
Fighting for What?:

Why Jewish Palestinian Volunteers Made Their Way to Spain

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INTRODUCTION

The Spanish Civil War (1936 – 1939) saw the arrival of tens of thousands of volunteers from around the world to fight in its battles. Many of these came to join the International Brigades (IB) to fight alongside the Spanish Republic in its efforts against the Nationalists led by General Francisco Franco. The IB boasted volunteers from fifty-three nations in its ranks presenting a unified front against the threat of fascism. Among those volunteers was a sizeable group from Palestine, most of whom were members of the Palestinian Communist Party (פאלעסטינישע קומוניסטישע פארטיי, *Palestinische Kommunistische Partei*, abbreviated PKP in Yiddish and *الحزب الشيوعي الفلسطيني* in Arabic: Henceforth referred to as PCP). The actual number of Palestinian volunteers is still disputed; some reports from Communist veterans claim a figure as high as 500 while more recent studies suggest something between 150 and 250 volunteers¹. However, there is an aspect of this military engagement that is not disputed: that the staggering majority of those that left the Mandate to enlist were Jewish.

The natural question that proceeds from this information would be, why were so many of the Palestinian volunteers Jewish? Why was their representation in the figures so disproportionately large to the others? Nir Arielli suggests one answer to this question.

He argues that the Arab Revolt (1936–1939) was indirectly responsible for Jewish communists enlisting in the IB. The Arab Revolt was a nationalist uprising of Arabs in the British Mandate of Palestine against British colonial government and mass Jewish immigration. The revolt exacerbated a tension in the PCP with its predominantly Jewish membership. This tension increased after the Comintern appointed Radwan al-Hilu as leader of the PCP in 1934. Al-Hilu was an indigenous Palestinian Arab educated at the University for the Workers of the

¹ Nir Arielli, “Induced to Volunteer? The Predicament of Jewish Communists in Palestine and the Spanish Civil War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 4 (2011), 854–870.

East in Moscow. After the Arab Revolt started in 1936, he became increasingly focused on Arab nationalism. Al-Hilu encouraged members of the PCP to follow his shift towards Arab nationalism. Amongst other things, he encouraged party members to partake in various acts of terrorism against the government of the British Mandate and local Jewish communities. This caused discord within the party on two counts. First, it alienated the PCP from the European parties which were focused on anti-fascism. Second, and most importantly, it alienated much of the Party's Jewish membership. The Jewish membership sought to encourage a Jewish-Arab understanding rather than promoting one nationalist agenda over another.²

Arielli explains that it is very difficult to disentangle the reasons that induced the Jewish Communists to volunteer and that it is an amalgamation of various factors, including social context, a strong motivation, and a network already set up to get them there. This, however, does not seem to me to be an *entirely* satisfactory answer to the question of why they volunteered in Spain. The decision necessitated active work to get there and often came with the risk of the British government barring their return to Palestine. The historical background seems lacking without accounting for an ideology driving their decision. They could have stayed and fought for the unity of their party but instead chose to fight in Spain. That there was discord in their party does not explain why they would go through so much trouble to get to Spain unless they had a very strong political agenda for doing so. Arielli's argument lacks this crucial explanatory factor.

In addition, the idea that there was a system in place to get volunteers to Spain appears contrived. Volunteers still had to get visas to France on their own (from whence their journey to Spain truly began) and be smuggled into Spain over the closed border at the Pyrenees to join their regiments. This does not seem as clean and simplified a process as Arielli suggests, further complicating his explanatory framework.

² *Ibid.*, 864

The aforementioned concerns led to the posing of the questions which I intend to investigate and address more fully than they are currently addressed in the historiography. I will explore further the reasons that motivated Jewish Palestinian volunteers to join the IB by, first, analyzing two of the most plausible reasons for their decision and, second, positing an interpretation that more fully accounts for their decision.

The first reason posits that the volunteers' motivations were related to an active Jewish identity, as suggested by the contemporary Israeli government. Today, the volunteers in the IB are presented as heroes in the fabric of Israeli national history who joined the IB with an active Jewish identity and fought to protect their people and their country. However, it will be shown that this was not the case, and these motivations are falsely attributed to them in retrospect for various contemporary political reasons in Israel.

The second states that the motivations of Palestinian Jewish volunteers are comparable to those of other Jewish volunteers from around the world. It is typically understood that Jewish volunteers in the IB tended to come from countries where fascism already had a significant impact (notable exceptions being the USA, the UK and Canada). Their motivations for fighting against Franco included attempting to stop the further spread of these effects in Spain and the rest of the continent. Many members of the PCP were refugees from countries affected by fascism who were forced to flee, and so their reaction could easily be seen as comparable. Additionally, those members of the PCP that were born in Palestine (Sabras) had access to others' experiences with fascism and consequentially these experiences probably had an effect on the Sabras as well. Their reasons might not have been the same as those of the refugees they came in contact with, but the refugees' influence would have been felt. This account seems far

more plausible than the first, but to fully understand the motives for going to Spain requires the addition of a specific ideology: communism.

