

Gut Feelers and Blind Believers: A Comparative Analysis of Jewish Involvement  
in the Communist Party in New York City and London, 1935-1945

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## Introduction

In 1848, Karl Marx published *The Communist Manifesto*. This work, a blueprint for dismantling the oppressive systems of society subjugating the working to the ruling classes, soon sparked a worldwide ideology and movement known as Marxism. One year after publishing *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx became the first ethnically Jewish Marxist to move to London. Marx's Central European origins, period of immigration, and middle class socioeconomic position would put him at odds with the majority of his future adherents, however. When Marx died in 1883, a new wave of Jewish immigrants was just beginning a mass exodus out of Eastern Europe, flooding into the urban centers of the West. As the rise and fall of communism unfolded in the streets of these cities, these poor, immigrant Jews would play an integral role in the development and evolution of the radical left.

In the early twentieth century, London and New York City became hubs of both Jewish immigration and Jewish Communism. Between 1935 and 1945, the advent of the Comintern's Popular Front policy propelled Jewish involvement in the Communist Parties of both cities to new heights. This thesis employs an archival source base of oral histories and interviews, Communist Party publications and documents, and the writings of various Communist Jews and their counterparts, to explore the factors which drew Jews in London and New York City to the Communist Party during this period. Through engaging in a previously unexamined comparative analysis of Jewish Communism in London and New York City, this thesis sheds light on how contextual factors – demographics, socioeconomic conditions, discriminatory politics and social structures – interacted to shape the political culture of each Jewish Communist locale.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Each chapter explores a focal point in the relationship between the Communist Parties of London and New York City and their Jewish

populations during the Popular Front years, as well as the similarities and differences in how the Communist Parties responded to the respective needs and concerns of these unique communities. The first chapter accounts for the development and demographics of Jewish communities in London and New York City, as well as the evolution of the Communist Party and its Jewish membership. The second chapter analyses the socioeconomic conditions of Jews in each city, and efforts by the Communist Parties to attract Jews through pursuing social reforms. The third chapter explores the rise of anti-Semitism and fascism, and the quest of both Communist Parties to present themselves as the vanguard of Jews in both cities. The fourth chapter demonstrates how the conditions presented in the previous three chapters interacted to mold the creation of two unique Jewish-Communist political cultures.

In the following pages, this thesis demonstrates how Communist Party relationships with Jewish population shifted to fit the immediate needs of local Jewish communities. I argue that the size and socioeconomic conditions of the respective Jewish communities, as well as the threats posed by fascism and anti-Semitism, shaped the political culture characterizing the two Jewish Communist cities. In London, the smaller size of the Jewish community, its working class socioeconomic character, and the imminent threat posed by encroaching fascism and anti-Semitism produced a culture built around resisting fascism and improving standards of living. Across the Atlantic, New York City's larger Jewish population, its increasing upward mobility, as well as the less palpable threat posed by anti-Semitism and fascism, produced a multifaceted and prospering culture around language, art, intellectual life, politics and the creation of a new American-Jewish identity.

The story of Jews and Communism is the story of an immigrant people who moved across the globe and found an ideology espousing precisely their needs, fears and desires. It is a

story of hope in new ideas, and steadfast dedication to a community and set of values. Most of all, it is a complex story of nuance and contradiction. The individuals and their movement, described in these pages, joined the Communist Movement for many reasons. As such, a full comparison of the two cities and their Jewish Communist communities requires a more extensive study. By examining those rationales in two distinct locales, London and New York City, I hope to provide insight into the multifaceted relationship between Jews and the Communist Party more broadly.

### Historiography

The comparative analysis of Jewish involvement in the Communist Parties of London and New York City presented here represents a previously unexplored topic. The foundation for this analysis has been established by existing scholarship on broader topics, however. As such, this thesis is set within the intersection of three central fields of scholarship. The first and largest body of work examines the historical relationship between Jews and the left, with a special focus on Communism. Second, a field of study explores the history of Jews within the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), focusing on London. Third, a body of research examines the relationship between Jews and the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), with an emphasis on New York City. The leading scholarship within each of these fields established the essential background for this study.

The primary source base in this research stems from archives in England and New York City. These archives provided oral history interviews with Jewish Communists from both New York City and London, the official papers of the CPGB and CPUSA and their Jewish bodies, the individual papers of various Jewish Communist leaders, various Jewish communist newspapers and pamphlets, as well as a range of assorted materials relevant to this research. This study

places central emphasis on the topics and events discussed by these primary sources as a means of gaining insight into the factors which led Jews to involvement in the Communist Party, rather than exploring the more general arc of Jewish Communism classically explored in the secondary literature described below.

Scholarship on Jews and the left revolves around a central paradox: the oxymoronic notion of “Jewish Communism.” On its most basic terms, Communism divides the world into proletariat and bourgeoisie, structuring its ideology around these identities alone. In seeking to build a unified mass movement, communists advocated the rejection of adherence to any factions, including Jewish national identity. In light of this, historians have attempted to understand the phenomena of why Jews, a religious, ethnic and national group, joined Communist Parties worldwide in such large numbers.

In his work, *The Quest for Utopia*, Zvi Gitelman attempts to excavate and define a Jewish political tradition stretching from the ancient world to the modern period. Gitelman argues that while Jewish politics can never be understood as universal at any given time, Jewish politics has almost always maintained a strand characterized by what he terms, “the quest for utopia.”<sup>1</sup> This utopian ideological framework, he argues, is based on the ideal of “tikkun olam,” a religious ethical value promoting collective efforts to repair the world through social justice.<sup>2</sup> In their works, Moses Rischin and Nicolas Berdyaev explore Jewish ideals of Messianism, as well as tenets of charity and a focus on studying as key aspects of Jewish tradition.<sup>3</sup> Rischin and Berdyaev assert that these utopian ideals, embedded in Judaism by ancient religious scriptures and traditions, are reflected in the Communist ideological focus on building a better future. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Zvi Gitelman, *The Quest for Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1992), x.

<sup>2</sup> Gitelman, *The Quest for Utopia*, x.

<sup>3</sup> Messianism is a Jewish article of faith expounding the eventual coming of a savior, who will establish a more utopian world.

Gitelman, Rischin and Bardyaev argue that the similar thread of utopianism woven through Jewish tradition and Communism reveals a natural relationship between Jews and Communism.<sup>4</sup>

Other scholars have asserted the limitations of this view. Ezra Mendelsohn, a leading scholar on Jews and the left, argues that for many Jews the attraction of the left lay in the opposite; Communism promised an escape from the restrictions of an archaic and outdated religion. Mendelsohn asserts that Jews saw Communism as a path to transcending the Jewish ghettos, and becoming members of the international working classes.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, in his work, *On Modern Jewish Politics*, Mendelsohn emphasizes the significance of contextual factors in understanding why Jews found leftist movements appealing. Focusing on the interwar years, Mendelsohn highlights that widespread poverty and anti-Semitism naturally led Jews to Communism, a political movement professing dedication to equality and liberation, and an agenda committed to resisting against anti-Semitism and fascism.<sup>6</sup>

In *Prophecy and Politics*, Jonathan Frankel expands on Mendelsohn's argument, asserting that Eastern European Jews already attuned to radical ideas in their places of origin, brought their leftism to the Western World where they developed "political subcultures."<sup>7</sup> These political subcultures represented Eastern European communities merely transplanted into a new home.<sup>8</sup> Frankel and Mendelsohn's approach, though slightly different, both examine how Jewish conditions and environmental contexts influenced Jewish political orientations.

In his work, *Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate 1843-1943*, Enzo

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<sup>4</sup> Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), 166.; Nicolas Bardyaev, *The Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 69-70.

<sup>5</sup> Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics*, 96.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, & the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 2-3.

Traverso reinforces Frankel and Mendelsohn's contextually based arguments. Traverso asserts that Jewish immigrants during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were tied to their Eastern European roots, and existed as a detached ethnic segment of the broader working classes. Traverso argues that the insularity of Jewish immigrant communities allowed for the development of a unique Jewish Communist culture that resisted assimilation.<sup>9</sup> Frankel and Traverso's works highlight the importance of considering the ways in which Jews developed ethnic enclaves and cultures within wider cities, and inside the Communist movement itself. This factor will be further explored within the final chapter of this thesis.

Scholars asserting the significance of contextual factors in the radicalization of Jews, including Frankel and Mendelsohn, are generally in consensus regarding the link between the Communist stance against anti-Semitism and the Jewish presence in CPs. This idea was first asserted by Robert Michels in his 1962 work, *Political Parties*, which argued that Communist resistance against anti-Semitism represented the central source of Jewish involvement.<sup>10</sup>

In theorizing around the relationship of Jews with the left, this thesis employs with the latter scholars' emphasis on examining the contextual factors surrounding Jewish radicalization, rather than the former scholars' focus on ideological factors.

The second and third body of literature crucial to this thesis are studies of Jews and the left in specific locales. While these works offer valuable perspectives on the particular places under examination, scholars of these localized studies generally utilize paradigms similar to those espoused in the wider field explored above.

Scholarship surrounding the relationship between Jews and the CPGB is relatively sparse.

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<sup>9</sup> Enzo Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate: 1843-1943* (Amherst: University Books, 1994), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Michels. *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. Translated by Eden Paul and Ceder Paul (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 247-8.

However, the leading works in this field focus on the contextual factors which drew Jews to the CP, both in Great Britain more broadly, and in London in particular.

A key debate in the scholarship on Jews and the CPGB reframes the overarching examination of the paradox of Jewish communism through the question of whether Jewish participants in the CPGB should be termed, “Jewish Communists” or “Communist Jews.” This debate was originally framed by Jason Heppel, who argued that Jews in the CPGB identified with Communist identities far more than with Jewish identities. In his work, Heppel asserts that during the 1930s, a lack of interest in what could be considered Jewish issues and Jewish traditions within the Party framework suggests that these Jews detached from their Jewish identities, trading their religious and ethnic communities in favor of participation in the Communist milieu.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, Henry Srebrnik’s *London Jews and British Communism: 1935-1945*, argues that Jewish membership in the CPGB during the 1930s and 40s held strong connections to Jewish identity. Srebrnik asserts that between 1935 and 1945, Jews gravitated towards the CPGB due to the CPGB’s response to rising fascism and anti-Semitism, as well as its leading role in raising the standard of living among the working class Jewish population. Thus, Srebrnik characterizes these Jews as “Jewish Communists.”<sup>12</sup> This thesis employs Srebrnik’s term “Jewish Communists,” reinforcing Srebrnik’s assessment that the CPGB’s response to exclusively Jewish concerns was essential in drawing Jews to the CP.

Scholarship on the relationship between Jews and the radical left in New York City

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<sup>11</sup> Jason Heppel, “A Question of ‘Jewish politics’? The Jewish Section of the Communist Part of Great Britain, 1936-45,” in *Jews, Labor and the Left, 1918-1948*, ed. Christine Collette and Stephen Bird, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 93-121.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism 1935-1945* (Ilford: Vallentine Mitchell & Co. LTD., 1995).

during the early twentieth century is dominated by historians such as Tony Michels and Arthur Liebman. Michels's work, *A Fire in Their*, rejects notions, such as Frankel's, which assert that Jewish radicalization was merely transplanted from Eastern Europe into the United States. Rather, Michels asserts that the United States, New York City in particular, served as the birthplace of a leftist Jewish politics and culture.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Michels highlights the importance of Jewish Communist culture in New York City. He explains that after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1919, many Jews saw the Communist agenda and party structure as conducive to ushering in a new Jewish leftist culture around Yiddish language and identity. Similarly, Mark Naison, in his work, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, highlights the importance of culture to the New York City left. Naison explains that Communist Jewish culture developed out of the framework built by socialist Jews in New York who encouraged a Jewish leftist culture.<sup>14</sup>

While Michels' work focuses on broad Jewish leftism and Naison's work offers only a chapter on Jews within a wider study, Arthur Liebman's book, *Jews and the Left*, offers a comprehensive account of Jews and the Marxist left in the United States during the twentieth century. In line with Michels and Naison, Liebman's central thesis in this work is that the Jewish left formed a subculture in response to anti-Semitism and other adversities during the early twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> It was this subculture, he argues, which constantly reproduced and sustained Jewish association with the left over the course of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> The works of Michels, Naison and Liebman are crucial to this thesis in highlighting the importance of Jewish identity and culture to Jewish Communists in New York City.

This thesis employs the three fields of scholarship outlined above to examine a topic not

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<sup>13</sup> Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Liebman, *Jews and the Left* (New York: Wiley, 1979), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 26.

yet covered in scholarly literature: a comparative analysis of Jewish involvement in the CP in London and New York City. The scholarship described above highlights the importance of examining the contexts in which Jews joined CPs as a means to understanding why Jews found Communism appealing. By engaging in a close examination of the similarities and differences in the relationship between Jews and the CP in two distinct cities, London and New York City, this thesis further demonstrates how the CP appealed to Jews by responding to the unique contexts of Jewish populations inhabiting a specific urban framework.

Chapter 1: A Tale of Two Shtetls: The Development of Jewish Communist Communities in  
London and New York City

At the same time that the Communist movement spread around the world, millions of Jews were in the midst of their own international voyages. During the late nineteenth century, anti-Semitic legislation, anti-Jewish violence, and increased pauperization among Jewish populations pushed many Jews out of Eastern Europe and into the cities of Western Europe and the United States. Between 1880 and 1914, about 2.5 million Jews undertook this voyage out of Eastern Europe hoping to find economic opportunities and security from anti-Semitism.<sup>17</sup> These immigrants settled primarily in the United States, with a smaller number landing in Great Britain. This chapter explores the factors which led Jews to New York City and London, and the resultant demographics of the Jewish populations in each city. The contrasts in population size between New York City and London are mirrored in the membership of Jews within the Communist Parties of the two cities.

