Title: British Jews and Anti-Fascism in the 1930s


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The Blackshirts were attacking elderly Jewish people around Stepney… and then the report came through that a German unit had landed [in Spain] via Portugal. They were pouring in. I thought to myself, ‘now, it is my job, I’ve got to go. We can’t wait after reading Mein Kampf… they are going to wipe us out’ That’s why I went. I had to go.¹

Asked why he left for Spain in December 1936 to join anti-Fascist forces, Stepney-born son of Lithuanian-Jewish immigrants, Joe Garber, seemingly prioritized the personal impact of British far-right antisemitism, acknowledging also the possible ethnic ramifications of a Fascist victory in Iberia. Before his departure in Winter 1936, Garber had a long personal anti-Fascist history. After time in the Merchant Navy in the 1920s, he returned to his native London where he became quickly involved in efforts to oppose the nascent British Union of Fascists, founded in 1932 by Oswald Mosley. Arrested whilst counter-protesting at the ‘Blackshirts’ infamous rally at Kensington Olympia in June 1934, Garber also clashed with the police during the so-called ‘Battle of Cable Street’, Mosley’s abortive attempt to provocatively march through London’s East End in October 1936. His motivations to fight against Fascism, according to one scholar’s reading, were seemingly ‘specifically Jewish’; with the young Stepnian believing he was engaging in ethnic ‘defence’ work in both domestic and international settings.²

Others, however, have interpreted Garber’s anti-Fascist motivations differently. Highlighting his ‘thorough political grounding’, in 2000, Guardian journalist Peter Lennon argued that Garber’s decision to join the anti-Fascist movement was better explained by his ideological heritage and interests. Born into a radical socialist family (Joe’s father and uncle had both been heavily involved in the Bund in their homeland), Garber was inspired from a young age by far-left politics and activism. He joined the Young Communist League aged 10, sabotaged lorries under Police escort during the General Strike of 1926 aged fifteen and became involved in militant unionism during his time in the Merchant Navy later in the same decade. In making those decisions, so this analysis went, Garber’s ethnicity mattered little. Indeed, Joe noted himself that by the time he had become a fully paid-up member of the Communist Party of Great Britain [CPGB] in 1931, he had ‘rejected… religion outright’ and had jettisoned many
of the customs and characteristics of immigrant Jewish life. Thus, solidarity with Spanish workers fighting for the Republican cause – especially after Italian and German assistance for Franco became wider knowledge – meant that Joe ‘knew exactly why he had to… go to fight’ in Iberia. In 1936, a 25-year-old Garber sought and secured the permission and assistance of the CPGB leadership in London to travel to Spain.³

These two, starkly contrasting, readings of one anti-Fascist’s life and decisions neatly demonstrate the dichotomous view of British-Jewish anti-Fascism that has existed up to this point. On the one hand, there developed a view (particularly prominent amongst general, especially early, histories of the Spanish Civil War) that the ethnicity of British volunteers of Jewish heritage was insignificant and that strong socialist and/or communist inclinations overrode any ethnic concerns. As Tom Buchanan observed in his seminal *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* - which says very little about the Jewish heritage of sections of volunteers - ‘for the great majority [of all who served in Spain]… volunteering came as a conscious political decision’.⁴

Others, however, have instead foregrounded the ethnicity of British-Jewish volunteers, arguing that anti-Fascism both in Britain and abroad was a clear ‘ethnic reaction’ by individuals hailing from a minority group facing religious, ethnic and cultural hostility from the contemporary far-right.⁵ In Britain, the development of this view owes much to trends from the 1970s and 1980s onwards within British Jewish historiography towards greater emphasis on social history (the so-called ‘New’ school of academic thought), as well as growing awareness of the scale of anti-Fascist involvement within the community.⁶ Internationally, perceptions of Jewish involvement in the Spanish Civil War have said to have been ‘fundamentally shaped’ by the Holocaust, with many post-War academics purposely and consciously concentrating on tracing a ‘Jewish resistance narrative’ in the 1930s and 1940s ‘to counter the myth of Jewish passivity’ in the face of Fascist aggression.⁷

Through a detailed analysis of the memoirs, autobiographies, personal papers and life histories of 35 British Jewish anti-Fascists active in the 1930s, this article shows that there is indeed credence in both arguments. There are, however, key differences in terms of scale and timing – mapped out
comprehensively and evidenced in the below discussion and analysis. It will be shown, for instance, that the earliest Jewish volunteers in the fight against Fascism were highly secularized, culturally assimilated and strongly ideologically and politically committed individuals, focused above all on the political ramifications of growing support for Mosley and Franco. After this modestly-sized vanguard, however, larger numbers of British-Jewish anti-Fascists acted because of a growing awareness of the ethnic implications of Fascist growth in Britain and Spain. Their battle was driven by a seemingly acute awareness that their position as Jews, and the position of Jewish communities in Britain and Europe, was imperilled by the growth of political movements which made no secret of their antisemitic outlooks and ambitions.

Importantly, though, this article will also argue that seeing British-Jewish anti-Fascism in a binary fashion such as this belies the often intricate and fluid nature of political and ethnic identity. Whilst political or ethnic reactions are clearly discernible amongst many militant activists, detailed analysis of the reminiscences of this group also uncovers individuals for whom the motivation to take the significant step to place themselves on the frontline against Mosley and/or Franco was much more fluid and defies easy categorisation. The final section of the article, therefore, explores the usefulness of the sociological concept of ‘reactive ethnicity’ (first posited by American scholars Alejandro Portes and Reuben Rumbaut) in helping us to discern a third, new, way of viewing and understanding anti-Fascism amongst British Jewry at this time. In essence, in the same way that Americans of immigrant descent from the late 20th century onwards responded to ‘hostile contexts’ with ‘ethnic group solidarity and political mobilisation’, so too was it the case that many British Jews losing touch with their heritage and identity in the 1930s found themselves brought back into the fold due to far-right antisemitism and became energized into fighting back against Fascist aggressors. As will be demonstrated, such individuals do not sit neatly in either of the current modes of understanding – they were neither just strongly politically inclined individuals acting purely and consistently in ideological terms, nor committed Jews who were naturally motivated to fight back against contemporary Fascist anti-Jewish actions and propaganda.
Such is the level of coverage of British Fascism and the Spanish Civil War by academic and general histories, it has often been said that that the opportunity for scholars to say something new and significant about either is limited.\(^9\) By offering the most comprehensive analysis of the recollections of British-Jewish anti-Fascists – spread across multiple British archives and repositories – to date, together with a detailed exposition of the development of the related academic literature, this article shows that this is not the case. Indeed, as well as introducing the notion of ‘reactive ethnicity’ to our framework of understanding surrounding anti-Fascism, this study contributes to multiple aspects of our knowledge of this period’s wider political and social history. On a basic level, the scholarship on efforts to oppose Fascism ‘lags behind’ that on Fascism itself, and this study will add to our growing understanding of the forms that anti-Fascism took and motivations needed to act and fight against the political far-right.\(^{10}\) It will also further demonstrate that the British-Jewish community were – as suggested previously - often present at the forefront of this struggle, from the earliest days of anti-Fascist action in Britain and abroad.\(^{11}\)