THE PALESTINIAN COMMUNIST PARTY

The vast majority of those who volunteered for the IB from Palestine were Jewish members of the PCP. Though many of those who enlisted went of their own free will, this picture is complicated by the relation between the PCP and the British authorities in Palestine as well as the Communist International (Comintern). To illustrate this, the following account of the foundation and history of the PCP is needed.

The PCP was formed in 1923 through a coalition of the two largest factions that had formed after the fall of *Miflegat Poalim Sozialistit* (MPS), the Socialist Worker's Party. Despite its Zionist roots, the party adopted an anti-Zionist stance, denouncing the movement for "serving the Jewish bourgeoisie and collaborating with British imperialism".³ Following its second congress in the summer of 1923, the PCP formally announced that "All the activities of the Zionist institutions prepare the ground for capitalist colonization at the expense of the exploited masses".⁴ The Comintern formally recognized the PCP in early 1924 as the Comintern section in Palestine. However, the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) stressed the importance of its transformation "from an organization of Jewish workers into a truly territorial party" and outlined its task as one of support for the Arabs against both Zionist and British authorities.⁵

Membership throughout the 1920s remained consistently small and predominantly Jewish. Though this is an estimation on my part, it seems that within this Jewish majority most,

³ Arielli, "Induced to Volunteer," 856

⁴ *Ibid.*, 856

⁵ Budeiri, *The Palestinian Communist Party*, 6.

if not, all were of Eastern European descent.⁶ If the make-up of the list of those who volunteered for the Brigades is sufficient to establish the make-up of the PCP, most of its members were of East or Central European descent with backgrounds in communist organizations in their home countries. The majority of the PCP's membership consisted of young men aged 18-24⁷.

The Comintern soon started mounting pressure on the party to increase recruitment among the Palestinian Arabs. Figures regarding membership throughout the British Mandate are sketchy at best, though "it probably never surpassed 5000, while at any given time party membership usually did not exceed 400, dropping at certain points to around 100".⁸

The PCP had problems with the British Authorities from their formation. Its small size did not stop British authorities from demonizing the party and portraying it as a serious threat to order and tranquility bent on undermining their position in Palestine. Sir T. Drummond Sheils, Parliamentary Undersecretary at the Colonial Office, said he had "not an atom of sympathy with these Jewish communists, who from every point of view — Zionist, Arab or British — are a danger to the community."⁹ Sir John Chancellor, High Commissioner for Palestine, similarly believed that "in view of the extensive agitation, which is now being directed from Moscow, to extend the activities of the Communist Party in Palestine to the Arab population, I consider it advisable, in the interest of the public security, that persons of this kind should be removed from the country whenever possible."¹⁰

Besides the British, the PCP had also garnered severe disfavor from the Zionists. The Comintern had denounced Zionism as early as 1921 at its Third Congress. The Comintern

⁶ Martin Sugarman, "Against Fascism – Jews who served in the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War" 1–4, 109–114.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Arielli, "Induced to Volunteer," 856.

⁹ The National Archives [TNA] [British], CO 733/186/1, Shiels to Wilson, 8 April 1930. [Quoted in Nir Arielli, "Induced to Volunteer", 856]

¹⁰ TNA, CO 733/203/2, Chancellor to Passfield, 1 March 1931[Quoted in Nir Arielli, "Induced to Volunteer", 857]

condemned Zionism's aims at the creation of a Marxist Jewish state as attempts to "divert the Jewish working masses from the class struggle and is nothing but a petty bourgeois counter-revolutionary utopia."¹¹ In Palestine, leaflets distributed by the PCP denounced the Zionist movement on every conceivable topic. They criticized them for bringing immigrants into the country without being able to provide work for them; for depriving the Arabs of their land and their livelihood; and for serving British imperialism. In the mid-1930s, the PCP even went as far as equating the various branches of Zionism with fascism.¹²

Zionist leader and, later, first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion, played a leading role in having communists removed from the Histadrut. He also accused PCP propaganda among the Arab population of inciting violence against Jews.¹³ Chaim Weizmann, chairman of the World Zionist Movement and, later, the first President of Israel, was concerned that the British public might mistake the PCP with the Zionists "and nobody will believe us if we say they are our deadly enemies and agents of Moscow who are exterminating Zionism wherever they can."¹⁴

While the Communist Party of Great Britain existed legally in Britain itself, branches around various parts of the Empire were illegal. In most of the colonies where communism was banned the penalty for being caught in the act of communist activities usually consisted of imprisonment and fines. In the Palestinian Mandate, however, the policy adopted by colonial authorities in 1921 consisted of deportation. That same year, some forty Jews were deported,