At the same time that many Jews began leaving Eastern Europe for the cities of the west, radical leftist ideology gained traction among the poor Jewish masses. In 1897, Jews in Eastern Europe established a Marxist organization known as the “Bund.”<sup>18</sup> The Bund preached socialist ideology to the masses of Jews facing economic difficulties, providing many with an education in Marxism prior to their departure from the East.<sup>19</sup> As a result, a number of Jews entered their new homes eager to join the socialist movement wherever they settled.

Leaving Eastern Europe, Jews were faced with the choice of where to settle. In the 1880s, a French socialist penned the “Pledge of Allegiance,” famously painting a picture of the United

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Robert Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees From the First World War Through the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 27.

<sup>18</sup> Liebman, “The Ties That Bind,” 323.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

States as a utopian land of “liberty and justice for all.”<sup>20</sup> As descriptions of American freedom floated into Eastern Europe, visions of a land free from anti-Semitic legislation and violence filled the hearts of Eastern European Jews. In her autobiography, Minnie Goldstein, an immigrant Jew, recounts her father’s words upon deciding to leave Poland, “I want to go to a country where everyone is equal...I want to go America...where I can work hard and make a living for my wife and children and be equal to everyone.”<sup>21</sup> For immigrants like the Goldsteins, the U.S. alone served as the antithesis of Eastern European inequality and anti-Jewish discrimination. Its cities quickly came to represent ideal destinations. American Jewish activist Mary Antin explained, “America was in everybody’s mouth...all talked of it.”<sup>22</sup>

While most Eastern European Jews envisioned the United States as a land of opportunity and freedom, those who had received a Marxist education through the Bund, recognized in its descriptions the values of liberty and justice espoused by Marxism. In traveling to the U.S., many believed they were leaving behind the persecution of their diasporic past for the security of life in a democratic utopia. George Watt, a second-generation American Jew explained that his parents chose to move to New York simply because, “Everyone did...They did see it as a land of opportunity, and I think they did feel they would come here and have a better chance.”<sup>23</sup> In the words of one Yiddish journalist, Jews arrived in New York City believing they had crossed “the border between the land of *goles* [exile] and the land of freedom.”<sup>24</sup> By the 1930s, around two

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<sup>20</sup> Scott A. Merriman, *Religion and the Law in America: An Encyclopedia of Personal Belief and Public Policy* (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2007), 110.

<sup>21</sup> Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer, ed., *My Future is in America: Autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 21.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Antin, *From Plotzk to Boston* (Boston, 1989), quoted in Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 27.

<sup>23</sup> George Watt, interview by Jonathan Solovy, 1980, Interviews for “Jewish American Volunteers and the Spanish Civil War” Audio Collection, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive, New York University, NY.

<sup>24</sup> Y. Pfeffer, “Pesakh in Nyu York un Elis Ayland: Yetsies mitrayism dertseylt in onel sem’s hoyz,” *Morgen zhurnal*, April 12, 1906, quoted in Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the*

million Jews resided in New York City.<sup>25</sup>

The same wave of immigration that transported two million Eastern European Jews to the shores of New York City, carried approximately 150,000 to London, bringing the Jewish community in London to a total of approximately 180,000.<sup>26</sup> The vast disparity in the size of the immigrant populations in New York City and London demonstrates the greater popularity of New York City among this group.

In fact, Jews settling in London during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century expressed a different vision of this new homeland. For many, the price of traveling across the Atlantic to New York City proved too expensive, dictating London the most practical choice.<sup>27</sup> Rather than praising Great Britain as a utopian land of liberty, Jewish immigrants described their choice to settle in London primarily in terms of the factors which pushed them out of Eastern Europe. In a series of interviews with second-generation Jewish immigrants to London, the decision to settle in this city is described most centrally as a decision to escape anti-Jewish violence and explore new economic opportunities. Others describe attempting to travel to New York City but settling in New York City on the way.<sup>28</sup>

Transplanted from the Eastern European Pale of Settlement into the metropolises of the west, Jewish immigrants in both London and New York City found themselves condemned to the working classes. The massive Jewish immigration into New York City and London presented

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*Age of Immigration, 1840-1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Ritterband, "Counting the Jews of New York, 1900-1991: An Essay in Substance and Method," *Jewish Population Studies* 29. (1997): 210, Accessed Jan 30, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Alderman, *Modern British Jewry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 119.

<sup>27</sup> *Selma Berrol, East Side/East End: Eastern European Jews in London and New York, 1870-1920* (Westport: Praeger, 1994), xi.

<sup>28</sup> Jack Shaw, interview by Toby Haggith, April 12, 1991, Interview 13547, The Spanish Civil War Collection: Sound Archive Oral History Recordings, Imperial War Museum, London; Maurice Levitas, Interview by Conrad Wood, Dec. 17, 1995, Interview 16358, The Spanish Civil War Collection: Sound Archive Oral History Recordings, Imperial War Museum, London.

Communist with fresh hopes for incorporating Jews into their movement.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Soviet Union leadership dictated the establishment of Communist Parties around the world.<sup>29</sup> In response, socialists in the United States attempted to establish two Communist Parties. In 1919, the Communist Party of America was founded under the leadership of Charles Ruthenberg, and boasted a following of approximately 24,000. Meanwhile, the Communist Labor Party under John Reed and Benjamin Gitlow included close to 10,000 members.<sup>30</sup> In 1921, the two groups combined at the behest of Lenin, and, in 1929, the party was renamed the Communist Party of the United States of America.<sup>31</sup> Ten years later, the party would hold a membership of around 100,000.<sup>32</sup>

The first Marxist Jewish group was established in New York City in 1885, setting in motion a long affair between Eastern European Jewish immigrants in New York City and the American left.<sup>33</sup> While the Socialist Party dominated leftist politics in New York City through World War I, the CPUSA rose in importance during the interwar years. Between 1930 and 1938, the body of the CPUSA grew from 7,500 to 75,000. During the 1920's, approximately 15 percent of this growing membership was Jewish, a number which grew over the following decade.<sup>34</sup> Throughout the Popular Front years, Jewish Communism in New York City flourished.<sup>35</sup> Within the CPUSA, New York Jewish Communists held an official organ in the New York State Jewish Buro. Its duties included the production of a monthly Jewish magazine during the late 1930s,

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<sup>29</sup> Geoffrey Alderman, *The Jewish Community in British Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> Klehr, Haynes and Fridrikh Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Liebman, "The Ties That Bind," 337.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew B. Hoffman and Henry F. Srebrnik, ed., *A Vanished Ideology: Essays on the Jewish Communist Movement in the English Speaking World in the Twentieth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016). Actual Party membership numbers are not accounted for during this period. However, scholars agree that Jewish participation in the Communist movement, regardless of card-carrying party membership, reached its height during this period.

entitled *Jewish Life*. More prominently, many Communist Jews held membership in the International Worker's Order (IWO), a fraternal organization of industrial workers associated with the CPUSA.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, in 1920, a group of British socialists gathered in a London hotel intending to unite Great Britain's disparate socialist adherents and trade union leaders into one single Communist Party.<sup>37</sup> The Convention brought together 157 delegates from parties and organizations including the British Socialist Party and the Independent Labor Party. After two days of discussion, the radicals established the Communist Party of Great Britain.<sup>38</sup> Over the course of the next ten years, CPGB membership fluctuated, at times reaching over 11,000 and at others, sinking to less than 3,000.<sup>39</sup> In London, membership in the city's branch of the CPGB reached its height in 1944, with 17,537 members.<sup>40</sup>

By the 1920s, Jews comprised at least 10 percent of documented CPGB membership, with scholars suggesting this number was actually far higher.<sup>41</sup> In 1936, the CPGB established the Jewish Bureau as a body representing Jewish Communists. In 1943, this group was transformed into the National Jewish Committee, dedicated to outlining the intersection of Jewish issues and Communist politics and platforms, while aiding in the development of a strategy for drawing Jews to the CP.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Jennifer Young, "The Scorched Melting Pot: The Jewish People's Fraternal Order and the Making of American Jewish Communism, 1930-1950," in *A Vanished Ideology: Essays on the Jewish Communist Movement in the English Speaking World in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Matthew Hoffman and Henry Srebrnik, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 51.

<sup>37</sup> Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party*, (London: John Murray Publishers Ltd., 2002), 11.

<sup>38</sup> Beckett, *Enemy Within*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew Worley. *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Britain Between the Wars*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2002, 11.

<sup>40</sup> Heppel, "Party Recruitment: Jews and Communism in Britain," 321.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 317-18

<sup>42</sup> Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons, *Socialism and American Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 277.

While a vast majority of Jews in both London and New York City were never members of the CP, Jewish membership in the CP in both London and New York City was disproportionate to the size of the Jewish populations within each city.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Jewish involvement in the CPUSA outnumbered that of London's Jews. These basic differences between New York City and London in general population size as well as proportion of membership within the CP set these two cities and their Communist Jewish communities apart from the outset.

In sum, this chapter demonstrates two central points which serve as the basis for the further comparison of the two cities and their Jewish Communist communities. First, the years between 1935 and 1945, during which the CP established its Popular Front, represented the height of Jewish involvement in the CP in both cities. Second, New York City's Jewish population and number of Communist Jews outnumbered those of London.

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<sup>43</sup> Liebman, *The Jews and the Left*, 63; Heppel, *Dark Times, Dire Decisions*, ed., Jonathan Frankel and Dan Diner, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 315.

Chapter 2: The Vanguard of the Working Classes: The Communist Party and Jewish Socioeconomic Conditions in London and New York City

Vicky Amter grew up in New York City. The child of two Jewish parents, she was raised among New York's tenement houses. As a young adult, Amter joined the Communist Party and became a section organizer on the Lower East Side. In an interview Amter was asked why she joined the CP. She reflected, "I grew up in the tenement houses, I saw the needs and the inequities and the social problems that they had and I heard a lot of discussion on street corners where party people would discuss. I was filled with empathy...I never was a theoretician, I'm still not...I was a gut feeler."<sup>44</sup>

The establishment of Jewish communities in London and New York City during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries followed similar paths. Both shunned by the established German and Central European Jewish communities of both cities, Eastern European Jewish immigrants concentrated into overcrowded and poorly maintained areas of London and New York City. Jews in London funneled into the city's East End, concentrating around the boroughs of Whitechapel, Bethnal Green, Mile End, and Stepney.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile New York Jews settled in the Lower East Side before expanding into areas including Brownsville, the Bronx and East Harlem. On both sides of the Atlantic, these new immigrants faced harsh working conditions in factories and sweatshops with low wages, as well as grim living conditions in overpopulated slums. This chapter explores Jewish socioeconomic conditions between 1935 and 1945 in London and New York City, as well as the ways in which the Communist Parties of both cities attracted Jews like Amter by responding to the social and economic needs of this population.

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<sup>44</sup> Vicky Amter, Interview by Jon Bloom, Sep. 29, 1980, Oral History of the American Left Collection, Tamiment Library and Research Archive, New York University, NY.

<sup>45</sup> Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism*, 21.

Communist ideology by very definition, professes dedication to defending the interests of the working classes. Despite its own claims to represent the best interests of the poor, the CPs in both London and New York City struggled in their early years to attract followers. Between the late 1910s and the mid-1930s, the Communist International (Comintern) demanded CPs around the world maintain strict focus on party dogmas.<sup>46</sup> During these years, CPs adhered to a policy characterized by militant and uncompromising pursuit of revolution through class struggle. As such, the Parties refused to compromise on their ultimate vision of the necessary steps to world equality, through any compromises or alliances with other movements or parties.<sup>47</sup> This policy often muzzled party focus, creating a strategy ignoring the realities of daily working class conditions.<sup>48</sup> By and large, this approach failed the Communist movement in appealing to a large number of those in need of basic social and economic reforms.

In 1935, the Comintern established the Popular Front as CPs around the world declared their central and primary goal the destruction of fascism.<sup>49</sup> This new era ushered in a period of compromise and alliances with other working class and leftist organizations, and to a shift away from militant radical policies towards those focused on more basic social reform.<sup>50</sup> The Popular Front in London and New York City manifested itself in Communist led campaigns centered around housing issues and other socioeconomic conditions, increased involvement in the labor movement, and an overall concern with responding to the needs and concerns of the working and middle classes. Like Amter, many Jews recognized the CPs active efforts to respond to the basic socioeconomic conditions and immediate needs of their community, and found its appeal in a set

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<sup>46</sup> Amter, interview.

<sup>47</sup> Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 459.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 459.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 459.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 460.

of social reform pursuits. It was during these years that Jewish participation in the CPs of London and New York City surged.

During the early 1900s, Jews in the East End of London worked mainly in the clothing, shoe and cabinet making industries. In Stepney, one of the most heavily Jewish boroughs of the East End, 30,000 residents labored in the clothing industry alone.<sup>51</sup> This work required long hours in sweatshops or factories for little pay.<sup>52</sup> During the Depression, unemployment rates in the clothing, furniture and shoe making industries rose and conditions became increasingly difficult. At the same time, overcrowding and the deteriorating state of housing found the Jews of the East End, and especially Stepney, in grim conditions.<sup>53</sup> In 1938, 184 people crowded into each acre of Stepney, with many living illegally in basements.<sup>54</sup>

In 1943, the National Jewish Committee of the CPGB in London declared the Popular Front a time not only of warfare against fascism, but of direct resistance against the issues facing the city's working classes. The committee stated,

The fight against the Fascists and anti-Semites and all sorts of diversionists can only be successful by cementing and making a reality of this unity...Here too, the London Party has shown that while we fight for a speedy victory and Labour unity, we at the same time fight for the immediate day to day needs of the people, e.g. health, housing, education, dependents' allowances, etc.,<sup>55</sup>

In line with this statement, the Popular Front Period brought the CPGB to the forefront of social reform advocacy for the predominantly Jewish population of the East End.

In an effort to organize for better conditions, the early years of the twentieth century saw various small Jewish trade unions established, including the National Amalgamated Furnishing

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<sup>51</sup> Alderman, *The Jewish Community in British Politics*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>55</sup> Statement Released to Public, "Letter of the National Jewish Committee of the Communist Party," by National Jewish Committee of the CPGB, October 10, 1943, Box CP/CENT/CTTE/02, File 2, Minutes of the Jewish Bureau, 1937-1945, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester.

