

Gerben Zaagsma, *Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 250.

by Fraser Raeburn

There is ambiguity lurking in the title of Gerben Zaagsma's book on Jewish participation in the International Brigades. Are we speaking of individuals who happen to be Jewish, or at least of Jewish descent, or are we speaking of a different category: those whose participation in the Spanish Civil War was (and is) understood as being specifically and inherently Jewish?

Zaagsma acknowledges this dichotomy, and uses it to provide a framework for his study, positing that the former became the latter over time. Yet there is no doubt that while Zaagsma has succeeded admirably in addressing how Jewish participation in the conflict has been framed and understood as specifically Jewish, he has not written what might be considered as the definitive work on Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades, despite claims advanced on the back cover. He may well have written something better and more interesting; he has certainly written something more methodologically rich. Scholars of both Jewish history and the International Brigades will gain a great deal from this text, but the scope of the inquiry is narrower than the title might suggest.

This is an issue that has affected other recent attempts to break the mold when writing about the international dimensions of the Spanish Civil War, particularly when it comes to the International Brigades. Transnational approaches appear to offer a great deal compared to the relatively staid, nationality-based histories that have hitherto been standard. Yet work of truly international scope is extraordinarily difficult, especially when one's remit is groups and organizations rather than individuals. Lisa Kirschenbaum's 2015 book on the Comintern in Spain is one such case: an excellent, insightful book, yet one that is also clearly the product of an American scholar of Soviet history, most familiar with these sources and perspectives. Here, Zaagsma's expertise lies in the Botwin Company (pp. 37-57), the only International Brigade unit composed specifically of Jewish volunteers, and its reception, particularly among the Jewish diaspora in Paris. Zaagsma is able to use these cases to offer useful points about international perceptions of the Spanish Civil War and the International Brigades, as well as insight into neglected aspects of the

International Brigades themselves, such as ‘nationality’ politics, although further exploration of this theme would have been welcome. In all, the book spends relatively little time exploring personal experiences and testimony of the Jewish volunteers. As a result, the first section of the book, dealing with the International Brigades themselves, feels sparse at c. forty pages.

In particular, little space is accorded to Jewish volunteers in other contexts than the Botwin Company. Zaagsma refuses to attempt to even enumerate them – this ‘misses the point’ (p. 13) – although several figures, generally from secondary texts, are discussed (pp. 22-3). Given Zaagsma’s own clever use of statistics in other ways, particularly regarding Jewish Communist Party membership in the Polish context (p. 23), it is not clear why further enumeration could have no worthwhile end. Anglophone Jewish volunteers in particular are accorded relatively little space, despite their prominence in these contingents, although the Americans feature more significantly in the discussion of commemoration. In fact, Jews of non-Eastern European origins rarely receive analytic focus. This is justified by the claim that other groups often had a lower consciousness of being in Spain as Jews (pp. 3, 24-5). While the present reviewer is in no position to argue with this statement, and Zaagsma is certainly correct to note that assuming a monolithic ‘Jewish’ identity across these very different contexts is immensely problematic, it is difficult to believe that more could not be said on the subject.

In contrast, the second section, a comparative analysis of the reception of Spain and the International Brigades in the Yiddish press in Paris, feels longer than necessary. While Zaagsma makes a strong methodological case for the approach taken, the comparative structure offers diminishing returns. While analysis of the communist-aligned *Naye Prese* is exhaustive (pp. 67-92), the comparisons offered slim pickings. The Labour-Zionist *Parizer Haynt* made few references to the International Brigade volunteers (p. 95), while the Bundist periodical *Undzer Shtime* has been incompletely preserved with only a handful of surviving issues covering the crucial year of 1937 (p. 102). This is hardly the author’s fault, yet has limited the insight available beyond the relatively straightforward ideological differences across the publications. This is not to say that the section is bereft of useful material – far from it – but that the framework does less to enhance the approach than it might have.

These are harsher criticisms than the book deserves. The approach taken has much to offer, and succeeds in answering what Zaagsma considered the central question of the book – ‘why *Jewish* volunteers?’ (p. 160). In particular, the final section, on the evolution of historical memory surrounding ‘Jewish’ participation in the Spanish Civil War, reads as an intricately constructed micro- historiography. This is likely the best – certainly the most detailed – effort to appreciate how historical understandings of the International Brigades evolved during the Cold War, in any context. So well has Zaagsma reconstructed the twists and turns, especially between Poland, Israel and the United States, it is jarring to come across the rare admission that a particular incident or exchange could not be traced (e.g. p. 126). Zaagsma also does an excellent job of placing ideas about the Jewish volunteers within their intellectual contexts, such as contemporary struggles against perceptions of Jewish cowardice (e.g. pp. 74-5), and later debates about the extent of Jewish resistance to the Holocaust (pp. 121-4). While this is perhaps not the promised definitive history – if such a history could ever be written – it succeeds admirably on other terms.

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