¹¹ Budeiri, "The Palestine Communist Party", 1

¹² Jewish National & University Library, Department for Manuscripts and Archives, V1272, file 12, leaflet: 'To all the residents of Palestine!', 20 June 1933; LI, IV-426-12, leaflet: 'The Palestinian Red Aid', June 1935; IV-425-23, leaflet: 'Uncovering MAPAI's fascist face', 1936. [Quoted in Nir Arielli, "Induced to Volunteer", 861]

¹³ David Ben Gurion, *Memoirs*, vol.I (Tel Aviv 1971), 501-11 [in Hebrew]. [Quoted in Nir Arielli, "Induced to Volunteer", 861]

¹⁴ Arielli, "Induced to Volunteer", 856

most of whom did not have Palestinian citizenship¹⁵. This information is significant on two counts. First, the lack of citizenship could serve to support the notion that at least some of the PCP's membership was composed of refugees; and second, the strength with which British authorities believed that the PCP posed such a serious threat to its control.

This process of deportation continued without legal sanction or justification for some time and was not formally legalized until June 1923 at a special meeting of the Mandate's chiefs of police, intelligence and legal system¹⁶. This meeting resulted in Article 8(c) of the Immigration Ordinance. The 69th paragraph of this law, later included in the Palestinian Penal Codex, stated that if "any person is conducting himself so as to be dangerous to peace and good order in Palestine ... the High Commissioner may, if he thinks fit... order that person to be deported from Palestine to such place as the Commission might direct."¹⁷

This modification allowed the Commissioner the power to deport any person he deemed detrimental to the public good by any standards. Mandate courts also utilized the modification which allowed the possibility of deportation on the court's recommendation. This was usually invoked in cases where the convict did not hold Palestinian citizenship. Standard procedure for mandate authorities was to deport foreign born communists to their country of origin, most commonly the USSR and other Eastern European countries, though there were many who were sent to France and Belgium¹⁸.

With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, the British authorities saw the chance to utilize the war as an incentive for deportation. There were cases in which arrested Communist activists were threatened with extended prison time with the only escape route being voluntary

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 857

¹⁷ Ibid., 857

¹⁸ Ibid., 857

enlistment in the IB. Arielli's research shows that "of the 200 communists who were arrested during the first four months of the [Arab] uprising (April-August 1936), at least 20 ended up in Spain." However, he also illuminates that "97 communists left Palestine 'of their own accord' during 1936-7. Interestingly, this category did not exist in earlier annual reports."¹⁹

It should also be noted that local Palestinian papers and other sources of media took up active and strong positions against the Nationalist rebels in Spain. For example, the Histadrut's paper, Davar, had this to say about the Spanish Civil War, warning of the dangers ahead in store for the Spanish people:

But it cannot be forgotten that the war was carried out in Spain by foreign powers that have finally taken over the country and her fate. The regime the Spaniards are now tied to is none other than the Gestapo, the political police of the Third Reich. [...] With the help of these agents, Franco will suppress the national will of the Spanish people. The policies of the Third Reich will be the source of answers for all day to day problems by becoming a totalitarian regime. And to the real problems of the resulting destruction, the Gestapo has given Franco the solution that allows him to give up the support of international capitalism. The conquered people of this civil war will build their country back up without receiving a fraction in return. Concentration camps have already been established for this purpose with the guiding principle that political criminals should be purified through 'work'.²⁰

In an earlier piece, the same newspaper criticized what it called "the delusion of neutrality" adopted by many European states in response to the Spanish Civil War,

But the Republican Government is the legal government of Spain that came to power in the correct way and with a large majority. A month ago there would not have been one man who would have questioned her right to buy weapons in Paris or London. Why have her rights changed? Because some generals were able to raise an army of Africans with foreign aid? Does this make the legal choice of the Spanish people any weaker? The Spanish government has, according to the power of law and the customs of international life, the right to buy everything she needs in order to survive.²¹

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 859

²⁰ *Ha'Shalit Hamiti beSfarad shel Franco: Gestapo*, Davar, 26 April 1939.

²¹ *"Ha'hashlaya she ba Netraliut"* Davar, 21 August 1936

Even more neutral papers, like the Palestine Post, actively followed the progress of battles throughout Spain, and kept local awareness raised and people informed.²² These strong positions on behalf of the Spanish Republic may have contributed to an idea that they should be defended. Though they did not actively encourage enlistment, these articles do foster an affinity for the Spanish Republic and one that might have very easily appealed to the members of the PCP. This penetration into day to day life and overall atmosphere on the side of the Republic may have contributed to PCP member's decisions to enlist in the battle for its survival.

As was previously stated, the rise of Arab nationalism in 1936 led to internal problems in the PCP. Al-Hilu's promotion of one nationalist agenda over another and consequent distancing of the predominantly Jewish membership was a failure to remain true to the more traditional internationalist communist ideals.