Trades Association 15 and the Union of Clothing Workers.<sup>56</sup> The leadership of these trade unions maintained strong ties to the CPGB, working through them and alongside them on labor issues. Meanwhile, the Marxist led Workers' Circle, gathered Jewish Eastern European immigrants into an group advocating for workers rights.<sup>57</sup>

In the 1930s, Stepney represented the East End borough most heavily populated by Jews. In turn, the Stepney CP chapter brought issues of housing to the forefront of its agenda.<sup>58</sup> Communist organizers produced literature to enlighten tenants on their rights, as well as ways to retain their houses in spite of landlord efforts to evict them. In addition, the CPGB established the Stepney Tenants' Defense League (STDLE), a group under the auspices of Communist Jewish leader Michael Shapiro and the leadership of other Jewish Communists such as Phil Piratin and Tubby Rosen. The group's purpose was to organize tenants in Stepney to fight against rising rents and poor living conditions.<sup>59</sup> Over the course of its existence, the STDLE organized rent strikes and marches in the East End.<sup>60</sup> In 1939, a rent strike of 2,000 tenants demonstrated the power of the group. That year, the STDLE announced that £25,000 was given to tenants as restitution for rent hiking, and an additional £60,000 for repairs. By 1940, 11,000 Stepney tenants joined the STDLE.<sup>61</sup>

Beyond organizing through labor unions on wage issues, and advocating for tenants around housing concerns, CP backed candidacies in the East End during the Popular Front years demonstrated a strong effort to respond to the needs of residents. In 1945, the CPGB ran Communist Jew Phil Piratin for election to Parliament in the Mile End district of London's East

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<sup>56</sup> Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>60</sup> "Fight For Homes," *Jewish Clarion*, March 1949.

<sup>61</sup> Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism*, 48.

End. Piratin's platform, directed towards the predominantly Jewish population of the East End, focused on continued resistance against fascism in the post-war years, as well as on housing, wages and other issues concerning his Jewish constituency. In an interview in 1987, Phil Piratin reflected on his own election to parliament, as well as the CPGB's success in organizing and appealing to the people of the East End. In response to a question regarding why the CPGB won support in elections during the 1930s and 1940s, Piratin explained that,

People were not voting for any kind of academic explanation of socialism, they were voting for a record. I remember during the election campaign, I was walking along the road with a young Oxford graduate- a comrade - and a local woman, a Mrs. Murphy, came up to me and said, "Six votes for you in our house, Phil." And she turned to the young man and said, "Do you know why we're voting for him? Because he got me a bleeding dustbin." After she'd gone he said, "But what's that got to do with Marxism?" I said: "If you mean, is she in any way knowledgeable about Marxism then the answer is no, but we touched her life in a positive and practical way." In the five years before the war, we brought a communist spirit to Stepney which was a genuine spirit of struggle.<sup>62</sup>

Piratin's words describe the CP's strategy of organizing around the issues most central to the East End community. While other political parties focused on broader reforms, or ignored the basic needs of the community, the CP and Piratin himself were in the streets talking to constituents and responding to their concerns. In Piratin's own words,

We concentrated on two things...the fight against fascism, and the other was the tenants' movement. We did a great deal of work on local issues, we fought battles. That's how we won support...When we went out on our daily worker round, the first thing we asked on the doorstep was "Have you got any problems?" And we stood by the people in the war. We were the first to initiate things- the fight for shelters and so on. People voted Communist in Stepney because of the things that had been done by the Communist Party in Stepney. Then, above all, we were outgoing, working in the grassroots, listening to people."<sup>63</sup>

As Piratin explains, few Jewish Communists in the East End adhered to, or even understood Communist theory or ideology. Piratin himself once explained that he understood very little of

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<sup>62</sup> "How to win votes and influence people," *7 Days Perspective*, 18 July 1987, 1.

<sup>63</sup> "How to win votes and influence people," 1

Lenin's writing. Instead, Piratin's record of addressing the basic and most essential socioeconomic needs of East End Jews was well known among Communist and non-Communist Jew alike. Piratin's popularity stemmed from his creation and leadership of the tenants' movement, as well as for his support of the East End's unemployed residents. Piratin won battles for Stepney residents, preventing the eviction of many East London tenants, and pushing landlords to perform repairs and return rent money following rent hikes. In the campaign of 1945, Piratin promised to continue his record of supporting the East End by guaranteeing Stepney residents better housing, cheaper rents, and an end to poor treatment, blackmail, and other corrupt landlord practices. In 1945, Piratin became the first and only Jew elected to Parliament.<sup>64</sup>

In an effort to further appeal to voters in the East End, the Piratin campaign sought to unite Jewish interests with the interests of the general working classes, allowing Jews to develop common ground with their gentile neighbors. Piratin and the CP's work on tenant's issues in the East End brought Jews into alliance with their gentile neighbors in the streets of London. An article promoting Piratin in 1945 stated,

The work of the Tenants' League proved to everyone that Jews and Gentiles have the same enemies...What joy there was in Brohmead Street area - mainly Jewish people - when the people from Southern Grove, Mile End, and Quinn Square, Bethnal Green - mainly non-Jews - marched along after their successful rent strikes for a big get together. Sophie Shneider was in her element making cups of tea and handing round cake. There was a sing-song. Never did people learn better how much they have in common. It's the same kind of unity that won Britain the war against Nazi Fascism. Britain still needs that unity to win us the fight for new homes and better post-war conditions.<sup>65</sup>

By the time Piratin entered Parliament in 1945, his reputation for promoting Jewish and working class interests was well known across the East End. Meanwhile, the CP gained a reputation as the

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<sup>64</sup> Pamphlet, Phil Piratin Campaign Poster, 1945, MS118, Fond 9, File b, Communist Related Materials; Jewish Matters, Laser Zaidman Papers, University of Sheffield Special Collections, University of Sheffield, Sheffield.

<sup>65</sup> Pamphlet, Phil Piratin Campaign Poster, 1945, Laser Zaidman Papers.

vanguard of Jews and the wider working classes of London.

In addition to Phil Piratin's successful campaign for election as the first and only Jewish Communist Member of Parliament, other 1945 campaigns in London's East End focused on the needs of working class Jews. A publication endorsing the Communist candidates across London in the 1945 elections highlighted that in the preceding years without Communist councilors in office, the CPGB had already made various achievements, including raising pay and dependents' allowances for Servicemen, creating nurseries, and leading the mobilization of the East End for the war effort including the establishment of a battery factory.<sup>66</sup> In Hackney, another heavily Jewish borough, Freda Lucas ran as a Communist candidate on promises to address housing shortages, expand health services and build schools and nurseries. Meanwhile, CPGB member and editor of the Communist newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, William Rust, campaigned in South Hackney with promises for better housing. One campaign pamphlet for Rust detailed a list of demands all directly addressing Jewish needs, including the creation of a law making anti-Semitism illegal, supporting an easing of naturalization processes for Jews in Great Britain, as well as the development of Jewish cultural institutions in South Hackney.<sup>67</sup>

Over the course of the Popular Front years, Jews dominated many of CPGB branches in the East End of London, and even entered Parliament as representatives of this community. Meanwhile, the actions of the CP around socioeconomic reforms allowed the CP to establish itself as a direct defender of the practical needs of London's Jews.

Across the Atlantic, the New York City CP's response to Jewish working class concerns paralleled London. During the Popular Front years, the New York City CP actively fought

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<sup>66</sup> Pamphlet, Hackney Borough Committee Communist Party Publication, MS 118, Fond 4, File 169, Laser Zaidman Papers, University of Sheffield Special Collections, University of Sheffield, Sheffield.

<sup>67</sup> Pamphlet, South Hackney Communist Party Publication, MS 118, Fond 4, File 169, Laser Zaidman Papers, University of Sheffield Special Collections, University of Sheffield, Sheffield.

against evictions, while pushing welfare departments to provide for the unemployed Jewish poor. Meanwhile, the radical left spoke out against the filthy, crime ridden conditions of the New York City working class Jews.<sup>68</sup>

Like in London, the New York City CP was deeply rooted in New York's labor unions. At the time, Jewish union laborers comprised a significant portion of CP membership.<sup>69</sup> In the late 1920s, 15 percent of CP members were employed in the garment industry, a heavily Jewish industry. During these years, 80 percent of the membership of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union was Jewish.<sup>70</sup> In 1929, the CPUSA formed Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, which attracted a large number of Jewish needle workers in the 1930s.<sup>71</sup>

Just as in London, the CP's response to Jewish socio-economic issues appealed to many. Vicky Amter, the Jewish CP member quoted at the start of this chapter, explained in an interview that her work in the CP involved responding to issues in her local Jewish community. Amter described her work, "Most of us did tenant's work, and then we related to the community and to the issues of the community, better housing, clean[ing] and sanitation, jobs, better schools, because...we were very active on the issues that faced communities at that time."<sup>72</sup>

Like Vicky Amter, Abe Osheroff was a "gut feeler" of Communism. In an interview, the Jewish New York City CP member responded to the question of why he joined the CP,

I would say at the outset, very practical questions. The Great Depression hit when I was 14 years old. I saw hunger in my neighborhood, and I saw a lot of people put out on the streets for not paying their rent and it just infuriated me. Even as a kid, it was wrong you know. But I remember asking my parents, why, why, why, is this happening and they couldn't give me an answer. When I was approaching 16 I began to hear explanations of the crisis by young communists. And they made sense to me at the time. I joined the YCL shortly after that.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Liebman, "The Ties That Bind," 338.

<sup>69</sup> Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 62.

<sup>70</sup> Beth Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 15.

<sup>71</sup> Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 62.

<sup>72</sup> Amter, interview.

<sup>73</sup> Abe Osheroff, interview by Jonathan Solovy, Sep. 29, 1980, Interviews for "Jewish American Volunteers and the

Amter and Osheroff represent two of countless Jews who watched the CP respond to the socioeconomic needs of the Jewish communities around them, and joined the party as a result.

While the CPs in London and New York City both appealed to Jewish populations through social reforms efforts aimed at the working classes during the Popular Front period, these parties were also forced to shape their campaigns to the divergent socioeconomic conditions of the two Jewish populations.

As the twentieth century stretched on, Jews in the United States were economically outpacing their coreligionists in Great Britain. During these years, New York's Jewish population exhibited a pattern of upward mobility.<sup>74</sup> By the Popular Front, many Jews were already on their way to entering the middle classes in large number.<sup>75</sup> A study of Jewish entrepreneurship in London and New York City at the turn of the century compares the two Jewish communities. Jewish entrepreneurship in London increased from 12.2 percent of the male population in the 1880s to 18 percent by the 1910s. Meanwhile, in New York City, the percentage of Jewish entrepreneurs increased from 18 percent to 34.3 percent of males in the same time frame.<sup>76</sup> In their work, *Purchasing Power: The Economics of Modern Jewish History*, Rebecca Kobrin and Adam Teller explain that Jews in London and New York City were subject to different economic frameworks. Referencing the entrepreneurship study above as evidence of the different rates of upward economic mobility provided Jews in their respective homes, Kobrin and Teller explain that London's Jews were far slower to advance economically than New York Jewry.<sup>77</sup>

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Spanish Civil War Collection, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wager Labor Archive, New York University, NY.

<sup>74</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>76</sup> Andrew Godley, "Enterprise and Culture: Jewish Immigrants in London and New York, 1880-1914." *The Journal of Economic History* 54 (1994): 430-2.

<sup>77</sup> Rebecca Kobrin and Adam Teller, *Purchasing Power: The Economics of Modern Jewish History*. (Philadelphia:

In 1900, 60 percent of Jews still worked in unskilled employment in the United States. By 1935, however, a New York City Welfare Council survey declared that 47 percent of New York's Jewish families were employed in white-collar jobs, and over a third of Jewish families had fathers employed as managers, officials or business owners. This proportion was over twice the percentage of non-Jewish immigrant families in white-collar jobs. When the Depression hit New York City in 1929, many other immigrant, ethnic and racial groups in the city remained rooted in unskilled, low-wage labor, and were severely impacted by the Depression. Jewish involvement in white-collar employment, however, allowed many to escape the harshest effects of the Depression. While twenty-two percent of Italians received government relief during the Depression, only 12 percent of Jews took this aid. In the 1930s, a Works Progress Administration documented the Jewish experience of the Depression years, "The crisis struck a number of members of our circle but it did not have catastrophic effects on them."<sup>78</sup>

As many Jews joined New York City's white-collar population, Jewish employment in the garment industry and needle trade decreased, and second-generation Jews increasingly rose above the lower socioeconomic status of their parents and into the middle class. By around 1935, the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union held half the number of Jewish women it had claimed fifteen years earlier. At the same time, Jewish families with fathers employed as unskilled laborers comprised 3 percent of families, while only 18 percent of non-Jewish families remained in unskilled labor.<sup>79</sup> In 1935, young Jews represented over half of employed youth. For those second-generation Jews who did not enter white-collar work, Jewish immigrant parents

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University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 139.

<sup>78</sup> Yiddish Writers Group of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Projects Administration in the City of New York, *Jewish Families and Family Circles of New York* (New York: Yiddish Writer's Union, 1939), Quoted in Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 17.