Significantly, it also acts as an important corrective to two aspects of existing scholarship. On the one hand, this literature has generally not paid close attention to the experiences of the individual anti-Fascist, preferring instead to focus on communal bodies such as the Board of Deputies and the Jewish People’s Council Against Fascism and Anti-Semitism (formed 1936 by, amongst other things, Jewish trade unions, Friendly Societies, Ex-Servicemen’s and youth groups), or broader political organisations with significant Jewish contingents (such as the Communist Party of Great Britain or the Young Communist League). This top-down approach has not proven conducive to understanding the nuanced and very personal nature of the decision for an individual to act directly against Fascism. Indeed, this was recognized as early as 1939, when Bill Rust, communist campaigner and Daily Worker correspondent, published his history of the International Brigade, in which he noted that it would be a ‘fruitful study to analyse the motives of each volunteer and the exact reasons which led him at a given moment to offer his services’.\(^{12}\)

Secondly, this tendency to view anti-Fascism along organisational lines has been accompanied by a trend of seeing Jewish anti-Fascism in ‘strongly moral terms’ in a post-Holocaust environment.
Conscious efforts have been made by scholars after World War Two to trace evidence of Jewish proactivity in the face of Fascist perils, in order to help dispel the myth of Jewish passivity during the conflict. It has been noted elsewhere that this meant that the ‘actual experiences’ of the individual anti-Fascist have often been side-lined and a propensity to presume ‘Jewish motivation or consciousness’ has been present. This often belies the fact that the cultural and/or religious Jewishness of volunteers of Jewish heritage could be extremely limited or not present at all, and that motivation and identity were not necessarily set in stone.¹³

This study also has real value in terms of shedding further light on the social history of British Jewry at an important time in the community’s recent past. During the interwar years fear was widespread amongst communal leaders that young Jews were energetically pursuing integration and assimilation, and were ‘estranging’ themselves from their parents, community and heritage.¹⁴ Tracing and analysing contemporary British-Jewish anti-Fascism is, therefore, particularly significant in this respect. For one, it shows that there were Jews whose ‘estrangement’ due to political inclinations was indeed very comprehensive, as well as Jewish activists for whom their connections to their identity and community were strong enough to lead them to engage in their defence. Yet, there were also Jews who were clearly drifting from the fold but for whom the shrill anti-Jewishness of Mosley and the wider perceived ramifications of a Fascist victory in Spain acted as a powerful reminder of their heritage and pushed them into reactive mobilisation against the Fascist far-right.

Such multiple historiographical contributions as these can only be made by concentrating, as this article does, on exploring the ‘life histories’ of the anti-Fascists themselves. It is well understood that materials like autobiographies, memoirs and oral histories suffer from ‘silences, conflations and omissions’ and that they cannot be a ‘literal representation of the past’.¹⁵ They are, however, well understood to be useful in providing a level of ‘personal representation and meaning’ that no organisational or official record could begin to match.¹⁶ They are thus an invaluable gateway to the histories of ‘forgotten’ groups such as workers, women and – especially important for this study – minorities, and valuable to any historian keen to understand ‘how individuals, at a specific moment, felt about things that mattered to them’.¹⁷
Given the apparent value – acknowledged in 1939 by Bill Rust but barely addressed since - of studies which 'analyse the motives… [and] reasons’ for individual action, it is surprising that the materials on which this article is based have been so under-utilized by historians wishing to trace and understand traditions of anti-Fascist activism during this pivotal decade. This is especially the case when we see the richness and diversity of new historical perspectives that can, as a result of their analysis, be brought to bear on eras and aspects of contemporary political, social and minority history; periods and topics which some have dismissed – incorrectly, as shown here - as historiographical dead-ends.

Amongst the earliest accounts of 1930s British anti-Fascism, Jewish participation is often little more than a footnote in broader narratives focusing on leftist political struggle and unity. This is because this literature explains the phenomenon of anti-Fascism almost purely in class terms, believing any national, racial and/or ethnic differences amongst the activists inconsequential. The international struggle for democratic, social or communist goals was believed to be a unifying force and thus, as a result, a rather homogenized view of those who acted was created and presented. In his Britons in Spain, for example, Bill Rust notes the contribution of ‘not a few Jews’ to the anti-Fascist cause, but only gives specific attention to ‘two East London garment workers’, Nathaniel Cohen – founder and leader of the first British volunteer group, the Tom Mann Centuria - and Sam Masters (‘one of the finest of the British volunteers and a true son of the working class’) as they were amongst the first Britons to arrive in Spain after the Fascist uprising. For Rust, the International Brigade was first and foremost ‘a product of social force and of the spirit of internationalism’, with British volunteers possessing of a ‘vision of a future society entirely opposed to the dark pessimism of the Fascists and reactionaries’. This sentiment is echoed by the last commander of the British Battalion of the IB, Bill Alexander, who commented in his British Volunteers for Liberty that ‘little attention [was] paid’ at the time to ‘religious or cultural background’. In the mid-1990s, he added that the Brigade more broadly was a ‘unique, spontaneous act of solidarity from all over the world’ with volunteers ‘overcoming difference of race, politics and religious philosophy because of the need to lift the threat of Fascism and war’.
When the Jewish heritage of volunteers wasn’t being overlooked, it could often be deemed insignificant. In 1979, historian and veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (a largely American battalion of the IB), Albert Prago, published two ground-breaking articles in the magazine *Jewish Currents*, effectively the first academic discussions of Jewish volunteering in the conflict. Yet whilst Prago wanted the considerable effort of Jewish fighters (he claimed there had been 7000 Jewish volunteers in Spain) to be more widely known, he did not claim that this was evidence of any particular trend amongst Jewish communities for anti-Fascism, nor confirmation of any special Jewish motivation. This was due, he claimed, to a ‘low level of Jewish consciousness among Jewish volunteers’ and because ‘many of the Jews who came from England, Canada, and France and the United States did not identify as Jews. They went as internationalists, as humanists, as anti-Fascists, as communists’.

Whether or not they were aware of Prago’s work, authors of many subsequent histories of British involvement in Spain did little to challenge his synopsis or present a more heterogenous view of the volunteers in terms of ethnicity. In his *Into the Heart of Fire*, James Hopkins concedes that whilst anti-Fascists of Jewish background both at home and abroad would have been ‘well aware’ of antisemitism perpetuated by the far-right, this was not a prime motivating factor. For British Jews, service in Spain was a logical extension of the work that these individuals had been undertaking in ‘local political matters and political campaigning’ linked to trade unions, Labour and or the Communist Party, in terms of industrial, employment and leisure rights. Anti-Fascism in Britain and in Spain simply provided a ‘common focus’ for already ideologically committed workers and activists from all parts and all communities. Similarly, whilst Tom Buchanan’s *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* does mention that a significant proportion (he suggests up to 10%) of British volunteers hailed from Jewish backgrounds, his discussion of this group is limited to just a few lines in his chapter on ‘Volunteers’, feeling no need to pay particular attention to Jews or Judaism there or in his section on ‘Religion’. For him, the
volunteers in Spain made a ‘conscious, political decision’ to serve, something which was a ‘logical continuation’ of political activism and prior anti-Fascist work against Mosley’s Blackshirts.\textsuperscript{25}

Similar notions are apparent within specific analyses of British Jewish political activism during the 1930s. Focusing on anti-Fascism in Manchester, Neil Barratt concluded that Jewish activists ‘wore their Jewishness most lightly’, feeling little connection or sympathy for their community and its leadership, being instead inspired by the leftist political atmosphere present within many working-class, immigrant homes.\textsuperscript{26} In her analysis of second generation Jewish political life in the interwar East End, Elaine Smith claims that the focus of ‘politically active Jews’ was not necessarily on ‘Jewish interests’ or ‘Jewish politics’. Rather, like their left-wing, working-class Labour and/or communist-supporting non-Jewish peers, they focused on ‘progressive’ policies on housing, wages and employment; areas with ‘universal meaning’ that needed addressing as part of a broader working-class response to economic and political problems. Anti-Fascism and the Spanish Civil War may have drawn large numbers of Jews into the contemporary East London CPGB, but not because of their ‘Jewish line’ on such matters, rather because these Jews were locating ways of expressing and developing a ‘secular political culture’.\textsuperscript{27} Analyses of the participation of individuals of Jewish heritage in the British communist movement more broadly have variously labelled persons like these as ‘Non-Jewish Jews’ or ‘Communist Jews’; reflecting that their ethnicity was either inconsequential or only marginally important in driving/explaining their political actions and interests.\textsuperscript{28}