In this specific context of competing nationalist ideologies, Zionism and Arab nationalism, the Spanish Civil War could have been perceived by the alienated Jewish members of the PCP as an opportunity to actively fight for their communist beliefs on a larger and international stage. The problems for communists in Palestine were numerous; both the Zionist and British authorities despised them, the Mandate's governing authorities made any and every attempt to get rid of them, and the communists were facing the new problem of Arab nationalism. Staying to rectify and mediate the problems within their own party might have been useful on a small scale, but there was clearly a larger issue looming on the horizon; one whose goals and objectives were in complete contrast to those of the communists. Thus, the PCP's Jewish membership worried they were taking steps too far distanced from the international communist community's primary focus of combating fascism and their own party was losing sight of fundamental communist ideals.

²² "Hits and Misses on the Spanish Front", *Palestine Post*, 24 August 1936

These concerns served as a background to seize the opportunity available to the PCP's Jewish membership and fight against fascism in conjunction with the international communist community. They could fight fascism in defense of their own political ideals and protect their party in this way as well.²³ Even with the problem of forced deportation complicating the picture of volunteer enlistment, one could easily imagine that at least some of those faced with that decision would have been convinced that fighting heroically in Spain was preferable to long periods of incarceration. The problems raised by deportation are not necessarily incompatible one with a strong communist ideal. Fighting against the threat of fascism was more useful to the cause at large than serving jail time in which they were useful to no one.

In this sense, the Palestinian volunteers were not so different from those that came from around the world. Hitler was one of many fascist leaders to come to power in Europe. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe had encountered fascism before and it drove numerous citizens, particularly those with incompatible political beliefs, to flee. For most of these refugees, the experiences they had to draw on in their decision to fight the spread of fascism were related to their communism and their desire to uphold its ideals. This would also seem to be the case for much, if not most of the PCP's membership. Even in the cases in which members had no first-hand experience with fascism, there is little doubt that encounters with refugees' experience of fascism had a second-hand effect that strengthened whatever anti-fascist ideals they already held. Arno Lustiger points out that "Jews all over the world supported the struggle against the Franco rebellion," and that a significant number of Jews held important posts in the leadership of the IB. In fact, he lists fourteen of the most senior posts of the IB, including founders and commanders

²³ It must here be noted that this would also have been an opportunity for Arab members to do the same. Presumably they would have been just as alienated by Al-Hilu's national chauvinism as were the Jewish members of the PCP. However, my research is focused around the Jewish membership of the PCP alone, and has not been focused on the Arab membership at all. I do not have enough information to offer any justified statements on this front. As it is not the focus of this paper, I will not comment further on the motivations of the PCP's Arab membership.

of air and ground units, medical units, and generals, and explains that they were held by Jews.²⁴

²⁵ Perhaps the one thing all these Jews had in common was their idealism, whatever the cause may have been.

At first, the PCP campaigned for many years to have the deportations abolished, but it also opposed its membership's requests to join the IB. This was due, in part, to the ambiguous policy derived from the ECCI and the actions of the Soviet Union during the first few weeks of the Spanish Civil War²⁶. But as the PCP continued to dwindle, losing its membership to enlistment (and deportation), the leadership became concerned that it would be unable to fight both the Zionists and the British opposition. In time, however, the leadership realized that they could not prevent the deportations and that volunteering for the IB was actually acceptable to the Comintern.

If we are only considering the number of Jews who left Palestine after 18 July 1936 (the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War), the number of volunteers from the PCP seems to be between 145-160 volunteers²⁷. For the lowest figure of 145, 131 were men and 14 were women. Only about a dozen or so were Zionists. Two of them, Jecheskel Piekar and David Karon, were members of the Zionist paramilitary organization, *Hagana*, and it seems did not fight alongside their communist countrymen. If we extend the criteria to include those that left Palestine (or were

²⁴ *General Manfred Stern* founded and commanded the XI Thalmann Brigade and *General Mate Zalka* the XII Garibaldi Brigade. *General Waclaw Komar* commanded 129 Brigade until the end of the war. *Colonel Henryk Torunczyk* was the last commander of the XIII Dowbrowski Brigade and the "Agrupacion Internacional". *General Jakob Smuschkewitsch* was the commander of the Spanish air force. *General Grigorij Stern* was the Supreme Soviet adviser in Spain. *Colonel Simon Kriwoschein* was commander of the tank force and *Colonel Selig Joffe* was chief engineer of the air force. *Dr Rudolf Neumann* was founder and Chief Medical Officer of the International Brigades' medical service. Its last Chief Medical Officer was *Dr Edward Barsky*. *Julius Deutsch* became a general with responsibility for coastal defence. *Lieutenant-Colonel John Gates* (born Solomon Regenstreif) was the highest-ranking American officer in the Brigades. *General Miguel Gomez* was the Bulgarian Jew Ruben Abramov. *Commandante Carlos*, co-founder of the *Quinto Regimiento*, was the Italian Jew Vittorio Vidali.

