

# H-Net Reviews

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Gerben Zaagsma. *Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War*. War, Culture and Society Series. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 264 pp. \$114.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4725-0549-1.

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Gerben Zaagsma's *Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* explores the participation of Jews in a conflict often considered the ideological and military precursor of the Second World War. Zaagsma is concerned with the representations of Jewish volunteers and the "symbolic meaning" of their involvement both during the civil war itself, in which a "Jewish" unit, the Botwin Company, was formed, and after 1945 (p. 3). In the half-century after the war, he contends, Jewish participants have largely been remembered through a post-Holocaust lens, and used (in public discourse as well as by some historians) to counter narratives of Jewish passivity and physical weakness, to demonstrate that Jews were among the first resisters to the Fascist menace in Europe. Though focused on the conflict in Spain, the book is primarily a contribution to modern Jewish historiography. Zaagsma argues that Jewish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War fought on "a battle ground to achieve inclusion and emancipation," and therefore these fighters, "whether they were self-consciously Jewish or not, constitute one of the many chapters in the ongoing project of Jewish modernity as it unfolded from the late eighteenth century onwards" (p. 164).

The monograph proceeds chronologically and is organized into three sections. Part 1 provides the reader with background of Jewish participation in the International Brigades and the formation of the Botwin Company. While Zaagsma recognizes the difficulty in determining precise numbers of Jewish volunteers from the historical record, he estimates the total participants in the International Brigades at between thirty-five thou-

sand and forty thousand, of whom approximately 10 percent were Jews. He carefully discusses the slippery concept of "Jewish" participation: Did Jews participate as *Jews*? *Because* they were Jews? Or did they volunteer for other (political) reasons? Zaagsma emphasizes that leftist politics, and a common migratory experience (from eastern to western Europe, principally from Poland to France or Belgium) united the Jewish volunteers more than any theological or religious bonds, and concludes (sensibly) that Jewish volunteers should be defined as Jewish by descent, rather than by any particular common politics.

Part 2 explores how the experiences of the Jewish volunteers were recorded in the Yiddish press in Paris during the war, and compares the coverage of three different newspapers, namely, *Naye Presse*, *Parizer Haynt*, and *Undzer Shtime*, which represented, respectively, Communist, Labour-Zionist, and Bundist opinion in the Yiddish-speaking French Jewish community. Zaagsma relates the inherent tensions and conflicting loyalties of the migrant community, as articulated through the press. For example, the Communist *Naye Presse* balanced loyalty to the Comintern and French Communist Party (PCF), vociferous supporters of the International Brigades, and yet was also conscious of its place as a daily newspaper on the "Jewish street," a diverse migrant community with its own set of interests and concerns. Jewish involvement in Spain was ascribed less importance by *Parizer Haynt* and *Undzer Shtime*, primarily on ideological grounds, which Zaagsma demonstrates in his archival research of the coverage.

Part 3, the final and most compelling section, de-

tails the postwar interpretation and reinterpretation of the Jewish contribution to the International Brigades, as manifested in Israel, the United States, and Poland. It was during the 1950s and 1960s, in the Yiddish press in Poland, that Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades came to be reimagined as the first resisters against European Fascism, a forerunner in their later resistance during the Holocaust itself. Zaagsma attributes this shift to the publication of Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) and Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), both of which highlighted the supposed scarcity of Jewish (armed) opposition to the Nazis. The International Conference on Jewish Fighters in 1972, organized by the Israeli Trade Union Federation (the Histadrut) to coincide with the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Botwin Company's formation, was convened in Tel Aviv. That the conference took place in Israel, organized by the Histadrut, which had opposed participation of Jews during the Spanish Civil War, demonstrates the significant degree to which the Holocaust came to shape postwar reflections on the Jewish role in the conflict and the ways that the existence of a Jewish company was used for various purposes decades after the events themselves.

The sources used reflect the author's focus on how the volunteers have been represented. There is extensive use of press archives, in particular Yiddish newspapers in Paris, where an engaged Jewish émigré community was based. While Zaagsma draws on a variety of primary documents, the Yiddish press in part 2 is given more

space than perhaps it deserves, serving primarily as a foil for the significant reinterpretation of the Jewish volunteers after the war. The voice of the Jewish volunteers themselves during the conflict is also largely absent from the account. The text hugely benefits from Zaagsma's knowledge of multiple foreign languages, and the three parts of the book work together as a coherent whole.

*Jewish Volunteers* offers valuable insights for a variety of historical specialists. Military, and Holocaust, historians interested in postwar commemoration and representation will find in part 3 a model approach in piecing together how memory is refracted and dispersed transnationally, and used differently in particular national contexts. However, readers seeking to understand the particular *military* contribution of the Botwin Company, or International Brigades more broadly, will be better served elsewhere. Modern Jewish historians will find much of interest, while the discussion of the interventions of volunteer veteran Albert Prago in the United States during the 1970s, through his contributions to progressive magazine *Jewish Currents*, will appeal to American Jewish historians, particularly in relation to questions of American Jewish identity and memory of the Holocaust. Overall, Zaagsma has produced a readable and well-argued account, providing the reader with an engaging analysis of the formation of a Jewish company during the Spanish Civil War, and its interpretation and reinterpretation in popular memory during the remainder of the twentieth century.

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