Indeed, many British Jewish anti-Fascists in the 1930s were often deeply ensconced in the ‘secular political culture’ well before the national and international threat of Fascism grew from c1933 onwards. Such individuals would also clearly fit the label of a ‘Non-Jewish Jew’ or ‘Communist Jew’, given that virtually all were deeply politically aligned before undertaking their various anti-Fascist actions. For example, Alec Marcovitch (b. 1914, Glasgow to Russian/Polish immigrants) had worked as a tailor and had been raised in a ‘hotbed of political activity’, developing a ‘passionate interest’ in finding radical solutions to the ‘poverty, unemployment and general hardship that surrounded him’.\textsuperscript{29} This led him to joining the CPGB, where he became well-known for his extensive Marxist knowledge, skilled oratory and fiery and argumentative nature. He later noted his belief that it was the latter that ensured that soon
after his arrival in Spain in 1937 to serve a machine gunner that he was labelled a ‘Trotskyist provocateur’, being removed from his unit and placed in a ‘corrective’ detachment that undertook the most dangerous reconnaissance missions.30 Prior to service in Spain, Marcovitch had been willing to use his ethnic heritage to try to recruit Jews to the communist cause, yet he did not shy away from being critical of the notion that the Soviet Union was a Jewish safe haven, openly noting his belief in Stalin’s legal and social antisemitism.31

Similarly, Maurice Levine (b. 1907, Manchester to Lithuanian immigrants) was also politicized long before Mosley’s Blackshirts appeared on the scene. First becoming interested in socialism during the 1924 General Election, Levine worked as a tailor’s cutter before heading to Australia in 1928 to work with his brother, though Maurice was forced to return home three years later due to the effects of the Great Depression.32 His long-held interest in unionism and the ‘distress’ he witnessed due to the economic crash, led him to join the Manchester CPGB on his return, something Maurice also attributed to his ‘move away from… the Jewish religion’.33 Maurice went on to be involved in protests surrounding unemployment (including two hunger marches in 1932) and access to the countryside (including the infamous communist-organized mass trespass on Kinder Scout in April 1932), before becoming directly involved in anti-Fascist work in the city from 1933 onwards.34

Once war in Spain broke out in 1936 there was little doubt in Levine’s mind that the next step in his anti-Fascist work was to volunteer. He arrived at the International Brigade headquarters in Albacete in November of that year, amongst the first contingent from Manchester to arrive in Iberia. Maurice noted he encountered no resistance from his parents, believing his father was ‘quite proud’ his son was countering the ‘received wisdom that the Jews were not a fighting people’.35 Despite this, Maurice was himself unequivocal that his Jewishness played no part in his decision to serve:

I should say that it was the prime motive, the emergence of Fascism and Mosleyism in Britain, in persuading lots of people like myself to go to Spain. You see, Spain as such might not have had the attraction as regards defending the Spanish Republic if alongside it there hadn’t been this great creeping wave of Fascism taking place at the time. It was not primarily because Hitler was ranting against the Jews, that didn’t mean a great deal to the Jewish members of the Communist Party, but the fact here was
a challenge to our way of living and the frightening thing about it all was the acquiescence of the leading political figures in the country to it.36

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

Figure 1 - Maurice Levine (second from right) pictured in Madrid in May 1937. Source: Manchester Jewish Museum.

In that first Mancunian group were three other volunteers of Jewish heritage; George Westfield (about whom little is known), Julius ‘Jud’ Colman and Ralph Cantorovitch (shortened to Cantor once in Spain). Despite having been raised in an orthodox household, Colman (b. 1915 in Manchester to Russian parents) drifted away from his Jewishness during his adolescence and became involved in the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers. He then joined the YCL aged 17, where he was involved in ‘political campaigns’ ranging from chalking pavements, selling Challenge newspaper and establishing the communist-controlled ‘Youth Front’ to undertake anti-Fascist work.37 Cantor (b. 1916 in Manchester) was said to have been ‘impatient’ to get to Spain once war broke out, having also been particularly active in local communist circles and local and national YCL. He was involved in a wide range of activities once in Spain, ranging from translator (a basic French speaker, he picked up rudimentary Spanish whilst serving with Spanish machine gunners), stretcher bearer, ambulance driver, cycle messenger and machine gunner. He was fatally wounded in July 1937 at Brunete whilst manning a Maxim machine gun position with Colman. Shortly after, Colman wrote home: ‘Our fight is for a great cause. Sometimes the sacrifice expected of us is very great but as anti-Fascist class-conscious workers we realize that only by victory and the rout of Fascism will there be any future for human society’.38

[FIGURE 3 HERE]

Figure 2 – Photograph, by Ralph Cantor, taken in Albacete in November 1936 of first contingent to arrive in Spain from North-West England. Pictured is George Westfield (3 from left), Maurice Levine (standing, 4 from right) and Julius Colman (standing, 2 from right. Source: Working Class Movement Library
Evidently, it was politics and ideological interests, as opposed to ethnicity, which figured most prominently in the minds of these early British Jewish volunteers in Spain. Their actions were focused on changing the political landscape, with seemingly no feeling or acknowledgment that their heritage added an ethnic angle to their decision to serve and in the impact of their service. Again, this reflects the fact that Jews such as these had gradually lost focus and interest on their ethnic identity and heritage during their formative years, as seen clearly with another Mancunian Jewish volunteer in Spain, Leslie Prager (b. 1916 to Russian parents). He recalled that he grew up in a ‘Yiddish and Hebrew speaking’ home, that he prayed and attended Synagogue regularly and strictly ate Kosher, but after his father died whilst Leslie was a young boy he noted: ‘I threw the whole bloody lot out. I couldn’t get away [from his Jewish identity] quick enough!’ He became ‘completely besotted’ by communism in the 1930s, making regular visits to the Clarion Café (opened on Manchester’s Market Street in 1908 by Clarion editor, Robert Blatchford) to hear socialist and communist speakers and longer trips to Germany (1931) and the Soviet Union (1934). When he saw a newspaper advert for the Medical Aid Committee, Leslie ‘hared off to London’ to volunteer, where his ability to drive, together with lies about having medical expertise and an ability to speak Spanish, expedited his application. Importantly, this was not part of any long-term plan for Leslie. He commented: ‘I wasn’t bothered about the future, a career or anything’.39 Similarly, Charles Bloom (b. 1902, Shoreditch to Russian and French Jewish parents) found his route into the International Brigade to be equally straightforward. In his case, his service in World War One (he had lied about his age to enter the Navy Reserve and ended the war with the Royal Artillery Garrison) ensured his application to CPGB organizers went through unhindered. Charles joined up with the International Brigade in December 1936, and later served as a political commissar and runner for the British Battalion before being injured at Jarama in February 1937, after which he worked as a clerk in La Pasionaria Hospital in Murcia. Charles claimed that his decision to volunteer for Spain was driven by ‘political reasoning’ and his ‘international approach’.40