<sup>79</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 15.

advocated intensely for their children to escape the factory labor they endured, pushing them towards increased education.<sup>80</sup> In turn, a large number of second-generation Jews entered college. By the early 1900s, 25 percent of City College of New York's graduates were Jewish.<sup>81</sup>

In light of the existence of a Jewish community with a strong working class body, as well as an increasingly middle class group, the New York CP focused its social reform organizing during the Popular Front years on both segments of the Jewish population.<sup>82</sup> Between 1935 and 1941, the party's middle class membership rose from 10 to 44 percent. During these years, the CP in the United States became the only party within the Comintern whose membership was heavily made up on non-industrial workers. By 1946, only 29 percent of the New York City CP was comprised of industrial workers. In turn, the CP developed strong ties to heavily Jewish white-collar unions such as the Social Service Employees Union and the New York City District 65 of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union during the Popular Front years.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, while the Lower East Side of New York City had in the early twentieth century boasted the world's highest population density, many of its former Jewish tenement residents had moved out of this neighborhood by the Popular Front years. These years saw the most significant party growth in increasingly Jewish populated areas of New York City such as the West Side, Washington Heights and Greenwich Village.<sup>84</sup> Out of these neighborhoods, the party recruited a disproportionately Jewish middle class body of members and "fellow travelers," or non-member party associates. Many of these members were part of a Jewish intellectual and artistic community.<sup>85</sup> This group of figures will be further discussed in the final chapter, which will

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<sup>80</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 16.

<sup>81</sup> Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 188.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 464.

explore the ways by which the higher socioeconomic positions of New York City's Jews contributed to a CP membership with greater focus on cultural and intellectual concerns.

This chapter highlights two points. First, the CP attracted Jews during the Popular Front through its actions around improving the socioeconomic conditions of lower class Jews. Second, a comparison of the distinct socioeconomic conditions of Jews in London and New York City highlights that the CP held a versatile position in appealing to Jewish members. In London, the CP's campaigns, social reform pursuits and election platforms presented Jews with a party responding to their direct needs. In New York City, the relatively higher socioeconomic position of a large portion of New York's Jews meant that the CP engaged with both working class issues and increasingly middle class concerns during this period.

Chapter 3: Fighting Fascists: The Communist Response to the Rise of Fascism and Anti-Semitism

Charlie Goodman was born in 1915 at London's Middlesex Hospital. At the age of twelve, he began attending political meetings with his uncles. Soon, Goodman watched as the British Union of Fascists, marched through the streets of his city, shouting anti-Semitic slogans. In response, he joined the resistance against fascism, led by the CP of Great Britain. In 1936, Goodman was arrested fighting the fascist "blackshirts" at the Battle of Cable Street. Hungering to battle fascism beyond the streets of the East End, he then travelled to Spain with the International Brigades to fight against Franco's fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War. In an interview years later, Goodman explained, "The Communist Party [of Great Britain] was very very strong. Not because the Jewish people understood the theory of Communism or even supported the theory of Communism, but they saw the Communist Party as a leading organization in a fight against Mosley fascism, so they gravitated towards [it]."<sup>86</sup>

Goodman's story is not unique. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jews left behind the anti-Jewish violence and legislation of Eastern Europe for western cities they believed would be welcoming. The Popular Front years saw a spike in anti-Semitism in both London and New York City, however. In both cities, massive Jewish immigration at the start of the century had inspired a wave of anti-Jewish sentiment among those who saw Jews as unwashed and moneyless intruders. By the 1930s, this sentiment combined with an effort to blame Jews for the economic declines spurred by the Great Depression. Meanwhile, as fascism rose from the heart of Europe and spread around the world, anti-Semitism became a central and popular tenet of the movement's rhetoric. Between 1935 and 1945, all three of these anti-Semitic

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<sup>86</sup> Charlie Goodman, interview by Conrad Wood, Apr. 5, 1996, Interview 16612, The Spanish Civil War Collection: Sound Archive Oral History Recordings, Imperial War Museum, London.

tropes wove through the streets of London and New York City.

Just as anti-Semitism increased in both cities, the Comintern established the Popular Front, reappportioning all efforts towards the cause of fighting fascism. Soon, the CP came to be seen as a stalwart leader in the fight against fascism and anti-Semitism across the globe. The CPs' strong stance against fascism and anti-Semitism, as well as its unyielding resistance against these growing movements during the Popular Front years, attracted many Jews. This chapter will explore the ways by which the Communist Parties in London and New York City appealed to Jews through their active response to rising anti-Semitism and fascism both locally, and more broadly, during the Popular Front.

British Jewry multiplied by five during the years of Eastern European immigration. By 1914, immigration began to slow, leaving the London borough of Stepney with 100,000 Jewish residents.<sup>87</sup> As the population multiplied and concentrated into areas of London's East End, Jews were attacked with a wide range of accusations, targeting them as an unwashed, disease-ridden, destitute population, to a greedy, criminal and traitorous group plotting to takeover Britain.<sup>88</sup> One East End newspaper expressed its disdain for the Jewish immigrants, complaining of the "spread of a perfect series of Jewries in the great trading and industrial center of the kingdom characterized by all the dirt and nastiness, the squalor and crime, superstition and vice which are the salient features of the Hebraic settlements."<sup>89</sup> As the Depression developed and the British economy took a downward turn in 1929, Jews became a scapegoat for the growing financial crisis.<sup>90</sup> Meanwhile, newspapers and political leaders increasingly employed rhetoric accusing

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<sup>87</sup> Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism*, 20.

<sup>88</sup> Robert Wistrich, *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred* (New York City: Pantheon Books, 1991), 104-5.

<sup>89</sup>"Alien Immigration in the Provinces," *East End News*, 27 January 1903.

<sup>90</sup> Gisela Lebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism in England, 1918-1939* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978), 29.

Jews of failing to support the British war effort, or dominating the black market.<sup>91</sup>

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, anti-Semitism found a new ally in rising fascism. Increasingly popular fascist leaders across Europe capitalized on existing anti-Semitism and notions of Jews as both a scourge on cities and the cause of economic downturn. The rise of Hitler and Mussolini on the continent, as well as events such as the Spanish Civil War between fascist and Republican forces, instilled in Jews a sense of the imminent threat posed by an increasingly popular movement targeting Jews. Over the course of the early twentieth century, London itself saw the establishment of a number of fascist and anti-Semitic organizations including the Imperial Fascist League, the Britons, the National Socialist League and the British Union of Fascists. Meanwhile, various fascists and anti-Semites came into prominence in British society and government, including the Member of Parliament, Captain Archibald Ramsay.<sup>92</sup>

In 1932, Oswald Mosley founded the British Union of Fascists (BUF). The BUF quickly amassed followers sensitive to the economic downturn of the Depression years.<sup>93</sup> The group adopted anti-Semitic tropes within its rhetoric and message, attracting thousands to its movement.<sup>94</sup> In 1934, the BUF drew a body of 50,000 members.<sup>95</sup> The BUF held meetings across London, promoting anti-Semitic propaganda from their posts on street corners. Meanwhile, the streets of working class neighborhoods in London became filled with fascist youth chanting, “The yids, the yids, we’ve got to get rid of the Yids.”<sup>96</sup> This fascist rhetoric became so commonplace that London youth reportedly

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<sup>91</sup> Lebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism in England*, 32.

<sup>92</sup> Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism*, 53.

<sup>93</sup> Lebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism in England*, 36.

<sup>94</sup> Keith Hodgson, *Fighting Fascism: The British Left and the Rise of Fascism, 1919-39* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 133.

<sup>95</sup> William Rubinstein, “Antisemitism in the English-Speaking World,” in *Antisemitism: A History*, ed., Albert Lindemann and Richard Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 61. Instances in this paper in which figures are given for years outside of the period between 1935 and 1945 are provided due to a lack of clear figures during the period at hand.

<sup>96</sup> Robert Jacob and Alexander Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (Papermac, 1990), 404-5. “Yid” is a term for Jews often employed in anti-Semitic rhetoric.

played a game called “Jews and Gentiles,” modeled on the traditional “cops and robbers.”<sup>97</sup> As Mosley’s followers, or “blackshirts,” targeted Jews concentrated in London’s East End, London Jewry increasingly feared the hostility of their new home.<sup>98</sup>

Anti-Semitism and fascism in London between 1935 and 1945 manifested itself primarily in discriminatory rhetoric saturating public speeches and newspaper articles, along with more physically threatening forms of “Jew-baiting.” The latter involved instances of smashing the windows of Jewish businesses and homes, looting, and physical assaults. Meanwhile, Jewish stores were boycotted and picketed by fascists groups, and swastikas as well as anti-Jewish phrases and symbols were painted on Jewish homes, shops and public spaces in the East End.<sup>99</sup> Instances of physical violence became especially prevalent in 1936, when London’s fascist groups established a “reign of terror,” forming gangs to beat Jews in the streets of the East End.<sup>100</sup>

In the face of increasingly prevalent anti-Semitism and fascism, the CPGB took its stand, announcing, “It is quite clear, then. The task of saving democracy and defeating fascism is our job. A People’s Front against fascism is the answer.”<sup>101</sup> In an effort to materialize the party’s claim to represent the Jewish vanguard against fascism, CP leaders in London entered the Popular Front years by demonstrating fascist resistance both in the streets of London and abroad.

On October 4, 1936, Oswald Mosley planned to lead his blackshirts through the streets of East London.<sup>102</sup> The CPGB, Young Communist League and other groups organized mass resistance against the fascist march. The slogan of “They shall not pass” became the battle cry of the Jews and

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<sup>97</sup> Jacob and Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, 404-5.

<sup>98</sup> Lebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism in England*, 35.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>100</sup> Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism*, 56.

<sup>101</sup> “Letter of the National Jewish Committee of the Communist Party,” 1943. CP/CENT/CTTE/02/02. National Jewish Committee Papers, Labour History Archive and Study Centre. Manchester.

<sup>102</sup> Christos Efstathiou, “Some Ideological Aspects of the “Battle of Cable Street,” in *Democracy, Participation and Contestation: Civil Society, Governance and the Future of Liberal Democracy*, ed., Avril, Emanuelle and Neem, Johann (New York: Routledge, 2015), 25.

others who joined the fight.<sup>103</sup> As Mosley and his followers entered the East End, Communist protesters blocked the path of the march, rerouting Mosley's "blackshirts" to Cable Street. There, CPGB leader and future Communist MP, Phil Piratin organized a barricade of trams to block the march. On Cable Street, fights ensued between the fascists on one side, and the Jews of the East End, with members of the CP, on the other.<sup>104</sup> One member of the Young Communist League recounted that a quarter of a million people stopped the march of the Blackshirts in Aldgate.<sup>105</sup> In the aftermath of the event, the CPGB prided itself on organizing and leading the resistance against fascist advances in London, while Jews viewed this event as tangible proof of the CPGB's dedication to protecting their interests.<sup>106</sup>

Meanwhile, an event taking place a thousand miles from London's East End, afforded the CPGB an opportunity to once again prove its dedication to fighting fascism. On July 17, 1936, a military coup in Spain marked the beginning of a three year civil war.<sup>107</sup> Immediately after the war broke out, the Comintern began organizing military support for the Republican army in their war against the Nationalists under General Franco. Four months after the coup, the first Comintern organized troops of the International Brigades (IB) entered Madrid.<sup>108</sup> The IB encompassed units from around the world, including Great Britain and the United States. Of the thousands of volunteers from across the globe, it is estimated that up to 22 percent were Jewish.<sup>109</sup>

As the CPGB began recruiting volunteers into the International Brigades, London Jews

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<sup>103</sup> Samantha Bird, *Stepney: Profile of a London Borough from the Outbreak of the First World War to the Festival of Britain, 1914-1951* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 6.

<sup>104</sup> Efstathiou, "Some Ideological Aspects of the "Battle of Cable Street," 25.

<sup>105</sup> Jack Shaw, interview

<sup>106</sup> Jack Shaw, interview; Dave Goodman, interview. This sentiment is expressed extensively in interviews such as these.

<sup>107</sup> R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 3.

<sup>108</sup> Richardson, *Comintern Army*, 1.

<sup>109</sup> Alberto Fernandez, "Judios en la Guerra de Espana," transl, *Tiempo de Historia* (Madrid: Sept, 1975).

became increasingly concerned with the events of the Spanish Civil War. Many East London Jews feared that a fascist government in Spain would parallel the anti-Semitic rise of Hitler in Germany. Thus, a number of London Jews, enlisted in the Comintern army intending to resist against the spread of fascism and anti-Semitism. Many were not members of the CPGB at the time they joined the Communist army. One Jewish soldier from London, Charles Sewell Bloom, estimated that only about two-fifths of his battalion were Communists. Bloom himself enlisted in the International Brigades for one reason: "I'm an anti-fascist, was and always have been."<sup>110</sup> Another British veteran of the International Brigades, Jud Coleman, explained that Jews such as himself volunteered to fight in Spain not for the sake of bringing about a Communist Revolution, but to defeat fascism.<sup>111</sup> In Great Britain, approximately 2000 soldiers joined the IB.<sup>112</sup> British Jewish membership in the IB is estimated to have included between 200 and 400 soldiers.<sup>113</sup>

Over the course of the Spanish Civil War, the Stepney CP supported the anti-fascist cause in numerous other ways. The CP continuously voiced disapproval of the non-interventionist policy of the British government. In addition, while the CPGB collected funds for the British Battalion, the Stepney CP dedicated funds to the Naftali Botwin Company. This company, which took its name from a Polish Jewish Communist, consisted of about 175 Polish Jews and used Yiddish as its official language. For the Stepney CP and other London Jews, the Naftali Botwin Company represented the Jewish struggle against fascism around the world.<sup>114</sup>

The CP's active resistance against fascism in the Battle of Cable Street and the Spanish

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<sup>110</sup> Charles Sewell Bloom, interview by Margaret Brooks, 1977, Interview 992, Oral History Recordings: British Involvement in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-9, Imperial War Museum, London.

<sup>111</sup> Julius "Jud" Coleman, interview by Toby Haggith, Oct. 1994, Interview 14575, The Spanish Civil War Collection: Sound Archive Oral History Recordings, Imperial War Museum, London.

<sup>112</sup> Book, "British Involvement in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939; Oral History Recordings," 1980, LBY81/742, Department of Sound Recordings, Imperial War Museum, London.

<sup>113</sup> Martin Sugarman, *Against Fascism: Jews Who Served in the Spanish Civil War*, AJEX: 2000. Page 2. Held in Imperial War Museum, Accession 00/1452.

<sup>114</sup> Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism*, 107.

