jewish volunteers" joined up for the International Brigades, but instead explores "how a particular set of Jewish military experiences,

1. Robert Stradling, *History and Legend: Writing the International Brigades* (Cardiff: U Wales Pr, 2003) vii.

2. See, e.g. Tony Judt, "Rehearsal for Evil," *New Republic* 225.11 (2001) 29–35; Helen Graham, "Spain Betrayed? The New Historical McCarthyism," *Science & Society* 68 (2004) 364–69; and Richard Baxell, "Myths of the International Brigades," *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 91 (2014) 11–24.

3. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (NY: Viking, 1963).

both actual and remembered, became an expression of processes of emancipation and validation" (2–3). He is more concerned to explain how and why political actors—from Jewish communists in Paris to former International Brigaders in communist Poland and American members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Association (an organization for American veterans)—stressed that Jews fought with a specific *Jewish* motivation or consciousness.

Jews from various countries did, of course, join the International Brigades, although we cannot know for sure how many did so. Some have suggested that Jews were overrepresented in the Brigades, that is, more served in each national contingent than there were Jews in their country of origin. But Zaagsma maintains that such (unprovable) arithmetic overlooks the fact that Jews were overrepresented among the communist majority of the International Brigaders. Though Jews fought in various Spanish units on many fronts, historians seeking a specific *Jewish* experience have focused on the 13th International Brigade's "Botwin Company," named for the Polish Jewish communist Naftali Botwin (1907–25), whom the Polish Government executed after he shot an undercover police informant in the underground Polish communist party.

All this suggests a groundswell of support for discrete Jewish units and a Jewish identity within the Brigades, regardless of their home countries. But Zaagsma argues convincingly that ideas of distinct Jewish units chiefly reflected the propaganda efforts of Jewish communists in Paris. They hoped that a specifically Jewish unit could be used to mobilize support for Spain and, more generally, for the communist Popular Front tactics among Jewish communists. In a broader context, the author contends, publicizing Jewish fighting prowess could help negate the age-old stereotype of Jewish cowardice, while showing Jewish immigrants in Paris and other communists that Jews, irrespective of national origin, were fighting for Spain and the Popular Front just like Frenchmen.

This message resonated strongly on the eve of the Spanish Civil War, when ca. 90,000–150,000 Jewish Parisians were recent or second-generation immigrants from Poland and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. This was a population faced with growing xenophobia and antisemitism, workplace discrimination, and fear (among the undocumented) of being sent back to their countries of origin. Even the French Communist Party seemed to ride the tide of populism—its secretary general, Maurice Thorez, (seemingly) adopted the populist slogan "France aux Français" (France for the French) in September 1937. In that environment, Jewish communists wanted both to show that Jews were doing their part as bravely as other International Brigaders, and to convince Parisian Jews not to tolerate discrimination.

The second half of *The Jewish Volunteers* skips the Second World War and, curiously, the period of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which put Jewish communists in an impossible position vis-à-vis Nazi Germany. Instead its focus is on post-1945 appropriations of the Botwin Company, which, although it comprised only a small number of Jewish volunteers, came to represent *all* Jews, now seen as having served *as Jews*, not (hyphenated) Frenchmen, exiled Poles, or communists. Divorced from its actual historic context, the Botwin Company was made to symbolize Jewish heroism in order to counter criticisms that Jews had gone to the gas chambers like "sheep to the slaughter" (161). The new narrative credited their efforts and sacrifices with begetting Jewish resistance during the Holocaust and ultimately the state of Israel.

Gerben Zaagsma has persuasively debunked many of the myths surrounding the Botwin Company and revealed the drawbacks of ignoring historical context and a teleological view of the role of Jews in the Brigades. One wishes he had compared various attempts to appropriate Jews' roles in the International Brigades with the testimony of Jews at the fronts around Madrid and elsewhere in Spain. His research, understandably, concentrates on the French-Jewish experience, but at the expense of opening other perspectives on activities of European Jews in the Brigades—

for example, those of Britons or Scandinavians—that might have shed light on his investigation. Zaagsma is also prone to needless detours, as in his analysis of a *Bundist* newspaper's views of the Spanish Civil War, which contributes little to his central argument. His discussions of the origins and permutations of the Botwin Company myths are fascinating, but much less specific than he implies.[4] It was hardly the only unit created for purposes of propagandizing at home. Finally, I am not convinced that the Botwin Company played much of a role in Israeli public memory; Chaim Herzog's speech seems to suggest it does, but it is only one testimony, now over thirty years old.

This accessible book usefully clarifies the processes of appropriation and the evolution of European "Jewishness" in the shadow of the impending Holocaust. Not all its points stick, but its insights into the links between history and legend make it deserving of a wide readership.

4. See Michael Uhl, *Mythos Spanien: Das Erbe der Internationalen Brigaden in der DDR* (Bonn: Dietz, 2004).