For these Jews, anti-Fascism was a logical outcome of their support for communist ideology and organisations, itself a result of their own drift away from their Jewishness in their childhood, adolescence or early adulthood. Communism acted, as William Rubinstein has noted, as a ‘secular
substitute’ for a ‘faith lost or never possessed’. Likewise, Alfred Sherman (b. 1911, Hackney to Russian parents) - himself a CPGB stalwart, Spain volunteer in the 1930s and subsequently a journalist and political advisor to Margaret Thatcher - wrote many years later that communism gave the ‘de-Judaised Jew, or partially de-Judaised Jew, an identity’. Once the rise of Fascism nationally and internationally during the 1930s brought the political atmosphere into sharp relief, these Jews’ move away from their identities and their development of deep interests in radical ideology led them to the decision to take action. The strength of their own political convictions meant that they needed little persuading of the need to act, whilst strong prior connections of many to the communist movement – which led organized domestic and international anti-Fascist efforts – resulted in them often being amongst the very first to act. Their anti-Fascism mirrored that of non-Jewish anti-Fascists, seeing standing up to Mosley and/or Franco as a just political response to a contemporary crisis, with any sense of an ethnic angle imperceptible or on the extreme fringes of their thinking.

Although his conclusion was that the Jewishness of Jewish – especially Western - volunteers in Spain was of only marginal importance overall, Prago still believed that a ‘driving force of Jewish consciousness’ was perceptible in parts of the International Brigade. He used the existence of the Botwin Company (a largely Polish Jewish unit formed in 1937), as well as the reminiscences of a number of American volunteers (such as the New York-born Rubin Schecter, who claimed he went to Spain as he ‘wanted to fight back against Hitlerism’) to evidence that there were clearly ‘additional, compelling reasons’ for Jews in particular to take up arms against Franco’s Nationalists. Indeed, given that the anti-Jewish rhetoric of Spanish Fascist leaders was both prominent and widely reported internationally, Prago admitted that it was natural that that some Jewish individuals conscious of their identity and heritage would want to act. Significantly, the actions of these volunteers took on a greater degree of importance in the post-Holocaust environment in which Prago was writing:

The International Brigade became the vehicle through which Jews could offer the first organised armed resistance to European Fascism. Their combatant role in Spain proved that they could fight well and that
as early as 1936 they were actively resisting Fascism. Not all went passively to the concentration camps and crematoria. Later historians were even clearer in their interpretation of Jewish anti-Fascism as an ethnic reaction. Ten years after Prago’s analysis, German Historian and Holocaust survivor Arno Lustiger published his ground-breaking *Schalom Libertad!* largely focused on uncovering the life histories of Central European volunteers in Spain. Lustiger later made it clear that his work was borne from a drive in the 1980s in Germany to examine ‘Jewish resistance’ against Nazism more deeply, in order to correct the ‘convenient picture of a passive Jewry in the face of persecution and extermination’. Lustiger’s argument was simple. The Jewish volunteers (his estimate was 6000) who fought in Spain were, first and foremost, ‘anti-Nazi activists’, ethnic individuals repelled by the Fascism, racism and antisemitism of Hitler and other ‘mini-Hitlers’ across Europe. He highlighted that many Jewish volunteers had strong connections to their faith and their communities and were deeply involved in Jewish communal life, both before and after their service. These identifying and practising Jews, he argued, were angered by the reports of Spanish Fascist anti-Jewishness and thus leapt to the defence of the Republic, fearing the ramifications of a Franco victory for Jews in Iberia and, ultimately, Europe.

Importantly, the notion of an ‘ethnic reaction’ actually pre-dated Lustiger’s analysis. In Britain, a growing sense that the ethnic identity and connections of Jewish anti-Fascists was an important motivating factor grew from the late 1970s, as new scholarly analyses of British Jewry’s social and political history began to demonstrate the scale of British Jews’ efforts to oppose Mosley and Franco. In her pioneering *Political Anti-Semitism in England*, published in 1978, Gisela Lebzelter argued that the anti-Fascist efforts of the Communist Party Great Britain attracted two kinds of Jews, in two phases. The highly politicized, often highly secularized, Jew who had likely joined the communist movement before the BUF’s creation in 1931, and the ‘politically uncommitted’ Jew, who joined in increasing numbers after 1934 as Mosley’s rhetoric became increasingly antisemitic in tone and content. This second group, Lebzelter argued, were attracted by CPGB propaganda aimed at trying to ‘mobilise Jewish sympathies’, were aggrieved at the apparent lack of action being taken by communal leaders.
and thus saw the far-left as the only viable means of developing a ‘far more successful opposition against Fascist anti-Semitism’.  

Subsequent historians specifically interested in tracing British Jewish anti-Fascism were helped by the growing availability from this period onwards of oral history and life history material emanating from the generation from which most British Jewish volunteers emerged. Increasingly, the conclusion was reached that the move to oppose the far-right both inside and outside of Britain was a conscious decision by Jews, mindful of their identity, working to improve the situation for their community. For example, Sharon Gewirtz’s analysis of anti-Fascism undertaken in Manchester by the city’s Jewish working classes in the 1930s determined that ‘Jews fought back against their victimisation at the hands of Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists’. Specific academic interest in events like the Battle of Cable Street also grew at this time, leading to special events such as a ‘Witness Seminar’ convened at the Institute for Historical Research in 1991. The testimony of the Jewish activists present led the historian David Cesarani to conclude that they had been driven by the perceived need to act in their own self-defence as they felt ‘victimised’ by the Blackshirts and were seemingly well aware of anti-Jewish developments in various European regimes. 

In subsequent years, the notion that Jews acted because they were Jews and because of their Jewishness has effectively become the accepted view of anti-Fascism taken by the community in Britain during this decade. This can be seen both in terms of academic work focusing specifically on the Jewish community and within broader analyses of British anti-Fascism. The same is also true for histories of British volunteering in the Spanish Civil War, which also gradually came to the general conclusion that Jewish volunteers must have been influenced by their ethnic identity. Initially, the concessions to this line of argument were small and not altogether prominent. As early as 1982, for example, Bill Alexander conceded it was ‘understandable’ that a large number of Jews chose to serve in Spain, given the ‘background of Nazi atrocities against the Jewish people and of street battles in London as Mosley tried to spread Fascism’. Likewise, Tom Buchanan noted that some ‘left-wing Jews’ were ‘particularly keen to oppose a Fascist military rebellion that revived memories of Spain’s expulsion of the Jews in 1492’, whereas in his Unlikely Warriors, Richard Baxall concluded that as Jews were ‘particular targets’
of Fascism in Britain it was inevitable that they were ‘quick to see parallels’ between Mosley, Hitler and Franco and were driven to head to Spain. Recent work focusing specifically on British Jewish volunteers, however, highlighted the importance of the ‘ethnic reaction’ argument. Paul Bagon, for instance, claimed that Fascist antisemitism nationally and internationally created a ‘distinct Jewish motivation’ to serve in Spain, whereas Martin Sugarman noted that as well as many Jews who were ‘totally imbued with communist ideals’ there were also British Jewish servicemen who ‘went as Jews and anti-Fascists’ and ‘linked the fight against the Fascists with the fight against antisemitism’.