²⁵ Arno Lustiger, "German and Austrian Jews in the International Brigades," *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 35, no. 1 (1990), 298

²⁶ Raanan Rein, "A Belated Inclusion: Jewish Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War and Their Place in the Israeli National Narrative," *Israel Studies*. 17, no. 1 (2012): 27

²⁷ *Ibid.*

deported) before 1936 and came to Spain specifically to fight for the Republic, the number increases by several dozen.²⁸

The ratio of Jewish volunteers in the IB was always disproportionately large in comparison to their proportions in the respective countries from which they came. Listed below are the proportions of Jewish volunteers from the five countries with the largest representation in the IB.

Poland - 2,250 (of 5,000 Poles - 45% - Jews only 10% of Polish population)

USA - 1,250 (38% of total USA Volunteers – Jews only 4% of USA population)

France - 1043 (15% of French volunteers - Jews only 0.5% of population)

Britain – between 200 and 400 (11 to 22% - Jews 0.5% of population)

Hungarian, Austrian (120-150 volunteers based on research by Hans Landauer and others in *The Leo Baeck Year Book* 1995)²⁹

It should be noted that Palestinian representation falls just below those listed above and that the population of the Yishuv at the time numbered no more than 400,000 people. Keeping in mind that at least 145 volunteers came from Palestine, this is quite a considerable figure.

THE ISSUE OF JEWISH IDENTITY

There is a naïve intuition suggesting that the reason volunteers came from Palestine had to do with their having an active Jewish identity. It suggests that they fought against fascism in full awareness of the fact that it posed a serious threat to their people and homeland and enlisted to hinder its progress. This seems a very natural and justified intuition to hold, especially in light

²⁸ Rein, "A Belated Inclusion" 28

²⁹ Sugarman, "Against Fascism", 2

of the fact that this is the motivation ascribed to the volunteers by the Israeli government. However, there are a number of reasons this could not have been the case.

Reports suggest that many volunteers used non Jewish aliases to disguise their identities which they may have only revealed to other Jews upon arrival in Spain.³⁰ This serves as a partial account for the variance in figures regarding Jewish participation in the IB, as well as indication that for many, their identity was not their driving motivation. Additionally, there is a great deal of historical context missing that demonstrates why members of the PCP would not have been the ones to leave Palestine with an active Jewish identity.

The people of Palestine that might have fought in the IB with an active Jewish identity were the Zionist organizations. However, the Arab Revolt was happening at the same time and the Zionists and their followers were amongst those being targeted by the Arab Nationalists. The Zionists generally refused to send their membership to Spain claiming, “We have neither the time nor the ability to deal day in and day out with the events taking place on the Spanish fronts. We too are defending ourselves in the trenches for the third year now. We are losing people every day. And no one knows if we have reached the height of terror or if the worst is still ahead of us”.³¹ In fact, according to Raanan Rein, contemporary Zionist media conspired to silence the stories of local volunteers who left for Spain, so as to discourage others from following them. Rein iterates that “in the articles and notes published on the International Brigades, the absence of any reference to the volunteers from Palestine was conspicuous.”³²

The members of the PCP who volunteered for the IB would not have utilized an active Jewish identity in their reasons to fight at least partly because it didn't coincide with the ideal notion of communism. It seems, then, that since the volunteers who could possibly have gone

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pg 4

³¹ *Hashomer Hatzza'ir*, 1 September, 1938. [As cited in Rein, “A Belated Inclusion”, 44]

³² Rein, “A Belated Inclusion, 25

with an active Jewish identity were actively discouraged from doing so, describing it as the prime motivation for the majority of Palestinian volunteers for enlisting is not terribly plausible. Why, then, is this the very motivation ascribed to Palestinian volunteers by the modern Israeli government? Rein suggests that it was a series of chain events that linked “Jews fighting Fascism in Spain to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and then to Israel’s wars against its Arab enemies.”³³

Though there were obvious sympathies towards the Spanish Republic displayed in Palestinian newspapers and fascism was almost universally agreed amongst the Jewish population to be abhorrent, the plight of the Palestinian volunteer in the IB was largely ignored both before and immediately after the Spanish Civil War. As was mentioned before, newspapers actively tried to censor the stories of IB volunteers so as to hinder others from going. However the case becomes more drastic upon their return to Palestine.