Civil War at the start of the Popular Front effectively solidified a significant base of Jewish support for the CP in London. Meanwhile, the CP built a network of organizations dedicated to the agenda of anti-fascist resistance, providing London's Jews with both security and solidarity in the fight against anti-Semitism.

During the Popular Front years, and even earlier, Communist affiliated youth groups, such as the Young Communist League (YCL), and Jewish Lads Brigade (JLB), built their agendas and activities around continually disrupted fascist meetings and rallies.<sup>115</sup> In 1934, the Young Communist League passed a resolution stating that its central purpose during the following years would be to, "rouse all working-class youth to drive Mosley and his poisonous anti-Semitic propaganda out of Britain."<sup>116</sup> Maurice Levitas, a young Jewish man from the East End and member of the Young Communist League, explained that the YCL responded to the spread of the BUF by creating chapters in areas where the BUF was gaining strongholds. In Bethnal Green, the YCL recruited about 150 members through promoting anti-fascist politics. Levitas explains that he himself joined the YCL at the age of 16 because,

...for Jews the special situation was that Hitler had come to power, and there was a similar character by the name of Mosley who was trying this same stunt in London. And also there was the fact that people like my father and other Jews in their 30's and 40's, who had come from Eastern Europe remembered the anti-Semitism of Eastern Europe and knew that the SU had abolished anti-Semitism, so there was a natural sympathy for the Soviet Union if you happened to be a Jewish worker.<sup>117</sup>

Similarly, London East Ender Jack Shaw explained that he joined the YCL simply, "because that was the only organization that was fighting fascism."<sup>118</sup> Over the course of the Popular Front

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<sup>115</sup> Maurice Levitas, interview. The Jewish Lads Brigade was not officially a Communist affiliated body, many of its East End members were affiliated with the CP as demonstrated in interviews such as this one. . The YCL often recruited out of the Jewish Lads' Brigade, and a significant portion of its membership was Jewish.

<sup>116</sup> Report, Report and Resolutions of the 9th National Congress of the Young Communist League, 1934, Box 1, Young Communist League- Periodicals A-Z, Working Class Movement Library, Salford.

<sup>117</sup> Maurice Levitas, Interview.

<sup>118</sup> Jack Louis interview by Toby Haggith, 12 Apr. 1991, Interview 13547, The Spanish Civil War Collection: Sound Archive Oral History Recordings, Imperial War Museum, London.

years, London's Jews increasingly gravitated towards the CP's anti-fascist agenda, regardless of their attachment to Communist ideology. Jewish YCL member Dave Goldman explained that despite his committed membership in the YCL, "I was still politically very naive, and confused and had no sort of structured view of politics. I had my own liberal upbringing and my own view of what was going on with the rise of fascism, but I didn't know a lot about communism."<sup>119</sup>

At the same time that the CPGB and its London branches demonstrated dedication to defending Jews against anti-Semitism and fascism, Jews became increasingly frustrated by the relative silence of the Labour Party (LP), the British government, and the Jewish establishment. In 1936, the Stepney branch of the CP commenced the Popular Front years by inviting the Stepney Labour MP to ally in public resistance against fascism. The Labour MP offered little response.<sup>120</sup> Meanwhile, in the fall of 1936, the Stepney Labour MP accused London's Jewish population of "hysteria" in their participation in the Battle of Cable Street. Rising to the defense of its Jewish members, the CP blamed the LP for its compliance with Mosley and the BUF, arguing that party action could have prevented Mosley's march.<sup>121</sup> This trend of the LP's absence from the resistance against anti-Semitism in London continued throughout the Popular Front years.

Over the course of World War II, many Jews became increasingly frustrated with the British government's military decisions. While accusing the British government of failing to act in the interests of the Jewish community at various points during the war, the CPGB pursued various avenues of direct support for Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. In 1943, the CPGB passed a resolution demanding that the British Government go beyond offering sympathy for the horrors committed to

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<sup>119</sup>Dave Goodman, interview by Conrad Wood, 15 Apr. 1996, Interview 16621, The Spanish Civil War Collection: Sound Archive Oral History Recordings, Imperial War Museum, London.

<sup>120</sup>Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism*, 54

<sup>121</sup>Ibid., 54.

European Jewry by offering Jewish refugees safety in Great Britain.<sup>122</sup> At a Conference of Jewish Members of the CPGB that same year, attendees produced a statement declaring support for the unpopular Second Front delayed by the British government. The Conference declared, “The Second Front has a special meaning for Jews. Fascism threatens the entire Jewish people, who would be the first to gain from immediate victory and the first to lose by defeat.”<sup>123</sup> This alignment of interests between London Jews and the CPGB offered many in the East End a reason to join the CP.<sup>124</sup>

While the inactivity of the LP and the British government represented a major source of anger among Jews during the Popular Front years, East End Jews developed even greater frustrations with the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the central body representing British Jews since 1760. When war broke out in Spain, and the fascist menace seemed increasingly close to London’s Jews, the Board of Deputies was deeply focused on a Zionist agenda, gathering money for the building of a Jewish state rather than supporting the Naftali Botwin Company and other anti-fascist causes.<sup>125</sup> Over the course of the Popular Front years, Board of Deputies agendas engaged little with events such as the Spanish Civil War, the spread of fascism across Europe, and the growing plight of European Jewry, instead focusing discussions on such matters as Zionism and concern over kosher meats in London.<sup>126</sup>

In 1943, Jewish members of the CPGB issued a declaration addressed to the Jews of Great Britain. This “Call to the Jews of Great Britain” detailed the atrocities committed by the

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<sup>122</sup> Pamphlet, Communist Party of Great Britain Public Statement to London Jews, 17 Feb, 1943, Box CP/CENT/CTTE/02/01, File 01, Minutes, etc., of the National Jewish Committee, 1940s-60s, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester.

<sup>123</sup> Report, National Jewish Committee on Conference of Jewish Members of the CPGB, 1943, Box CP/CENT/CTTE/02/01, File 01, Minutes, etc., of the National Jewish Committee, 1940s-60s, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester.

<sup>124</sup> Srebrnik, *London Jews and British Communism*, 77.

<sup>125</sup> Elaine R Smith, “Class, Ethnicity and Politics in the Jewish East End,” *Jewish Historical Studies* 32 (1990), 364.

<sup>126</sup> This statement stems from an examination of the agendas of the Board of Deputies in their archives between 1935 and 1945.

Nazis and the Axis powers during the early years of the war and declared that the central task of British Jews was to: “to put aside all differences and divisions and unite as Jews.”<sup>127</sup> This statement addressed to British Jews presented the CPGB as an organization which placed Jewish interests and the fight against fascism above its own agenda, a policy, the statement implied, at odds with such mainstream organizations as the Board of Deputies.

As the Popular Front years stretched on, the CPGB and the Board of Deputies continued to clash over the best interests of London’s Jews. Over the course of the Popular Front years, the CP continually advocated for illegalizing anti-Semitism (as had been done in the Soviet Union). Many of London’s East End Jews were furious to find that the Board of Deputies of British had met with Jewish MPs to oppose the legislation, arguing it would culminate in negative views of London Jewry.<sup>128</sup> Meanwhile, in 1943, the CP organized against the release of Mosley and other interned fascist leaders.<sup>129</sup> In turn, the Board of Deputies did little to stop Mosley’s release, provoking anger in the East End where the Stepney borough council represented the first local government body to publicly oppose the British government’s decision.<sup>130</sup>

In 1943, the battle between the National Jewish Committee of the CP and the Board of Deputies manifested itself in a public CP report that the Board of Deputies was doing little to address the real needs of Jews in London. The report explained, “Clearly the Board is out of touch with the real interests of the Jewish people...Real issues such as the winning of the war...the fight against anti-Semitism...find little of no place in the business of the Parliament of British Jews.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Pamphlet, Communist Party of Great Britain Public Statement to London Jews, 17 Feb, 1943, Minutes, etc., of the National Jewish Committee.

<sup>128</sup> Henry Srebrnik, “The British Communist Party’s National Jewish Committee and the Fight Against Anti-Semitism During the Second World War,” in *The Politics of Marginality: Race, the Radical Right and Minority in Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. Tony Kushner and Kenneth Lunn (Abingdon: Frank Cass & Cp. Ltd., 2006), 85.

<sup>129</sup> “Daily Worker Leads Fight Against Anti-Semitism” 1946, The Jewish Clarion.

<sup>130</sup> Srebrnik, “The British Communist Party’s National Jewish Committee,” 87.

<sup>131</sup> Publication, National Jewish Committee Public Statement, 1943, CP/CENT/CTEE/02, File 02, Minutes of the Jewish Bureau, 1937-1945, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester.

Arguing that dedicating time and resources to the issue of Palestine obstructed the immediate needs of European Jewry, the CPGB promised to focus on addressing the immediate dangers posed by the rise of fascism and Nazism.<sup>132</sup> An additional report of the same year explained “They [the Board of Deputies] should be mobilising Jews to intense war effort activity, but reluctance, fear and indecisiveness are preventing this. “What will the non-Jew say?” is the key note of everything they do.”<sup>133</sup> From the standpoint of such critics, the Labour Party, the government and the Jewish establishment spent the Popular Front years encouraging a path of least resistance, advocating Jewish passivity and peaceful disengagement in response to anti-Semitism and fascism in the streets of London. For many London Jews, this strategy did not suffice. Over the course of the late 1930’s, the CPGB rose to fill the gap left by the silence of this dominant leftist political organization.

In a *Jewish Clarion* article in 1950, Phil Piratin responded to an accusation that the CPGB fooled Jews into believing the party was acting in their best interests. Citing the CPGB’s strong record of fighting against fascism, Piratin wrote,

It was only the Communist Party in Britain which rallied millions against fascism. The Communist Party, whose policy alone can end racial discrimination, will continue to show the people the way to fight for their liberties, and we make no exception for Jews. In short, we fight against all injustice on behalf of all oppressed, and against all oppressors, under whatever label and with whatever excuses.<sup>134</sup>

Piratin’s words summarize the significance of the security and defense offered by the CPGB to Jews in London during the Popular Front years. In the face of rising anti-Semitism and fascism, the CPGB and its London chapters actively defended London’s Jews against fascism abroad and at home, engaging in physical battles while also advocating on behalf of Jews in other arenas. In the

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<sup>132</sup> Meeting Minutes, Discussion Notes for National Jewish Committee Meeting, 1943, CP/CENT/CTEE/02, File 02, Minutes of the Jewish Bureau, 1937-1945, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester.

<sup>133</sup> Publication, National Jewish Committee Public Statement, 1943, CP/CENT/CTEE/02, File 02, Minutes of the Jewish Bureau, 1937-1945, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester.

<sup>134</sup> Phil Piratin, “Who’s Fooling Jews?” *Jewish Clarion*, Mar, 1950. 1.

midst of silence by the British government, the Labour Party and the Jewish establishment, the CPGB created a movement of resistance against fascism and anti-Semitism at every turn. Across London's East End, Jews recognized the work of the CPGB and looked favorably upon the party, regardless of their stance on Communism. As Maurice Levitas explained, "The point is that the socialists were the most vigorous opponents of fascism in the East End of London."<sup>135</sup>

Across the Atlantic, in New York City, a young man Jewish named Martin Birnbaum also joined the CP. Years later he explained in an interview, "As a Jew, I'd gone through so much in Europe in terms of personal losses of family, harassment, persecution that I was naturally drawn to social justice. I didn't need any prodding. I didn't need any outside influences."<sup>136</sup>

During the Popular Front years, Jews like Birnbaum left the anti-Jewish violence of Eastern Europe only to find anti-Semitism rising once again in their new homes. New York's Jewish immigrants suffered the same stereotypes as their coreligionists in London.<sup>137</sup> While levels of anti-Semitism remained low in early twentieth-century New York, the onset of the Great Depression made the 1930s arguably the most anti-Semitic period in American history.<sup>138</sup>

During the Popular Front years, anti-Semitism in New York City and London manifested in many similar ways. Just as in London, these years brought increased anti-Jewish rhetoric, violence and discrimination to New York City. Yet, the larger size of the New York Jewish population, coupled with the existence of both a working class and increasing upwardly mobile population, translated into differences in how anti-Semitism expressed itself in the two cities, as

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<sup>135</sup> Levitas, Interview.

<sup>136</sup> Martin Birnbaum, interview by Paul Buhle, Nov. 6, 1977, Oral History of the American Left, Tamiment Library and Labour History Archive, New York University, NY.

<sup>137</sup> Wistrich, *Antisemitism*, 119.

<sup>138</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 5.

well as how the New York CP responded. While London's CP physically defended its Jewish population against a fascism and anti-Semitism that was imminent both locally and abroad, New York City's response to anti-Semitism took on a different character, one that reflected the complexities of the community it sought to represent.

In the streets of the urban working class neighborhoods of New York City, the rise of fascist groups during the Popular Front years mirrored London's East End. New York's Jews watched as fascist forces spread through Europe, and fascist groups surfaced in the streets of their own city. As the American economy took an increasingly downward turn, many Americans began to find the Nazi rhetoric and anti-Semitism then flooding through fascist Europe more appealing.<sup>139</sup> A Catholic priest named Father Charles E. Coughlin's anti-Semitic radio speeches were heard by around 3.5 million Americans each week. His predominantly Irish Catholic followers "Christian Fronters," often incited violence against Jews.<sup>140</sup> Between 1939 and 1942, the Christian Fronters picketed and protested against Jewish businesses, vandalized synagogues and stores, and assaulted New York City's Jews.<sup>141</sup>

On February 20, 1939, the German American Bund, a Nazi organization in the United States, organized a rally in Madison Square Garden gathering 19000 attendants. Members of such groups as the Christian Front waved Nazi flags and shouted phrases of "Smash Jewish Communism," and "Stop Jewish Domination of Christian America."<sup>142</sup> Many viewed this event as evidence that anti-Semitism had taken firm hold in New York City.<sup>143</sup>

Certainly, the rise of fascist groups such as the Christian Front during the Popular Front

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<sup>139</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 107.