[Figu**ere 4 HERE]

*Figure 4 - Activists manning barricades during the 'Battle of Cable Street', October 1936. Source: Bishopgate Library.*

Within the recollections of a large number of active anti-Fascists in this period, there is considerable evidence that their actions were driven by a broader concern for the wellbeing of fellow Jews, both nationally and internationally. In terms of the internal threat posed by Mosley, a variety of strategies developed. Some, for instance, simply supported efforts of bodies and organisations to which they were already affiliated. For example, in his work as an official in the United Ladies’ Tailors Trade Union in London, Mick Mindel (b. 1909, Stepney, Lithuanian parents) was a vocal advocate of action against Mosley and his belief that unionisation was the most effective way to protect Jewish workers. In the lead up to Cable Street in 1936, however, he worked hard to drum up support among the Union and East End locals for the counter-demonstration, and in an interview with the *Guardian* on the day itself noted ‘this shows if we stand united we can beat anybody’. Likewise, Israel Scheef (b. 1912, Stepney to Lithuanian parents) and Albert Booth (b. 1912, Hackney, Ukrainian/Lithuanian parents) also became ‘extremely active in the anti-Fascist movement’ during the 1930s, disrupting Fascist meetings and organising anti-Fascist marches in the East End involving communist groups, the Labour Party and trade unions. Whilst Booth was a committed Labour Party member (the Party supported his family whilst Albert served three months in Wormwood Scrubs in 1936 for assaulting a police officer at Cable Street), Scheef did not see his anti-Fascist work as part of any particular political movement. Whilst he regularly joined protests organized by the CPGB, he ‘was never a communist’ and explained his actions
were driven out of a growing concern for the position of Jews in Britain, fuelled by increasing knowledge of the deterioration of the position of Jews in Germany.  

Others simply took it upon themselves to find more straightforward ways of fighting back against Fascist antisemitism. Maurice Franklin (b. 1920, Shoreditch to Romanian immigrants) recalled a relatively peaceful, orthodox Jewish childhood in a ‘mixed area’, but as soon as the Fascists began to ‘stir up animosity’ during his adolescence he ‘felt compelled to act’. In October 1936 he found himself manning barricades at Cable Street and scuffling with Fascist supporters, recalling later that ‘I was there at the time supporting the Jewish people against the march’. Similarly, for a twelve-year-old Joyce Goodman (b. 1924, Stepney) it was hearing Fascist speakers at street corner meetings that made her want to ‘be part of the human wall’ at the planned counter-demonstration: ‘If you were a Jewish kid and you stood there listening to them [Fascist speakers] belting out their message of hate you learned to hate back, because you heard of all the attacks in the East End’. Others like Ubby Cowan (b. 1917, Stepney to Austrian/Polish immigrants) were spurred to undertake anti-Fascist work after witnessing Blackshirt attacks on Jewish friends, spreading his efforts across multiple fronts, including disrupting Fascist meetings, collecting for Aid for Spain and working with immigrant, union and political groups to organize elements of the Cable Street counter-protest. Other anti-Fascist work was more sporadic and ad-hoc. Leonard Sannitt (b. 1920, Stepney to Polish parents), for instance, was angered by Fascist attempts to ‘deliberately incite and frighten the Jewish community’ and worked in gangs of Jewish boys to interrupt Fascist meetings. Likewise, Morris Beckman (b. 1921, Hackney, Polish parents) recalled groups of young Jews who would ‘stalk the roaming gangs of Blackshirts’ to protect Jews or retaliate against attacks on Jews or Jewish property. In Stepney, the so-called ‘Blue and White Club’ (with around 40-50 Jewish members) briefly existed at this time for such purposes, encouraging members and attendees at meetings to ‘be prepared for self-defence’ and to possibly even carry weapons. Similarly, young Jews in Leeds in the 1930s recalled how there were many vigilante groups of ‘tough [Jewish] lads who liked fighting the Fascists’.  

Seemingly though, those Jews who wanted to find organized means of engaging in anti-Fascist work ‘naturally gravitated’ towards the political far-left. Fascism, in effect, pushed a large number of Jews
previously unaffiliated or uninterested into the British communist movement because - as stated by the Jewish Chronicle - of a ‘desperate belief’ held by many that their anti-Fascist efforts ‘was their only form of self-defence’. According to Lebзelter, for these ‘politically uncommitted Jews’ their ‘identification with the radical left was only temporary, defined in negative terms as an alliance against Fascism’. More recent scholarship has labelled such individuals as ‘Jewish Communists’, reflecting that they were often ‘Jews before they were Communists’ and/or that many made the purely pragmatic decision to join the communist movement because it offered opportunities (like through its anti-Fascist work and efforts) to further and protect Jewish interests.

Jack Shaw (b. 1917, Stepney to Russian immigrants), for instance, fits this description. He recalled that he ‘joined the YCL because that was the only organisation fighting Fascism’ and later went on to work disrupting Fascist meetings, being and was falsely imprisoned after Cable Street for attacking a Police officer. Likewise, Tony Gilbert (b. 1914, Stepney) joined the CPGB in 1936 after hearing Blackshirts shouting antisemitic taunts at a CPGB speaker in Victoria Park Square:

The speaker shouted ‘Who’s prepared to join the Communist Party?’ And I raised my hand, more in opposition to the shouting of the Fascists to any conviction that I should become a communist. I was reactionary… I did join without any conviction as to the theory, philosophy of communism… It was a reaction to an incident to which I was part.

Tony - who said ‘I saw myself as a target being a Jew’ - went on to demonstrate at Cable Street and recalled seeing young Jews tipping over trams at Aldgate to use as road blocks: ‘I was seeing the power of people being able to stop something that was hateful to them’.

Similar moves were happening outside of the capital. In his native North-East, David Goodman (b. 1915, Middlesbrough) joined his local YCL and CPGB branches in his early twenties because he was ‘very conscious of Hitlerism and antisemitism’ and shocked by ‘the humiliation and degradation of the Jewish communities and the confiscation of their property, so you had this feeling of kinship with the victims of Hitler in Germany’. In Manchester, Jews interested in fighting the Blackshirts often flocked to the local YCL branch and/or its affiliated social club, the Challenge Club, which were both
located in the same premises in the heart of the Jewish quarter on Elizabeth Street, a building which effectively became the nerve centre of anti-Fascist work in the city.\(^7\) Joe Garman (b. 1916, Manchester to Russian immigrants) recalled how he and fellow members were involved with breaking up Fascist meetings, distributing anti-Fascist propaganda and attacking Fascist speakers (‘I am a man of peace, but I had no qualms about putting my boot in’).\(^7\) Another member, Josh Davidson (b. 1914, Salford, Russian parents) remembered how he ‘wasn’t interested in politics at all until the rise of Hitler and… Mosley’, noting that the Challenge Club ‘recruited… mainly on the basis of anti-Fascism, not on the basis of communism or socialism’\(^7\). Nonetheless, members soon became aware of the risks involved with standing up to the Blackshirts. As Bella, Esther, Freda, Lily and Rose Clyne (all born in Manchester between 1911 and 1924 to Russian parents) recalled, as well as fighting the Fascists they also had to contend with a seemingly far from sympathetic local police force. At one BUF meeting held at Chorlton Town Hall in 1935 eight Jewish members of the Challenge Club were thrown out, with the men amongst them attacked by Blackshirt ‘heavies’ brandishing knuckle-dusters, all whilst the Police detailed to maintain order at the meeting looked on. Freda noted that: ‘[the Police] knew we were Jewish… they all looked at each other when we came in and sat down’\(^7\).