The first group of IB volunteers to return to Palestine were disappointed to find that an official welcoming ceremony organized by Abba Hushi, the secretary of the workers’ council in Haifa and a leading member of the General Federation of Jewish Workers, had been cancelled³⁴. It was largely due to pressure issued from the British authorities who proceeded to detain the returning volunteers for interrogation. In later years, especially after the Second World War, events were organized in honor of the veteran volunteers in which they were often invited to speak. However, these events, which should have offered them some public visibility, did not seem to attract much of an audience at all. In fact, as of 1945, the Palestinian Group of International Brigades consisted of only 30 veterans.³⁵

Rein indicates that there are documented instances of veterans of the Spanish Civil War complaining to the British International Brigade Association (IBA) of the lack of support and

³³ *Ibid.*, 25

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 25

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

recognition they received in their homeland. Their issues often arose with the Histadrut and the Labor party associated with it, who generally declined assisting them in their endeavors to raise awareness about Spain and her veterans, largely in light of the well-known communist heritage of the IB veterans. The reasons they cited were familiar, namely preoccupation with local problems. To be fair, this is not surprising for the time, as these Zionist organizations were concerned with transporting Holocaust survivors to Palestine, advancing national independence and negotiations with the British government, as well as dealing with the local Arab population³⁶.

When the ten year anniversary of the Spanish Civil War occurred in 1946 and veterans tried to put together events in its commemoration, their attempts to find sponsors and supporters were fruitless³⁷. In hopes of gaining support from various organizations, the veterans even tried appealing to their Jewish identities and sensibilities by emphasizing their struggle against fascism as one against anti-Semitism. They sought official greetings from various Zionist organizations, and received only one response. They “failed to secure even written greetings from the Zionist Workers’ Parties, besides the Hashomer Hatzair, who sent us a few lines. Only the Communist Party of Palestine participated actively through its representative Esther Vilenska.”³⁸ Although they did not get much support for their cause and their struggle, they could at least take comfort in the fact that Israel had taken up an anti-Franco position very early on in its existence and had cut off diplomatic ties between itself and dictatorial Spain.³⁹

As time progressed and more information became readily available about the Holocaust, Rein explains that it gradually became part of Israel’s *zeitgeist*.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ [as quoted in] Gerben Zaagsma, “A Fresh Outburst of ‘Old Terror’?” 141-2

³⁹ Rein, *A Belated Inclusion.*, 33

“A key component in Israeli collective identity and issues of Jewish supposed passivity and submissiveness vs. Jewish resistance in the face of Fascism and Nazism were hotly debated. In this political and cultural climate, a link was gradually formed between the struggle in Spain against the Nationalist rebels, the fight against Nazism during WWII, and Israel’s military campaigns against its Arab enemies”.⁴⁰

The first milestone Rein describes was reached in October 1972 at the International Conference of the Jewish Fighters in the International Brigades in Spain which took place in Tel-Aviv. It was sponsored by the Histadrut and several kibbutzim. By this time, the Israeli association of veterans numbered some ninety members and consisted of two groups. One group consisted of “volunteers who had left Palestine to fight in Spain and returned either immediately after the evacuation of the Brigades from Spain or in the following years”. The second group consisted of Jewish volunteers who “came to Spain from various European and American countries and relocated to Israel for the first time after 1948”. Significantly, the second group contained “Jewish-Polish veterans who moved to Israel only in the late 1960s, following a wave of anti-Semitism in this Communist East-European country”.⁴¹ It was the arrival of this second group that revitalized the activities of the first group and rekindled the Israeli veterans’ association⁴².

It was around this time that connections started being drawn between the volunteers in the IB and Jewish participation as fighters during the Second World War. The need to create an image that was less submissive and more resilient became a fundamentally “Israeli” one; something Israelis clung to and incorporated into their image of themselves. Rein suggests that “the creation of a chain of events linking the Jews fighting Fascism in Spain to the Israeli soldiers fighting to defend the Jewish state’s national sovereignty, would gradually allow for the

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 33

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 34

⁴² *Ibid.*, 34

inclusion of the Spanish War veterans in the Israeli pantheon of heroes.”⁴³ Suddenly, organizations such as the Histadrut that had previously denied them recognition based on their political beliefs began to glorify the IB veterans and envisioned them as Jewish heroes who fought to protect the Jewish homeland and her people. They came to be known as “the first fighters against Nazism” and heroes of the struggle against anti-Semitism. But this did not yet solidify their place in the Israeli pantheon of heroes.

It was not until the next milestone occurred, events commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, that Rein suggests that their place as political tools became solidified. During a meeting on 29 September 1986, President Chaim Herzog delivered a speech in honor of the IB veterans. This event was also sponsored by the Histadrut and was widely covered in the Israeli press. Herzog discussed the heroism of the volunteers and their foresight at being able to connect the events in Spain to the destruction that would follow during the Second World War. He linked these two events inextricably throughout the entirety of his speech. He also noted that the percentage of Jewish volunteers in the IB was the largest of any other group and was largely disproportionate to their representation in the populations of their countries of origin and the world as a whole. Herzog even mentioned very proudly that there were a few volunteers from what he called the “fledgling community in the land of Israel”.⁴⁴

What he never mentioned was the reluctance of the Zionist institutions to support the volunteers in their efforts to defend the Spanish Republic. All that mattered now was that Jews and Israeli’s owed these volunteers a debt of gratitude for their sacrifice and what they had taught the generations that followed them. Herzog then proceeded to talk about contemporary

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 34

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 38

issues, specifically regarding the need of western democracies to support Israel in her struggles against terrorism. Rein explains it best.