<sup>140</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 121.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

years instilled fear in New York City's working class Jewish population. However, the threat posed by this group remained for the most part enclosed within working class, Irish neighborhoods.<sup>144</sup> Meanwhile, the strongest fascist threat in the United States, embodied by a group known as the Silver Shirts, existed primarily in the American South.<sup>145</sup> The Silver Shirts, founded by a man who appointed himself the "American Hitler," and referred to as "the most important native anti-Semitic organization in the United States," never centered in New York City in the same way that Mosley and his Blackshirts had in London.<sup>146</sup> Additionally, due to increased socioeconomic mobility, many Jews by the mid-1930s had relocated out of New York's urban, working class neighborhoods. As such, a large number of Jews did not witness fascist threats in the streets of New York City. While fascist anti-Semitism took hold in New York City and posed a physical threat to a number of working class New York City Jews, the dangers facing Jews in New York City were relatively limited in comparison with those encountered by London's Jewish community.

Comparing the actions of the New York CP to those of the London CP during the Popular Front years emphasizes the relative contrasts in threat posed by fascism and anti-Semitism in the two cities. During the Popular Front years, the CP led various rallies and marches against anti-Semitism. Meanwhile, in London, Mosley and his fascist "blackshirts" threatened the streets of Jewish East London with violence and blatant anti-Semitism, climaxing in the Battle of Cable Street in which hundreds of thousands of Jews, Communists and fascists came to blows. New York City never had its Battle of Cable Street. While the CP in New York City took to the streets with rallies and marches, their actions never reached the level of street fighting undertaken by the

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<sup>144</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 145.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 112

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

CPGB. Instead, the New York CP was forced to demonstrate its dedication to resisting fascism and anti-Semitism through alternative means.

In part, the CP responded to the existing concern of New York Jews over fascism and anti-Semitism through the pen, rather than the fist. During the Popular Front years, the CP produced propaganda and writing emphasizing that the Soviet Union and Communism alone had actually solved the problem of anti-Semitism. The CP in New York City convinced many Jews that Communism represented the only cure for anti-Semitism in America.<sup>147</sup> An editorial in the Communist magazine, *The New Masses*, wrote,

The lessons for American Jewry to observe are manifest. There was Czarist Russia. Today there is Hitler Germany. The moral is inescapable; the Jewish masses cannot stave off anti-Semitism by themselves. They cannot purchase safety through meekness, nor retreat to the synagogue, nor even flight to Palestine. They must stay and defend themselves. And this they can accomplish only through alliance with the whole revolutionary working-class, who like them have everything to lose from the success of a Fascist movement. Without them, the Jews are consigned to the Ghetto, doomed to massacre and pogroms.<sup>148</sup>

As the article demonstrates, the CP sought to convince Jews that the only means to securing themselves against the fascist quest for dominance rested in allying with the working classes and following the dogmas of Communism. In turn, concern over the plight of Europe's Jews led many CP members to turn to Communism during the Popular Front years. In an interview, New York CP member Mary Zackheim explains that Jews in the United States believed Communism represented the only means of defeating anti-Semitism. She explains that "when the Soviet Union took over in 1917, every one of us was an idealist, and full of hopes that now we will conquer [anti-Semitism]...Do I have to tell you what it means to be scared, and to be a blind believer?"<sup>149</sup> Zackheim emphasizes that New York Jews developed a "blind" faith in

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<sup>147</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 199.

<sup>148</sup> "What to Do About it" *The New Masses*, Dec. 4, 1934.

<sup>149</sup> Meyer Zackheim, Ed Weiss, Julius Silvers, Sylvia Silber, and Mary Zackheim, Interview.

Communism, believing with all their hearts that this ideology held the sole answer to ending anti-Semitism.

Meanwhile, the CP established anti-fascism as essential to the party's mission during the Popular Front years. In May of 1938, the CPUSA held its Tenth National Convention in New York City. The Constitution published and distributed in pamphlets after this Convention required members to pledge to "work actively for the preservation and extension of democracy and peace, for the defeat of fascism and all forms of national oppression..."<sup>150</sup> In 1943, the CPUSA added a new stipulation to party membership. The amendment to the Constitution required all members to pay twenty to twenty-five percent of their dues to the Anti-Fascist Fund, a body under the administration of the National Committee overseeing the fight against fascism.<sup>151</sup>

In addition to these efforts, the CP in New York City led various political pushes to protect its Jewish population against anti-Semitism. At the same time that London's CP led a political push to criminalize anti-Semitism, the CPUSA advocated in vain for the United States government to do the same.<sup>152</sup> In another parallel with London, the CP represented the only political party advocating this stance.<sup>153</sup> Meanwhile, various Communist political campaigns in New York, including Israel Amter's run for Congress, centered around battling anti-Semitism. Amter's slogan stated, "Vote for Amter and Beat Anti-Semitism."<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Pamphlet, Constitution of the Communist Party of the United States of America, Aug, 1938. Box 170, Folder 20, Coll. TAM.132, Communist Party of the United States of America Records, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, NY.

<sup>151</sup> Pamphlet, Constitution of the Communist Party of the United States of America, Aug, 1942. Box 170, Folder 20, Coll. TAM.132, Communist Party of the United States of America Records, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, NY.

<sup>152</sup> Philip Mendes, *Jews and the Left: The Rise and Fall of a Political Alliance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 66.

<sup>153</sup> Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 506

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 507.

Just as in London, the Spanish Civil War presented Jews with a path to fighting against rising fascism in Europe. In turn, the CP gathered soldiers to fight in the American unit of the International Brigades, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Approximately 1,250 Americans joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. At least one third of these volunteer soldiers were Jewish.<sup>155</sup>

One Jewish soldier named Abe Osheroff from Brownsville, Brooklyn described his experience in Spain very differently than the previously quoted Spanish Civil Wars from London. While London's soldiers declared their sole purpose in fighting as a need to resist fascism, Osheroff explained that he himself, and likely the comrades around him, had little conception of what fascism truly was until they arrived in Spain. Osheroff explained,

A lot of my colleagues and friends will always sort of answer, I went because I hated fascism. To me that's not enough of an answer. It's a problem and it doesn't hold, it isn't credible to young people and as a matter of fact its not true. The truth of the matter is I didn't know what fascism was. I knew about it, id read about it. It was only after I got to Spain that I saw what a son of a bitch the thing was.<sup>156</sup>

Osheroff's words highlight the more muffled nature of fascism in New York City. While growing fascism and anti-Semitism in Europe certainly instilled fear in New York City's Jews, New York's Jews watched the rise of Hitler and Mussolini from across the ocean. Meanwhile, the fascist movement locally was relatively confined and limited. In contrast, London's Jews watched the fascist threat in Europe grow ever closer, just as Mosley, his blackshirts, and other fascist groups marched past their homes. As Osheroff's words suggest, many New York Jews never witnessed the fascist threat in their own city. Rather, New York Jews experienced a certain amount of security from fascism during the Popular Front years.

The relatively lower level of fascist threat during the Popular Front suggests why the CP

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<sup>155</sup> Peter Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 18.

<sup>156</sup> Osheroff, Interview.

responded to anti-Semitism with less force in New York City than in London. At the same time that London's CP took to the streets to fight Mosley, the New York CP published its regrets for failing to act in defense of New York's Jews. In 1938, the New York State Committee of the CP published a resolution confessing that it failed in its efforts "to properly combat anti-Semitism among non-Jews."<sup>157</sup>

Outside of the working class New York City neighborhoods filled with Jews, anti-Semitism in the City took on a different character in New York City, reflecting the unique size and socioeconomic positions of New York's Jewish population. Between 1935 and 1945, the rising socioeconomic positions of New York's Jews led to various efforts to quell the upward mobility of this group.<sup>158</sup> During these years, Jews faced restrictions around living in certain neighborhoods and working in various employment sectors, and many were banned from various institutions such as clubs, salons, schools, fraternities, and various organizations and cultural institutions in New York City.<sup>159</sup>

One of the most obvious attempts to block the upward mobility of Jews developed in New York City's universities. These institutions placed quotas on Jewish student intake and faculty members. This restriction, which many saw as one of the harshest forms of anti-Semitism in early-twentieth New York City, highlights the significant push among second generation Jewish immigrants towards higher education and entrance into American middle-class life. In London, restrictions on Jewish entrance into universities in London did not exist during this period, as far fewer Jews attended college.<sup>160</sup> This contrast between the two cities suggests that

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<sup>157</sup> "Problems of New York Jewry and the Tasks of the CP," *Jewish Life*, 2:4 (April 1938), 6, quoted in Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 505.

<sup>158</sup> Rubinstein, "Antisemitism in the English-Speaking World," 150.

<sup>159</sup> Wistrich, *Antisemitism*, 117.

<sup>160</sup> Rubinstein, "Antisemitism in the English-Speaking World," 160.

New York's more institutionalized anti-Semitism reflected the unique socioeconomic position of the city's Jews.

Faced with an institutionalized anti-Semitism that could not be combatted in the streets, the New York City CP extended its fight beyond the physical and political. Rather, it responded to these threats in cultural terms: by articulating the importance of elevating and sustaining Jewish culture as a means of resisting anti-Semitism. In 1937, the New York State Jewish Bureau of the CP stated, "The Jewish people in the United States [face] problems such as anti-Semitism, social discrimination, economic discrimination and the existence of forces that tend to stifle the creative expression of the Jews, tend to make of the Jews an oppressed minority."<sup>161</sup> The CP's recognition of the anti-Semitic threat to "creative expression" in New York highlights the significance placed by the New York CP during the Popular Front on combatting the unique institutional anti-Semitism in New York through resisting the suppression of Jewish culture.

In response to the development of an institutionalized anti-Semitism attempting to quell the rise of New York's Jews into middle-class America, the CP's Popular Front policies allowed Jews to create alternative pathways to success outside of the institutions they were blocked from. Faced with university quotas blocking young Jews from Columbia University and other institutions, Jews entered spaces such as City College of New York and built a culture of Communist intellectualism in the cafeteria. Meanwhile, a large number of Jews in white collar professions, as well as writers, intellectuals and artists joined the CP due to its stance against anti-Semitism.<sup>162</sup> Through the framework of Communism and possibilities opened up through joining the CP and uniting with other Jewish Communists, New York's Jewish Communists built a subculture in which Jewish life could flourish despite institutionalized anti-Semitism blocking

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<sup>161</sup> H.I. Costrell, "Perspectives," *Jewish Life*, 1:1 (August 1937), Cited in Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 505.

<sup>162</sup> Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 507.

Jews from fully integrating into American life. This will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

In conclusion, Jews in London and New York City both faced a threat posed by rising fascism and anti-Semitism during the Popular Front years. For many Jews in both cities, the CP responded to the widespread fear of these trends by demonstrating its staunch opposition to both fascism and anti-Semitism in ideology, as well as in practice. The New York City and London CP's organization of rallies against anti-Semitism and fascism, their condemnation of anti-Semitic events and rhetoric, as well as their organization of units to fight against fascism in the Spanish Civil War appealed to Jews in both cities. However, the different sizes, socioeconomic conditions and geographical locations of the two Jewish communities, created both contrasting forms of anti-Semitism and unique Communist responses. In London the proximity of European fascism as well as the popularity of the BUF under Mosley represented a more pressing threat than that faced by Jews in New York City. Most significantly, the direct threat of anti-Semitism and fascism in London translated into a CP response of direct engagement. Across the Atlantic, New York's Jews, separated by an ocean from the rise of fascism in Europe and presented with limited fascist development in their own city, experienced relatively lower threats of fascist anti-Semitism. The relative security of Jews in New York City led the CP to combat anti-Semitism through alternative means.

Chapter 4: Weaving a Political Culture: The Creation of a Jewish Communist Culture in New York City and London

Martin Birnbaum immigrated to New York City from the Ukraine. As a young man, Birnbaum lived in Coney Island, and wrote for *Di Yunge*, a Communist affiliated literary magazine. In a 1977 interview, Birnbaum explained, “I didn’t quite really quite know what Communists were...I was drawn to radicalism emotionally rather than on the basis of any theoretical knowledge. It was simply a question of justice or fairness.”<sup>163</sup>

In 1935, the Comintern’s Popular Front policy awarded CPs around the globe increased freedom in their efforts to appeal to ethnic groups within the party.<sup>164</sup> As a result, these years allowed Jews to embrace their Jewish identities within the CP more publicly.<sup>165</sup> In both London and New York City, this increased freedom of expression produced the framework for the development of Jewish subcultures.

The previous three chapters have explored differences in the conditions of Jewish life in London and New York City between 1935 and 1945. To recap, London’s Jewish community possessed a relatively small population size, predominantly working class socioeconomic conditions, and an imminent threat posed by a strong and aggressive fascist and anti-Semitic element in London coupled with a proximity to encroaching European fascism. In turn, New York City’s Jewish community boasted a much larger population size and membership in the CP, more dynamic socioeconomic conditions pushing many Jews into the middle classes, lower threats posed by fascism at home and abroad, as well as an anti-Semitism aimed at blocking Jews from entering the American middle-classes. In this chapter, I demonstrate how these differences

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<sup>163</sup> Birnbaum, Interview.

<sup>164</sup> Matthew B. Hoffman and Henry F. Srebrnik, *A Vanished Ideology*, 11.

<sup>165</sup> Hoffman and Srebrnik, *A Vanished Ideology*, 10.

interacted to create the starkest contrast between New York City and London during the Popular Front years: the political culture built by the two respective Jewish Communist communities. In this paper, political culture simply means the collective beliefs, activities and attitudes held by members of the same political orientation in a given locale.

A pamphlet entitled, “What We Must Do,” produced by the National Jewish Committee of the CPGB, stated in 1937, “It is clear that the principle task facing the workers of East London is the development of the broadest possible United Front to uproot fascism.”<sup>166</sup> As demonstrated in this article, London’s Jews during the late 1930s and early 1940s held two principle concerns: their socioeconomic conditions as workers in the East End, and the rise of fascist anti-Semitism. Over the course of the Popular Front years, the CP created the framework for Jews to respond to both practical issues. In turn, the Popular Front years saw Jewish Communists in London develop a culture that revolved centrally around the predominance of socioeconomic concerns and anti-fascism.