There were, of course, many Jews willing to risk even more by continuing their anti-Fascism internationally. As with politically committed Jews who went to Spain, volunteering for service in the Civil War for those less ideologically inclined was more often than not a continuation of efforts opposing the far-right in Britain, and often within the ranks of the communist movement. As has been noted, there was a ‘natural progression’ for British Jews who served in support of the Republican cause, starting with them joining the communists, then to anti-Fascism in Britain, then to anti-Fascism in Spain.\(^7\) Amongst this group, many saw their efforts and sacrifices as ethnic reactions, driven by desires to work against Fascism to protect themselves and their community. Jack Shaw, for example, enlisted for service in Spain as soon as possible after his release from prison in 1937, and went on to act as a runner for the IB. He remembered Fascist verbal and physical attacks on Jews living near him and that ‘this Fascism business annoyed me and Hitler was on the march’.\(^7\) Similarly, Louis Kenton (b. 1912, Stepney, Russian parents) joined the CPGB in the early 1930s and was present at the Albert Hall,
Olympia (both 1934) and Cable Street (1936) counter-demonstrations, noting he had been driven to act because of Fascist attacks on Jewish friends in the East End. Before membership of the communists he said he ‘hadn’t taken any interest at all in Spain or Spanish politics’, but soon came to believe that the Spanish were ‘the first people to fight back… and this made us want to go and help’. He departed soon after Cable Street in 1936 and worked as an ambulance driver and hospital assistant with the IB until 1938, when he returned to Britain to spearhead fundraising for more medical assistance.79

For sure, in the minds of these anti-Fascists the fight in Spain was just the next step in trying to halt the advance of Fascism internationally and thus vital in protecting Jewish communities. This can be seen with the example of Tony Gilbert, who attended an Aid for Spain rally, an interview at Litchfield Street (the effective HQ of the International Brigade within Britain) and departed for Spain all in one week in December 1936, going on to serve with the British Battalion until 1938, when he became a Nationalist POW. He said he was ‘very pleased’ he had been able to go so quickly and saw the defeat of Fascism as important for his own identity and his community: ‘I was born of Jewish parents and the Fascist ideology was designed to make the Jew the enemy’.80 Likewise, Frank Lesser (b. 1916, Hackney to Polish parents) noted that Fascist verbal and physical attacks on his community ‘affected me directly’ and that ‘I realised that antisemitism at that time was a virulent force’. He remembered how some older Jews believed the far-left to be a greater danger to their children than Fascism, but that he ‘adopted the view that Jews needed to act in their self-defence’.81 Although present at Cable Street in 1936, Frank had to wait until he was 21 in Summer 1937 to enlist for Spain, where he served as an officer until October 1938. Frank remembered that he had doubts beforehand about his decision, but came home from Spain convinced he had made the right choice:

I said [to a CPGB officer in 1937] I think I really ought to go to find out if what I’m thinking and doing is right. To test it in some way… I came out of the experience with the idea that my views were right. Those that I recognised as enemies, and in the first place, Fascism, were only my enemies personally but also the enemies of working people, of democracy and that fight had to be fought until it was won.82
Evidently, there were a large number of British Jews who became deeply involved in anti-Fascist work and service because of the deteriorating position for Jews, in Britain, first and foremost, and then internationally, once the conflict in Spain grew in significance. Care must be exercised, however, in presuming that ‘ethnic reactions’ like these resulted from strongly or long-held connections to an individual’s Jewish identity and heritage. In his 2017 work *Jewish Volunteers*, Gerben Zaagsma posited that the importance of Jewishness for Continental European volunteers in Spain had been often viewed too simplistically, with a tendency to presume an ethnic ‘motivation… underpinning their participation’. The actions of Jewish volunteers, Zaagsma argued, have been too often been consciously highlighted to counter the myth of Jewish passivity in the 1930s and 1940s against the Fascist threat, to the detriment of probing and understanding the stories of individual volunteers more deeply. He concluded that greater subtlety in approach and analysis was needed, and that ‘the phrase “Jewish volunteers” is useful to denote descent but cannot be used to describe a specific category of volunteers who went to fight… with a specific Jewish motivation or consciousness’.

Indeed, this is also true with regards British Jewish anti-Fascism in the 1930s. Whilst there were people of Jewish heritage whose actions was driven largely by secular or ethnic political agendas, there were also many whose identity was more complex and for whom this existing interpretative dichotomy is not particularly relevant. What can actually be seen in the British example are instances where Jews losing their Jewishness (becoming ‘estranged’ from their peers, heritage and community, in contemporary parlance) were reminded of their difference by the threat of Fascism. Resultantly, they felt sufficiently re-engaged in terms of their ethnic identity that they determined to undertake self-defence work that would previously have been unthinkable. Such an idea was actually first mooted in 1937 by the American Jewish journalist William Zuckerman in his volume entitled *The Jew in Revolt*, which aimed to assess the overall cultural, social and spiritual position of modern Jewry, particularly the British Jewish community. For most of the interwar period Zuckerman had been resident in London and was thus well placed to see the changing nature of Jewish identity amongst the second generation, as well as communal debates (the so-called ‘condition of youth’ question) and fears surrounding this and the effect of European and British Fascism on conceptions of Jewishness. He concluded that Fascism was
actually having a counterproductive effect, in the sense that it was pushing many Jews who had previously been pursuing integration in a – up to that time – largely tolerant Western culture back into the communal fold: ‘Even those who never thought of the Jewish problem, and of engaging in the defence of Jews, have now been forced by Fascism to make the end of anti-Semitism one of their first objectives’. 86

Although analyses of British Jewish anti-Fascism have generally not strayed from the arguments that either strongly-held political or ethnic convictions explain Jewish actions, there have been sporadic acknowledgments that motivations could be less clear cut, more fluid and more volatile in response to wider circumstances. Lebzelter, for example, argued that the radical left’s anti-Fascism was particularly popular as it allowed increasingly ‘class conscious’ Jews to channel their growing anger at Fascist antisemitism and their desire to work against it within an accessible environment that had a clear ‘coherent ideology’. The communist movement proved welcoming of Jews, of whatever level of Jewish attachment, at this time because it sought as broad support as possible for its campaigns and minority group involvement helped give its anti-Fascist efforts an ethnic, as well as political, legitimacy. Thus, Lebzelter concluded that ‘anti-Semitic agitation briefly retarded the process of disintegration and revitalized the Jew consciousness amongst the assimilated sections of the community’. 87 Later analyses hinted that Fascism had a transformative effect in terms of the identity of some within the younger generation. Cesarani, for instance, noted that as the ‘Fascists “turned up the heat”… old identities dissolved and new ones formed’. 88 Likewise, Tilles acknowledged that Fascism was a ‘powerful reminder’ to Jews of both their continued lack of acceptance by some in the majority community and their identity and heritage as ethnic minorities. The antisemitism of the British far-right at this time drew ‘disparate elements’ of the community together, ‘encouraged reflection by Jews on their position within British society’ and evidently stirred up emotions and connections that many young Jews had been working to forget in a quest for integration into the British mainstream. 89

In effect, what these scholars are referring to is a process identified to have taken place amongst second generation immigrants in the United States, labelled ‘reactive ethnicity’. This theory was propounded by sociologists Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut in their Immigrant America, published in 1996,
and expanded on in further volumes and articles. It posits that whilst assimilation may be one answer to social, cultural, political and/or economic disadvantage or discrimination for ethnic groups, there is also sometimes a ‘rise and reaffirmation of ethnic solidarity and self-consciousness’ and ‘heightening of group consciousness… [and] political mobilisation’ as a response to such unwelcoming and hostile situations.⁹⁰ In terms of British Jewish anti-Fascism both inside and outside of the UK in the 1930s, this theory is particularly useful. It helps identify and categorize a group of increasingly integrated and secularized individuals for whom the threat of Fascist antisemitism made them reconsider their identity, turn to various forms of political activism to protect themselves and their Jewish peers and, ultimately, reconnect with their culture, heritage and community.