“The analogy was clear. Just as the West had failed to understand the threat posed by the Spanish Nationalists and their Nazi and Fascist allies, it was now failing to understand that Arab terrorism was a threat not only to Israel but to the entire ‘free world’. This was the moral lesson that his audience was supposed to learn from the Spanish Civil War. The ideological convictions of many of the volunteers were conspicuously absent from this speech, while the veterans became pioneers in the defense of Israel’s national interests”.⁴⁵

Herzog ended his speech with the following tribute:

“In the name of the people of Israel, the principle victims of the Nazis and fascists, I hereby pay homage to the honor and glory of all those volunteer fighters who used their bodies as a dam against a wave of evil, to all those who gave their lives in this cause, and to those who continued the fight from that day, to those survivors, may they enjoy a good and long life. Here I salute them as comrades in arms against the Nazis. They are the bearers of the vision of the spirit of mankind, the guardian of the image of humanity, and the defenders of human culture”.⁴⁶

Among the results of these events that occurred around the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War was the dedication of what is known as a Forest of Peace and Friendship in Bet Shemesh, near Jerusalem, to the Jewish volunteers in the IB and their sacrifice. Gerben Zaagsma argues that this forest has to be analyzed as a symbolic gesture in the context of the oldest Holocaust memorial in Israel, the Martyrs’ Forest.⁴⁷ The Martyrs’ Forest is one commemorating the lives of those Jews who perished in the holocaust and will eventually contain six million trees in their honor.

The iconic importance of trees in both Judaism and in the iconography of Zionism, as Rein and others have noted, must be explained here for the symbolism to take full effect. In Judaism, trees traditionally symbolize life and are used as an analogy for the way in which it progresses. Roots must be struck in order for the tree to grow and flourish upwards towards the

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁷ Gerben Zaagsma, “A Fresh Outburst of ‘Old Terror’? Jewish Born Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War”.

heavens. The planting of trees has also become a common Zionist practice in an effort to create the analogy of the Zionist movement “striking roots” in the ancient homeland of Israel. Forests have also been adopted in the Zionist movement as a means of creating what is commonly referred to as a “living memory for the dead”. The use of a forest as a memorial to the Jewish volunteers of the IB must be interpreted as a means of incorporating them into the Zionist narrative at large, regardless of what their motivations actually were and whether or not they wanted to be seen in such a way. These representations of the IB volunteers have been adopted and integrated very effectively into the Israeli perspective, and may prove to be nigh on impossible to erase.

This reflects an issue of historical memory that is particularly poignant and relevant to the Spanish Civil War. Jo Labanyi has written about the issues of historical memory surrounding a specific law in Spain, namely the *Ley de Memoria Histórica* or *La Ley por la que se reconocen y amplían derechos y se establecen medidas en favor de quienes padecieron persecución o violencia durante la Guerra Civil y la Dictadura*. The main objectives of the law are to recognize the victims on both sides of the Spanish Civil War and to condemn the Francoist regime. However, it has been heavily criticized by Spanish political parties for various reasons. There are those who claim the law has not done enough and question its effectiveness in exacting retroactive justice, while others denounce it in favor of the *pacto del olvido* (pact of oblivion). This “pact” was the decision by Spanish government after the death of Franco to avoid dealing with his legacy and the atrocities he oversaw. This was accepted on the grounds that allowing discussion of the past would endanger the transition into democracy and it was agreed that blame or guilt for the consequences of this suppression were not to be placed on any one particular party.

Labanyi's discussions regarding the use of memory in historical analysis and public-private distinction are quite relevant to the stories of IB veterans and their incorporation into Israeli national history. She claims that there is an important phenomenon of *collective memory* that plays a large role in our analysis and understanding of past events. Collective memory, she explains, can be used as a "bridge providing a continuum between personal memories and what happened in the past – for the two do not, and cannot, exist in isolation from one another."⁴⁸

She introduces the idea of *social frameworks*, as defined by Halbwachs, as "the sum of understandings of the past that circulate in any given society". She claims that without them "individual memories could not be recounted, since narration requires the insertion of data into a narrative structure (or mix of narrative structures) drawn from an available repertoire." She concedes that,