During the Popular Front years, the Jewish Bureau, and later, the National Jewish Committee, sought to prove these Jewish interests as central to the Communist agenda. Fusing Jewish concerns with Communist ideology, the Jewish Bureau and National Jewish Committee built a Communist ideology and culture directed towards the Jewish masses. Rather than discussing dogmas of dialectical materialism, the CPGB demonstrated to Jews that Communist ideology and membership in the London CP signified being part of a community dedicated to fighting fascism and defending tenants’ rights. In a Jewish Bureau statement on anti-Semitism, the Jewish Communist leadership explained, “Jews [must] ally themselves in the fight against Fascism with the most progressive section of the people, thus realising that anti Semitism is not

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<sup>166</sup> Pamphlet, National Jewish Committee of the CPGB Pamphlet, 1937, Box CP/CENT/CTEE/02 File 02, Minutes of the Jewish Bureau, 1937-1945, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester.

only a danger to the Jews but to the working class. Hence in unity of the working class we fight best against our enemies.”<sup>167</sup>

Through statements such as this, the Jewish Bureau declared that membership in the CP represented the best interests for Jewish East Londoners. Linking the interests of the Jewish community of London to the interests of the entire international working class, the JB and NJC sought to redefine Communism as an ideology inherently dedicated to Jewish interests and opposed to anti-Semitism. Moreover, the Jewish Bureau characterized the CP as the only group offering Jews liberation from the anti-Semitism *and* the oppression of Capitalism. An additional publication of the Jewish Bureau explained,

As long as capitalism remains, the menace of anti-Semitism remains... The Communist party is confident that all progressive and working class Jews will find in socialism the answer to the old Jewish problem and that they will stand and fight, wherever they are, with the other peoples of the world for peace and socialism.<sup>168</sup>

By characterizing Communism in direct opposition to fascism and anti-Semitism, and promising that a Communist future would signify an end to poverty and persecution of Jews throughout the diaspora, statements such as this offered Jews in London a Communist theory rooted in the belief that a Communist future was a future of Jewish liberation.

In addition to characterizing Communism as a Jewish liberation movement, the CPGB created an environment in which party involvement surrounded activities ranging from disrupting fascist meetings to resisting low-wages and poor living conditions. Rather than requiring its Jewish adherents to understand party dogmas, or even engage in work outside the East End, the CP in London created a culture of membership which merely required Jews to act

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<sup>167</sup> Publication, Information Bulletin of Jewish Bureau of the CPGB, 5, Box CP/CENT/CTEE/02, File 02, Minutes of the Jewish Bureau, 1937-1945, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester.

<sup>168</sup> Publication, Information Bulletin of Jewish Bureau of the CPGB, 5, Box CP/CENT/CTEE/02, File 02, Minutes of the Jewish Bureau, 1937-1945, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester.

in their own self-interest. Certainly, the London CP's Jewish community developed a culture characterized above all by fascist resistance and social reform advocacy, the very needs and concerns of East End Jews.

During the Popular Front years, Communist affiliated organizations such as the Young Communist League (YCL) crystallized this Jewish Communist political culture within their activities and mission. Membership in the Young Communist League held only one stipulation: anti-fascism. The Constitution of the YCL adopted at the 9<sup>th</sup> National Conference in London in June of 1937 declared that membership was open to all "non-fascist youth" willing to pay their dues, regardless of religion or background. As such, the YCL declared itself open to each and every "anti-fascist, democratic youth of Britain."<sup>169</sup> Through this broad case, the YCL advertised itself to Jewish members, describing itself as primarily,

A force which unifies and educates the youth in an anti-fascist spirit and trains the youth to understand that the British friends of fascism are their main enemy and that they must join in the movement for the defeat of fascist aggression and those who weaken and betray democracy in Britain.<sup>170</sup>

Demonstrating the overlap between the YCL mission and Jewish interests, the YCL professed, "Any youth who can agree to that can and must be brought into our ranks."<sup>171</sup>

Fraternal organizations and youth clubs such as the YCL stood at the heart of Jewish life in London during the Popular Front years. Membership in these clubs initiated young Jews into a social world of boxing, cycling, rambling and other athletic and social activities.<sup>172</sup> One member of the YCL, Dave Goodman, explained that YCL participation involved camping and demonstrating against the government, various social activities, and learning about rent issues

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<sup>169</sup> Pamphlet, Young Communist League of Britain Constitution, June, 1937, Box 1, 360/150/19, Young Communist League- Periodicals A-Z, Working Class Movement Library, Salford.

<sup>170</sup> Magazine, Young Communist League Publication, 1938, Box 1, 350/5072/AG, Young Communist League- Periodicals A-Z, Working Class Movement Library, Salford.

<sup>171</sup> Magazine, Young Communist League Publication, 1938, Young Communist League- Periodicals A-Z.

<sup>172</sup> Jud Coleman, Interview.

and other social reforms.<sup>173</sup> Through membership in the YCL, these young Jewish men gained access both to political education and participation in a political culture whose only requirement for participation was a commitment to anti-fascism and advocating for improved living standards.

It appears that a strong sense of solidarity and community for all those involved developed within the culture molded by the Communist Jewish community in London during the Popular Front period. Raphael Samuel, a British Marxist who grew up in a Communist Jewish family described his youth in London,

To be a Communist was to have a complete social identity... we lived in a little private world of our own... We maintained intense neighborhood networks and little workplace conventicles. We patronized regular cafes...We went out together on weekend and Sunday rambles. We took our holidays together, at Socialist Youth Camps...We had our own particular speech....Like freemasons we knew intuitively when someone was “one of us.”<sup>174</sup>

The high concentration of Jews in the CPGB in the East End built a communal culture around participation in Communist activities, creating a movement of political and social solidarity around a commitment to Jewish security and improved living standards. This culture, which flourished around the neighborhoods of Stepney and Mile End itself promoted and encouraged participation in the radical movement. Louis Kenton, a CP member who grew up in London, explained, “Living in the East End, there was a natural radical element throughout my whole youth, so, without being aware of it, I found myself sympathizing with the Labour section of the movement, and later the Communist movement...When I was about 19, 20, I seemed to gravitate naturally towards the movement, and I joined the Young Communist League.”<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Dave Goodman, Interview.

<sup>174</sup> Raphael Samuel, “The Lost World of British Communism,” *New Left Review* 154, 1985, Quoted in Frankel and Diner, *Dark Times, Dire Decisions*, 284.

<sup>175</sup> Louis Kenton, interview by Bill Alexander, 1983, Interview 13775, The Spanish Civil War Collection: Sound Archive Oral History Recordings, Imperial War Museum, London.

For Jews in London, the CP during the Popular Front years required little understanding or agreement with Marxist ideology. Rather, any opponent of fascism was invited to participate in the movement. For Communist Jews in London, being a member of the CP signified membership in a political culture whose strongest components were anti-fascism and a dedication to social reforms. The imminent threat of fascist development in London, as well as the working-class conditions of East End Jews, offered a natural path to the CP.

Across the Atlantic, the conditions of New York City's Jewish community created a vastly different Communist political culture. While London's Jews unified around anti-fascism and social reforms, these factors were only one segment of the culture around which Jews in New York City gathered. Rather, the large size of New York's Jewish community, increasing social and economic mobility, and less imminent threats of fascism, produced an environment in New York City conducive to a more elaborate culture. Out of the tightly knit Jewish working class communities of the Lower East Side and Brownsville grew a political culture built around pride in Yiddish language and secular identity, as well as participation in social and political organizations. Meanwhile, in the classrooms of City College and the art galleries of the Lower East Side, a group of second-generation Jews found Communists welcoming them into the city's intellectual and artistic circles. Over the course of the Popular Front years, Jews in the New York City CP would develop a complex and multifaceted culture in stark contrast to the London CP's more pragmatic orientation.

In 1937, the Jewish community in New York City comprised almost a quarter of the city's population.<sup>176</sup> In neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side, Brownsville, Harlem, and areas of the Bronx, Jews dominated the streets, creating tightly knit working-class Jewish

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<sup>176</sup> Ritterband, "Counting the Jews of New York, 1900-1991," 210.

communities. These neighborhoods were saturated with Communists. As one woman who grew up in the Bronx during the 1930s explained, “When I was little I assumed that the whole world was Communist. And certainly the whole world was Jewish.”<sup>177</sup> The large sizes of these Jewish enclaves of settlement fostered the creation of a distinct Jewish culture within them.<sup>178</sup>

In an interview, Abe Osheroff, a member of the CP in NYC described his Jewish neighborhood in Brownsville through two central characteristics. First, youth either grew up to become Communists, joined a gang, or became doctors.<sup>179</sup> Second, Yiddish filled the streets.

Yiddish was my mother tongue. I gave in to the terrible assimilationist pressure ... But fortunately, I lived most of my young manhood in a neighborhood where it was impossible for it [the loss of Yiddish] totally to happen. Because everybody at home or that I was related to was as Jewish as Jewish can be. And I continue to speak the language whenever I had a chance and so forth.<sup>180</sup>

In communities such as the Lower East Side, Brownsville, and Harlem, the use of Yiddish was widespread, creating intimate and exclusive communities built around the language. Connections between the use of Yiddish language and leftism had been established far earlier in the century, when Russian Jewish intellectuals arrived in the United States and realized that in order to appeal to the working class Jewish masses fresh off the boats from Eastern Europe, it would be necessary to speak their vernacular tongue: Yiddish.<sup>181</sup> As these Russian intellectuals established Yiddish speaking socialist schools and newspapers, they built a socialist subculture in New York City that revolved around Yiddish language and identity.<sup>182</sup>

With the establishment of the Popular Front, the CP ushered in the framework for a revitalization of this Yiddish culture built by socialists earlier in the century.<sup>183</sup> During the

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<sup>177</sup> *At Home in Utopia*, directed by Michal Goldman (2008; New York: New Day Films).

<sup>178</sup> Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 140.

<sup>179</sup> Osheroff, interview.

<sup>180</sup> Osheroff, interview.

<sup>181</sup> Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 5

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>183</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 222.

Popular Front years, the loosening of party mores around supporting Jewish ethnic traditions led to the creation of a new Jewish culture built within the framework of Communism in New York City. This new culture involved a strengthening of “Yiddishkeit,” or a Jewish secular subculture built around Yiddish language and identity.<sup>184</sup> As Osheroff relates in the quote above, the Popular Front years saw New York City’s Jews move ever closer to an association with Communism through Yiddish.

The Yiddish Communist culture built during the Popular Front revolved around Yiddish writing. During these years, thousands of New York’s Jews subscribed to the CP’s Jewish and Yiddish newspaper, the *Morgen Freiheit*. This newspaper’s circulation outnumbered the Party’s central English-paper, the Daily Worker. In addition, the party published various Yiddish literary sources, including Yiddish cultural materials, *Der Hamer* and *Di Yunge*.<sup>185</sup>

Martin Birnbaum explained that he himself became affiliated in Communist circles through his attraction to its use of Yiddish culture. He asserted that his avenue to Communism began with picking up a Yiddish literary supplement produced by the Communist Yiddish press. He told an interviewer, “I found it a very good literary supplement and I liked what they had to say.”<sup>186</sup> Birnbaum explains that after this, he read whatever the left produced, and used to meet a group of Yiddish writers and sit at literary cafes in New York City.<sup>187</sup>

Beyond newspapers and literary supplements, the CP’s Yiddish press also circulated Yiddish literature. Itche Goldberg, a Yiddish writer and member of the CP in New York City

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<sup>184</sup> The Comintern viewed the importance of Yiddish not only as a practical tool for speaking with the Jewish working classes, but also as a symbol of working-class identity. As such, Communists sought to elevate pride in Yiddish language as a means of encouraging identification with the proletariat. During the Popular Front years and before, the Comintern advocated for the use of Yiddish rather than Hebrew, a language considered bourgeois. For further information, see

<sup>185</sup> Mendelsohn, “Jews, Communism and Art in Interwar America,” in, ed., Jonathan Frankel and Dan Diner, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 239.

<sup>186</sup> Birnbaum, Interview.

<sup>187</sup> Birnbaum, Interview

describes in an interview how a Yiddish secular culture was created and fostered by the CP in New York City. Goldberg explains that Yiddish writers “described the lower depths of Jewish life, the lower depths of the people, the people below.”<sup>188</sup> In turn, they fostered a love of literature among the Yiddish-speaking masses. He articulates that Yiddish writers understood and wrote about the Jewish lower classes in a way that lacked parallels with other ethnic groups, creating a “closeness between people and language, people and literature.”<sup>189</sup> Goldberg explains that Jews created a culture in America in a way that other ethnic groups did not. He tells the interviewer, “the Poles didn’t create Polish American culture...I can’t often think of a single Polish poet in this country...They had newspapers but nothing beyond it.”<sup>190</sup> Beyond reading Yiddish newspapers and books, the Yiddish speaking New York immigrants attended choruses and drama troupes where the CP held a strong presence.<sup>191</sup> Other New York CP members, Meyer Zackheim, Ed Weiss and the Silvers told an interviewer, “Every one of us went to lectures, every one of us went to Cooper Union, to [the] Educational Alliance, that was our cultural development.”<sup>192</sup>

Over time, New York City became home to a Jewish culture built around Yiddish language that was unique to New York’s Jewish Communist population. In London, the Jewish Communist newspaper organ, “The Jewish Clarion,” was centrally published in English during the Popular Front period. Moreover, London did not draw the large number of Russian Jewish intellectuals who built a socialist Yiddish subculture earlier in the century. These intellectuals

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<sup>188</sup> Itche Goldberg, interview by Paul Buhle, Jun. 5, 1982, Oral History of the American Left, Tamiment Library and Labour History Archive, New York University, NY.

<sup>189</sup> Goldberg, Interview.

<sup>190</sup> Goldberg, Interview.

<sup>191</sup> Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 146.