Indeed, it is clear that Fascism - especially Fascist antisemitism - in the 1930s had the effect of leading to a ‘rise and reaffirmation of ethnic solidarity and self-consciousness’ among many British Jews seemingly previously set on a path towards assimilation. The threat posed by far-right hostility towards Jews made those drifting away from their community and identity rethink their position and intentions, in almost epiphany-like moments, energising them to mobilize against the Fascist threat. This is visible amongst British Jewish anti-Fascists active within Britain and also in terms of service in Spain. On the former, it is possible to point to individuals such as Martin Bobker (b. 1912, Manchester to Austrian/Russian parents), who moved away from his religious identity from his teens onwards, whilst at the same time developing an interest, encouraged by his older brothers, in communism. Yet, Martin noted that when Hitler came to power in 1933 ‘I realised then that things were serious’ and joined the local CPGB and YCL in order to engage in anti-Fascist work.⁹¹ Likewise, fellow Mancunian Aubrey Lewis (b. 1918) joined the CPGB in his teens due to the ‘acute economic difficulty’ he faced during his childhood and his belief that the communist idea of a ‘planned togetherness where people’s happiness and prosperity should be the primary concern’. However, once the Blackshirts began using Jews as a ‘scapegoat’ and Aubrey began witnessing antisemitic verbal and physical attacks he resolved to fight back:

The issues were so clear… In fighting them [the Blackshirts] you were not only defending their chosen target, your own people – because when they shouted “Get Rid of the Yids” it was you they were talking
about. So you were fighting the class enemy, its mailed fist, and you were the target so you were defending yourself as a Jew.  

For Jews like these, Fascist antisemitism proved an important factor in reminding Jews of a heritage, community and identity from which they were becoming increasingly distant. In London, Solly Kaye (b. 1913, Camden, Lithuanian parents) was born and raised in a secular household and by his teens ‘had left religion behind’ altogether. He noted, however, that the ‘militant antisemitism’ of the BUF meant he ‘became interested in politics because I wanted to know what we could do about this Hitler business’. After joining the Hackney CPGB in 1934, Solly embarked on an energetic and wide-ranging personal anti-Fascist mission, *inter alia*, chalking pavements, leafleting, selling the *Daily Worker*, speaking at anti-Fascist events, helping resettle refugee children from the Spanish Civil War and involving himself in numerous counter-demonstrations (including Cable Street), being arrested on numerous occasions after clashes with police and Blackshirts.

For individuals born into Jewish families but whom quickly progressed onto a path of social and religious estrangement, Fascist antisemitism acted as a startling, painful and poignant reminder of their heritage. This is apparent in the memoirs of Cable Street veteran Maurice Levinson (b. 1911, Russia, emigrated to Britain aged seven) where he recalled his Jewish workmate, friend and fellow anti-Fascist Hirsch, who had been subjected to eye-opening verbal attacks by the Blackshirts after walking by a meeting on Bethnal Green Road. Levinson recalled how Hirsh stated that the event had an important emotional impact:

> Although I was born a Jew I’ve never actually been conscious of actually being one. Even now I bow to no God and believe that religion is a stupid superstition. And now a strange thing has happened. Anti-Semitism has made me conscious of my racial attachment and for the first time I became aware of the fact that I belong to a religious group. That is the paradox of attempting to extinguish a belief; it only enflames the loyalty of its adherents.

Similar feelings and trends are evident amongst those who went on to serve in Spain, with Fascist antisemitism acting as a powerful reminder of their ethnic heritage and motivator in terms of ‘defence’ work. Max Colin (b. 1912, Hackney to Russian parents) recalled a secular upbringing in an ardently
socialist household. Max, however, had little political interests as an adolescent, recalling his decision to join Hackney YCL in his teens instead being driven by wanting access to their sporting and leisure programme. Yet, in 1934 he was encouraged by fellow YCL members to go to the BUF rally at Kensington Olympia (even though he ‘hadn’t a clue politically what it was all about’) and found himself shocked by the antisemitism he witnessed, not just from the Blackshirts, but also from policemen and non-Jewish workmates who he encountered on the way into the venue. This all forced him into paying more attention to the anti-Fascist work of the YCL (‘it began to make sense, you see’) and eventually led him to Spain in December 1936, a decision spurred by increasing knowledge of the ‘atrocious and heartbreaking’ situation for Jews in Europe: ‘I’d read Mein Kampf, you see… [and] these factors came together and that was the time I decided to join the International Brigades’.  

Likewise, Sam Russell (b. 1915, Stepney as Menassah Lesser to Polish parents) recalled a similarly enlightening moment which led him to take the decision to serve in Spain. Although raised in an orthodox household and experiencing antisemitism at school, Sam ‘became a bit of a Bolshie’ by early adulthood after joining the CPGB whilst an Egyptology student at University College, London, where he had become deeply interested in Marxist theory and had mixed with communist students. His training with the Officer Training Corps whilst at UCL, together with his political interests, made him the perfect volunteer for Spain and he was encouraged by the highest echelons of London CPGB leadership to serve. However, Sam – who left for Spain amongst the first London contingent in October 1936 and served as a machine gunner – later recalled that as well as being politically convinced at this time about the need to help the Spanish, he also had more personal reasons that had developed that acted as short-term spurs. He recalled that he had increasingly noticed that Mosley’s rhetoric was becoming anti-Jewish, whilst in 1936 he was also shocked when a number of fellow students began attending classes in black outfits. He said: ‘Coming from a Jewish family myself, I was suddenly alerted to what was going – and now it wasn’t something that was solely happening in Germany. It was happening here on our own doorstep’.  


For these Jews, and likely countless others whose life histories have not been preserved, Fascist antisemitism acted as a powerful reminder of an identity and communal connection being lost. Whilst many were evidently very politically motivated and were perhaps close to becoming ‘non-Jewish Jews’, the shock of the realisation of the effects, scale and potential ramifications of Fascist growth in the 1930s spurred them into reactions driven by a renewed sense of their ethnic heritage. They, therefore, do not fit neatly into either existing means of understanding Jewish anti-Fascism in this period and demonstrate the usefulness of the concept of ‘reactive ethnicity’ in explaining how and why ethnic minorities respond to those individuals, organisations and movements that wish ill upon them.

There was, in effect, a certain fluidity of identity and motivation as regards Jewish anti-Fascism that has not been adequately captured by prior histories; a changeability that meant that individuals did not always act in the manner which their actions and self-conceptions up to that point would suggest they would. Although generally utilized to help understand the nature of post-1945 American society, the notion of ‘reactive ethnicity’, therefore, can prove useful in different national, social, cultural, political and ethnic environments. In this case study it is valuable in demonstrating that the decisions taken by individuals of ethnic minority background when faced with hostility can be much more complicated and nuanced than may initially seem apparent. It would, for instance, be easy to presume that Jews would be naturally driven to act against an antisemitic threat, or that those with deep, far-leftist political inclinations would inevitably rally against a movement from the opposite end of the political spectrum that appeared to make significant strides to popular support or seats of power. Indeed, many British Jewish individuals with strong ethnic or political convictions acted with little hesitation in terms of anti-Fascism in the 1930s, believing their own efforts to be crucial in the ethnic or political struggle with which they had long identified. However, it is also true that the external threat posed by Fascism made some individuals think deeply about who they were, where they belonged and who they wanted to be, rekindling connections to identities previously being lost.