"it is true that collective memory is very different from private memory in that no actual remembering – in the sense of the recall of a lived experience registered in the brain – takes place in it: not only is there no such thing as a collective psyche, but collective memory concerns events that were not experienced by many members of the group and often are too remote to have been experienced by any of them. The term 'collective memory' is, however, appropriate since the shared (and contested) understandings of the past that comprise it do connect individuals with the past and are transmitted across generations in the same way that private memories are."⁴⁹

The connection to the case of the IB veterans in Israel lies in the context of a contemporary social framework and collective memory that has been changed over time and created something entirely different out of their service. The collective memory of Israel has been modified over time for political reasons and come to adopt this idea of the volunteers as Zionist heroes when, in fact, their motivations were connected to their communist ideals and were denounced by contemporary Zionists. The IB veterans have been woven into the fabric of

⁴⁸ Jo Labanyi, "The Politics of Memory in Contemporary Spain," *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 9, no. 2 (2008).121

⁴⁹ Labanyi, "The Politics of Memory in Contemporary Spain", 121-2.

Israeli history in such a way as to create the illusion that they were always part of the Zionist framework of Israel just as modern day individuals have been woven into the other end of the fabric and feel they are part of the same tradition. The sacrifice the volunteers paid for inclusion in the pantheon of heroes and to gain recognition for their service was a removal of their true motivations from the accepted history.

It should also be noted that history itself, the very study of the past we here read and use to educate ourselves, is also a universal form of collective memory. As Labanyi explains that “historical studies are accounts of the past that enter the public domain, and that contribute to the public perception of the past in a particularly privileged way since they have the authority conferred by their authors’ membership in the academy.”⁵⁰ How the legacy of the IB veterans will be painted depends on the manner in which is it captured and portrayed in the history, and it is the historian’s responsibility to portray them as accurately as possible. The inclusion of the IB veterans in Israeli national history may be one that is impossible to undo, but it can, at the very least, be modified for the sake of accuracy.

CONCLUSION

The Palestinian Jew’s decision to enlist in the IB was a complicated one. It was influenced by many factors, and was complicated even further by questions of allegiances and where they would be able to serve a higher purpose to the best of their abilities.

Volunteers may have been subtly influenced by the avid support offered the Spanish Republic by the Palestinian press. Davar defended the Republic as the only legitimate form of government in Spain and one that had come to power legitimately with the consent of the people. This ascension to power in legitimacy was, and still is, believed to be a fundamentally good thing and something that should be defended. Davar also warned of the consequences of the sources

⁵⁰ Labanyi, “The Politics of Memory in Contemporary Spain”, 122.

of aid from which Franco gathered his supplies and support. The real power controlling Spain, the paper argued, was Hitler and his Gestapo. Franco was but a pawn and the destruction he dealt would be suffered by the people of Spain for years to come. Even less “political” papers reported on the progress of the war and allowed current knowledge of events abroad to be consumed. This general atmosphere of support for the Spanish Republic may be considered a sub-context of the volunteers’ decision to enlist, but it is nevertheless part of the context.

The PCP’s relations with the Comintern also had a significant impact on the ultimate outcome of their activities. The Comintern encouraged their recruitment of the Arab population and even pushed so far as to appoint a head of the PCP that ended up dividing its membership along the issue of Arab nationalism. Additionally, the Comintern was, at least partially, responsible for the PCP’s poor relation with the Zionist institutions in Palestine due to their rejections of Zionism as a bourgeois mechanism to destroy the revolution. The PCP’s relations with the British Mandate authorities were also far from pleasant and hindered their progress substantially. British authorities believed the PCP to be a serious threat to order and their control over the region: one can hardly find ways to blame them on this count.

The Arab nationalist movement also had a substantial effect on the PCP and its members’ decisions to enlist in the IB. It was, after all, this movement that led to the schisms in the PCP that may have been the largest contributing factor to their decision to volunteer. However, it should be noted that their decisions were ultimately comparable to those of Jewish volunteers from other countries around the world as a unified front against the further spread of fascism across the continent. The communist ideals they held seem to be the most unifying and strongly held convictions that would have encouraged them to choose enlistment. Though there were instances complicated by the problem of deportation, their communist ideals still had the

opportunity to shine through, and provide a different scheme of thinking; where would they be of most use? Fighting gallantly against the spread of fascism or rotting in a cell? The choice was obvious.

However, one thing is clear; their reasons had nothing to do with a defense of an active Jewish identity. This belief is falsely attributed to them in retrospect by the Israeli government for political purposes. The misconception of their story ties into some of the issues of memory that have arisen in recent times surrounding current events in Spain itself and its struggles with how to remember these events. The issues of collective, as opposed to private, memory have had a serious effects in the understanding of events that took place during the Spanish Civil War and, consequentially, on its historiography. The role a collective memory has played in the attribution of motivations for the Palestinian volunteers in the IB is a critical one, and has turned out to be a seriously inaccurate one. This attribution seems to have stuck to them and may be the one that stands the test of time.

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