<sup>192</sup> Meyer Zackheim, Ed Weiss, Julius Silvers, Sylvia Silber, and Mary Zackheim, interview by Paul Buhle, Oct. 24, 1978, Oral History of the American Left, Tamiment Library and Labour History Archive, New York University, NY.

journeyed primarily to the United States. Historian Stephen Cullen explains that second-generation Jewish immigrants in London increasingly distanced themselves from both the Yiddish language of their parents, and their Jewish culture.<sup>193</sup> Alfred Sherman, a Jew from London reported, “In the ‘30s and ‘40s, you wouldn’t have got very far with Yiddish...in the heart of the East End”<sup>194</sup>

Alongside elevating Yiddish language, a strong component of wider Communist Jewish culture in New York City was its anti-religious orientation. The move to the United States rendered rabbis and religious life less central within Jewish communities, as immigrants felt New York offered a city of liberation from strict adherence and archaic traditions.<sup>195</sup> However, the creation of a Jewish identity around Yiddish language and culture allowed Communist Jews in New York City to maintain ties to their Jewishness while distancing themselves from religious restrictions. Thus, in New York City during the early twentieth century, and especially during the Popular Front, a secular Yiddish Communist culture was born. This sense of newfound freedom to leave behind religious traditions did not manifest itself on the same level in London. One Russian Jewish immigrant explained that he chose to immigrate to England rather than the United States as “Americans were apikorsim [free thinkers], they were atheistic.”<sup>196</sup>

A second component of New York City’s Jewish CP culture developed in response to the anti-Semitism unique to New York City during these years, which blocked many Jews from entering various sections of American institutional and middle-class life. Most uniquely, New York Communism provided Jews with access to political, social, artistic and intellectual circles

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<sup>193</sup> Quoted in Stephen Cullen, “Jews in the Communist Party of Great Britain: Perceptions of Ethnicity and Class,” in *A Vanished Ideology*, ed., Matthew Hoffman and Henry Srebrnik (Albany: State University of New York, 2016),” 182.

<sup>194</sup> Cullen, “Jews in the Communist Party of Great Britain,” 183.

<sup>195</sup> Liebman, “The Ties That Bind,” 326.

<sup>196</sup> Interview, quoted in Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 157.

during this period. Instead of entering mainstream organizations, many Jews clustered within Communist organizations. Families summered at Camp Kinderland, a summer camp and vacation spot established in upstate New York for Jewish Communists and their children.<sup>197</sup> Meanwhile, Jews joined fraternal organizations such as the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, which promised to provide a strong social community.<sup>198</sup>

Through its focus on Jewish concerns regarding fascism, anti-Semitism and social reforms, the CP offered Jews an avenue enabling participation in American politics. Martin Birnbaum explained that upon arriving in America he was struck by the way New York's Jews were able to be part of the political process. He told an interviewer, "I came from an environment in which there was anti-Semitism, where Jews participated very little in the political process... [In America,] they have a country, they're participants."<sup>199</sup> As Jews such as Birnbaum settled into American life, the CP provided opportunities for entry into American politics through party involvement. Within the ranks of the CP, Jews dominated cultural positions. Alexander Trachtenberg held editorship of the CP's publishing organ. Isaac Jerome Romaine chaired the party's cultural commission. Meanwhile the editorial board of the *New Masses*, a Communist magazine, was dominated by Jews.<sup>200</sup>

In addition to opening up social and political spaces to Jews, the CP also promoted Jewish entrance into artistic arenas. In 1935, members of the New York CP produced a document entitled "Call for the American Artists' Congress," advocating for the creation of a body unifying American artists. Half of the writers of this document were New York Jews, while

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<sup>197</sup> Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 41.

<sup>198</sup> Pamphlet, Jewish People's Fraternal Order Advertisement, Box 1, Folder 30, TAM.001, International Workers Order Records, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, NY.

<sup>199</sup> Birnbaum, Interview.

<sup>200</sup> Alan Wald, *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade*, 183.

twenty percent of the 378 signers were Jewish artists.<sup>201</sup> Meanwhile, in 1938, many Communists participated in an exhibition of Jewish artists in New York City created by the the Alveltlekher Yidisher Kultur Farband (YKUF), an international Communist Jewish organization promoting Yiddish culture. The YKUF additionally opened its own art gallery for Jewish benefits on the Lower East Side.<sup>202</sup>

Perhaps most significantly, and certainly most famously, Communist Jewish culture in New York City was embodied during the late 1930s and 40s by its intellectuals. Many of these intellectuals experienced their radicalization in the cafeteria at the City College of New York (CCNY). As mentioned previously, university quotas blocking Jewish students from entering various college institutions led a large number of second-generation Jews to pursue a degree at CCNY and Brooklyn College. During this period, CCNY and Brooklyn College employed the largest percentage of Jewish faculty members of any other college.<sup>203</sup> Communist historian Melech Epstein, reflected, “I entered City College...There for the first time, I heard of Communism.<sup>204</sup> Another Communist Jew from East Harlem, George Watt, explained that his time at Brooklyn College initiated him into the YCL and CP, as his classmates were active in organizing on the campus and in the city.<sup>205</sup>

In the cafeteria of City College, students divided into lunch alcoves, where they ate surrounded by those who shared their particular brand of politics. Alcove 2 contained the pro-Stalinist Communist youth, and was the most popular, while Alcove 1 contained the anti-Stalinist left. Julius Rosenberg, the famous Jewish Communist executed in the McCarthy Era

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<sup>201</sup> Mendelsohn, “Jews, Communism, and Art in Interwar America,” 223

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>203</sup> Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 205.

<sup>204</sup> Melech Epstein, *The Jew and Communism: The Story of Early Communist Victories and Ultimate Defeats in the Jewish Communist, U.S.A., 1919-1941*, (New York: Trade Union and Sponsoring Committee, 1959), 202.

<sup>205</sup> Watt, interview.

was one of its members.<sup>206</sup> From among these classrooms alcoves, a group of second-generation Jews would later become termed the “New York Intellectuals.” While they predominantly stemmed from the anti-Stalinist Alcove 1, many of these future intellectuals flirted with the CP during this period.<sup>207</sup> In addition, as New York Intellectual Nathan Glazer explained,

Young Jews were strongly attracted to...fields of culture, easily influenced by the successful in them, and the large number of Communists in these areas played an important role for them in making Communism respectable, acceptable, something to be taken seriously...this great influence of Communism in intellectual and cultural circles...played an enormous role in bringing the second generation of Jews, attracted to intellect, enamored of culture, into the CP.<sup>208</sup>

Glazer’s words highlight the significance of Communist cultural spaces as an appeal to New York’s second-generation Jews. Lionel Trilling, a member of the New York Intellectuals reflected on the leftist origins of many of his fellow intellectuals, “The importance of the radical movement of the Thirties cannot be overestimated. It may be said to have created the American intellectual class as we now know it in its great size and influence.”<sup>209</sup> Through the CP, Jews from the Yiddish literary circles to the classrooms of City College found avenues into the New York intellectual and artistic milieu. In contrast, London’s immigrant population and second-generation children predominantly left school at young ages, as the working class conditions of their families required.

In his work, *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade*, historian Alan Wald explains that Communist culture in America allowed Jews to escape pressures to assimilate into middle-class Christian culture by allowing Jews to retain their folk cultures.<sup>210</sup> Certainly, Communist culture offered Jews a means of evading assimilation, by elevating pride

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<sup>206</sup> Irving Kristol, “Memoirs of a Trotskyist,” *New York Times*, Jan. 23, 1977.

<sup>207</sup> Bloom, Alexander. *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986,) 47.

<sup>208</sup> Nathan Glazer, *Social Basis of American Communism*, (Harcourt, 1961), 166.

<sup>209</sup> Lionel Trilling, “Young in the Thirties,” *Commentary*, May 1, 1966.

<sup>210</sup> Wald, *Trinity of Passion*, 183.

in Jewish language, literature and national identity. However, Wald's claim falls short in characterizing the importance of Communist culture for Jews in America. Rather than merely serving as a framework for protecting Jewish cultural insularity, the CP's creation of intellectual, artistic, political and education spaces for Jews in New York City offered Jews a path into American culture as well. Beyond molding a Jewish cultural identity, these Jewish Communists built a new identity as "American Jews."

In the early twentieth century, the New York City CP founded the School for Jewish Studies, intending to educate Jews in New York on both Communist and Jewish topics. At its foundation, the leading Jewish Communist theoretician, Alexander Bittelman wrote,

The study of Jewish life, to which this school is dedicated, is an important and vital phase of creating and building Jewish life...in the United States...and thus works for the further development of this American Jewish community...assisting the process of free and voluntary integration of the American Jews into all phases of the general life of the American people as a whole. It is the process of becoming, not just Americans and not just Jews living in the United States, but American Jews, a process involving a new type of Jew and a new type of Jewish community."<sup>211</sup>

Bittelman's words describe a far larger phenomenon occurring in New York City than merely the establishment of a new school. From the YKUF galleries of the Lower East Side to the classrooms of the School for Jewish Studies, a new American Jewish identity sprouted from the roots planted by Jewish Communist political culture. Through participation in the artistic, intellectual, educational, political and religious spaces shaped by the CP, and maintaining ties to Yiddish language and identity, the CP provided Jews with the tools to meld their Jewish identities with their increasingly American ones.

In sum, London's Jewish Communists and New York City's Jewish Communists built

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<sup>211</sup> Notes, Alexander Bittelman's Notes on School For Jewish Studies Dedication, Box 1, Folder 14, TAM.062, Alexander Bittelman Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, NYU.

two distinct political cultures during the Popular Front years. In London, the smaller population size, lower overall socioeconomic status, and increased threat posed by fascism to London's Jews created a political culture among Jewish Communists centrally concerned with pragmatic issues. In New York City, where Jews boasted a larger population and relative economic prosperity, and held a relative sense of security from fascism, Communist Jewish political culture took on a more complex form. Rather than defending Jews in the city streets, the CP in New York City allowed Jews to circumvent American institutionalized anti-Semitism by elevating pride in Yiddish secular culture, and providing alternative spaces to engage in American political, social, artistic and intellectual life.

### Conclusion

In this work, I have compared the relationship between Jews and the Communist Party in two leading metropolises of Jewish Eastern European settlement between 1935 and 1945. The argument of this paper is twofold. First, I assert that the Communist Parties in London and New York City both appealed to Jewish members during the Popular Front years by directly responding to Jewish needs surrounding socioeconomic issues and rising anti-Semitism locally and abroad. Second, I argue that examining the distinct conditions of Jewish communities in London and New York City between 1935 and 1945 highlights the ways in which the Communist Parties of both cities oriented their policies and activities around the unique characteristics of these urban locales. In London and New York City, the population size, socioeconomic conditions, and relative threats of fascism and anti-Semitism facing each Jewish population interacted to shape the political culture of Jewish Communism in each city. In other words, while there remained considerable overlap in motivations between these two groups of Jewish communists, I argue that Jews in London joined the CP in a largely defensive and

pragmatic fashion, while Communist Jews in New York City created a more multifaceted culture around language, secular religious identity, politics, art, intellectual life, and building an American Jewish identity.

By the time the Popular Front years drew to a close, Jewish Communism was in decline. As the threat of fascism retreated, and Jews increasingly moved out of working-class neighborhoods in both London and New York City, CP membership in both cities faded. In time, Jews would come to realize the extent of European Jewish decimation, and the role played by the Soviet Union in this destruction of Jewish life and culture. Brokenhearted, Jews retreated from their beloved vanguard of yesteryear. At the end of the 1950s, few Jews remained who would defend the disgraced Communist Party.

The relationship between Jews and Communism is often characterized as a fleeting moment in Jewish history. Scholarship on Jewish Communism in the early twentieth century is filled with book titles such as Matthew Hoffman and Henry Srebrnik's, *A Vanished Ideology*, positing that the affair between Jews and the radical left ended abruptly when the violent treatment of Jews by the Soviet Union came to light. However, the comparative analysis engaged in within the pages of this thesis suggests that the Jewish relationship with the radical left represented more than merely a fleeting love affair. Rather, this moment held far reaching implications for Jewish life well beyond the disenfranchisement of many of its players. The Jewish Communist cultures of New York City and London, built around the distinct conditions of each city's Jewish population during the Popular Front years, point to wider trends in Jewish political culture during the years that followed.

In the years following the collapse of Jewish Communism, Jewish political cultures in New York City and London continued to follow two unique paths. In New York City, children of

New York's Jewish Communists took to the streets in the late 1950s and 60s to fight in the Civil Rights Movement, while others translated the legacy of their parents into building the American New Left. Despite breaking ties with Communism, Jews have remained instrumental in United States leftist cultures in the years since its decline. Yet across the Atlantic, London's Jews have not demonstrated the same leftist ties over the last half-century. Examining the political cultures which developed earlier in the century certainly offers clues.

In London, Jewish Communists during the Popular Front years built a culture hinged on temporary pragmatic concerns. While Communism appealed to a population threatened by fascism and poverty, leftist culture held little relevance once these concerns critically declined. In contrast, New York's Jewish Communists molded a culture far beyond immediate issues. Rather, New York's Jewish Communists shaped an American Jewish identity combining art, social and intellectual life with deep roots in the left. Rather than tying their political culture to temporary pragmatic concerns as London's Jews did, the Jewish Communists of New York City built a foundation for American Jewish leftism too strong to topple as Jews left the Party. Whether Communist Jewish culture in New York City and London during the Popular Front years molded the politics of the last half century or not requires further investigation. Yet I would argue that Jewish Communist culture during the Popular Front years must be considered as more than merely an evanescent moment in history. Rather, this moment offers insight into the development of modern Jewish life in New York City, London and beyond.

In conclusion, while scholarship on Jewish involvement in the left is extensive, few analyses devote attention to comparing Jewish communism in its distinct geographic locations. By engaging in a comparative analysis of Jewish communism in New York City and London, this study demonstrates the unique character of Jewish Communism in each of its urban homes.

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