Given that all this was occurring at a time when the British Jewish communal establishment was racked with doubts over the seeming ‘estrangement’ of younger Jews, it is important to note that the Fascist threat had certain positive local outcomes in terms of ethnic identity. It may have made many deeply
politically inclined ‘non-Jewish Jews’ even surer of their ideological convictions, but it also further cemented the connection of Jews – whether they had remained firmly within the fold, or, indeed, had been drifting from it – to their Jewishness and their community. As William Zuckerman noted at the time, one unintended consequence of Fascist scapegoating of the Jewish minority in both Britain and in Europe was that it solidified Jewish identity, whilst also making many previously uncommitted Jews realize the significance of their ethnic heritage. There were young Britons of Jewish persuasion who, in a relatively short space of time, went from seemingly caring little about their Jewishness, to suddenly feeling a renewed connection to their heritage and then being driven to stand – often next to fellow Jews - on the barricades at Cable Street and/or in the Iberian trenches.

The reason why these Jews have been hidden within previous analyses is due to a tendency to read Jewish anti-Fascism in terms of broader political or ethnic narratives first, paying attention to the individual and their actions and motivations second; actions and motivations which perhaps do not always comfortably sit within existing interpretations. The existing body of academic work has shown that bravery and altruism was present amongst the British Jewish anti-Fascist contingent at this time, and that this group clearly did a great deal both nationally and internationally to try and halt a far-right advance across Europe. This article – which delves more deeply into the experiences of British Jewish anti-Fascists in the 1930s than any previous analysis – confirms such conclusions. Where it deviates, however, is in the belief that not all British Jewish anti-Fascism was driven purely by straightforward political or ethnic reactions. By examining the experiences and ‘life histories’ of these individuals on their own terms, and employing the theory of ‘reactive ethnicity’ to a historical case study, we find new ways and means of understanding the personal and communal effects of the rise of British and European Fascism in the 1930s and the broad reaction developed to this by large numbers of people of Jewish heritage.


3 P. Lennon, ‘The East Ender: Joe Garber’, *Guardian*, 10 Nov. 2000. Garber served a machine gunner and was shot and seriously injured on two occasions. IWM, 12291, Interview with Joe Garber.


5 Bagon, ‘Anglo-Jewry’, 34.


17 M. Bosworth, “"Let me tell you…” Memory and the Practice of Oral History’ in *Memory*, 22, 31.

18 Cohen was injured in November 1936 and invalided out. Masters was killed at Brunete in July 1937. Rust, *Britons*, 12, 20-21.


20 Alexander, *British*, 36


22 Fred Copeman’s 1948 recollections about his own service, entitled *Reason in Revolt* (London, 1948) are also notable for omitting discussing the Jewishness or Jewish heritage of any fellow British volunteers.


30 He recalled ‘[We were sent] behind the fascist line… but in the process of doing so the law of averages was that certain problems were going to be solved, namely the elimination of people who were politically active’. Marcovitch survived the war and later served during WW2. Manchester History Archive [hereafter MHA], 182, Interview with Alec Marcovitch.


36 Quoted in Corkhill and Rawnsley, *Road*, 5.

37 IWM, 14575, Interview with Julius ‘Jud’ Colman.

38 B. Barry, *From Manchester to Spain* (Manchester, 2009), 16-18.


40 IWM, 992, Interview with Charles Bloom.

Quoted in Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists*, 186.


For example, Fascist General Gonzalo Quipe de Llano’s regular radio broadcasts contained antisemitic sentiment. In October 1936 he claimed that ‘Our war is not a Spanish Civil War, it is a war of Western civilisation against the Jews of the entire world. The Jews want to destroy the Christians who, according to them, “came from the Devil”. Quoted in Prago, ‘Jews (1)’, 15. The speech was widely reported in Jewish communities. See, for instance, *Jewish Chronicle*, 2 Oct. 1936.

Prago, ‘Jews (1)’, 16.


Lustiger, ‘German’, 303.


Quoted in P. Catterall, ‘The Battle of Cable Street: Witness Seminar’, *Contemporary Record*, 1, 1994, 124. Cesarani maintained this argument and view in most of his later work on this period. For instance, in 1996 he noted ‘when faced with anti-Jewish prejudice and organised anti-Semitism, young British-

53 Daniel Tilles focuses mainly on communal leaders and organisations, but nonetheless notes that ‘Britain’s Jews reacted to the emergence… of an explicitly antisemitism political party’ with a range of ‘Jewish defence activity’. Tilles, British, 2, 12. Nigel Copsey states that Jewish anti-Fascists in Britain ‘were undoubtedly influenced by Jewish persecutions in Germany’. Copsey, Anti-Fascism, 14.

54 Alexander, British, 36.


57 Quoted in J. Freedland, Jacob’s Gift (London, 2006), 120–125.

58 Jewish Museum, London [hereafter JML], 99, Interview with Albert Booth; JML, 490, Interview with Israel Scheef.

59 IWM, 27797, Interview with Maurice Franklin.

60 Quoted in Catterall, ‘The Battle’, 127.

61 JML, 381, Interview with Ubby Cowan.


63 Beckman, The Hackney, 104, 157-158. Beckman was involved in more organized and direct anti-Fascist work after the Second World War, when new Fascist groups began to emerge in the capital. Beckman, The 43 Group.

64 IWM, 9157, Interview with Tony Gilbert


66 IWM, 33028, Interview with Louis Kenton.


68 Lebzelter, Political, 157-158.

69 E. Smith, ‘East End Jews in Politics, 1918-1939; A study in class and ethnicity’, University of Leicester Ph.D. thesis (1990), 221. See, also, S. Cullen, “’Jewish Communists’ or “Communist Jews”’?

70 IWM, 13547, Interview with Jack Shaw.

71 IWM, 9157, Interview with Tony Gilbert.

72 IWM, 16621, Interview with David Goodman; Quoted in Corkhill and Rawnsley, *Road*, 95.

73 Gewirtz, ‘Anti-Fascist’, 23. See also, IWM, 14575, Interview with Julius Coleman.

74 Manchester Jewish Museum [hereafter MJM], J89, Interview with Joe Garman.

75 Quoted in Corkhill and Rawnsley, *Road*, 157-161.

76 MJM, J61, Interview with the Clyne sisters.


78 IWM, 13547, Interview with Jack Shaw.

79 IWM, 33028, Interview with Louis Kenton.

80 IWM, 9157, Interview with Tony Gilbert.

81 Indeed, many immigrant parents were shocked and angered by their children’s move into the communist ranks, seeing this as a danger to their own and their family’s wellbeing. See Dee, *The ‘Estranged’*, 224-226.

82 IWM, 9408, Interview with Frank Lesser.

83 Zaagsma noted that both Lustiger and Prago had admitted that their work was directly influenced by a desire to bring the efforts of Jewish volunteers to as wide a public attention as possible. Zaagsma, *Jewish*, 156-157.


85 See Dee, *The ‘Estranged’*.


88 Cesarani, ‘Foreword’, viii-xi.

89 Tilles, *British*, 12, 192.

91 MJM, J43, Interview with Martin Bobker.


93 Solly remarked that he was Barmitzvah aged 13, but ‘didn’t understand a word that I’d read’ during his coming of age ceremony. IWM, 9479, Interview with Solly Kaye.

94 IWM, 9479, Interview with Solly Kaye.


96 IWM, 30603; 8639, Interview with Max Colin. Max went on to serve as an Ambulance Driver up to 1938.

97 IWM, 9484, Interview with Sam Lesser; Quoted in M. Arthur, *The Real Band of Brothers* (London, 2009), 210-212.