



Young Communist League members and others demonstrate in Manchester in support of Spanish republicans fighting Franco, 1937

MANCHESTER'S RED ARMY

The recent demise of the British communist movement has led to a flurry of attempts to write its history. But crucial gaps are being left. There is a tendency to neglect organisations which were subsidiaries of the party. In recent research on aspects of the history of the Young Communist League, I was struck by the important role played by Jewish young people in particular areas, especially in the Thirties, and felt that it would be useful to share some information on this – a part of left history which is in danger of being forgotten.

The YCL began to establish itself as a part of the social networks of Jewish youth in parts of Manchester and east London from the late twenties and early thirties. One of the highpoints of activity by Manchester YCLers during this period was their leadership of the April 1932 mass trespass on Kinder Scout. This event resulted in several arrests, a significant fact about which has been described by a participant in the action: 'As we got back into Hayfield, there was a row of police, stopped everybody. and they were picking out who they wanted, who they thought were foreign looking; if they were Jewish, it would set prejudice against them when the trial took place.' The fact

that some of the key activists and leaders of the Manchester YCL were Jewish was used by police to try and isolate the organisation, but it actually expressed one of the organisation's strongest points. The YCL gained credibility by becoming an integral part of a significant community, and the vehicle through which many young Jews combated increasing attacks on them by the fascist movement.

We are looking here at an example of political culture in a small community constituted around distinct strata of the local working class; strata which were marginalised as a whole, and for whom a shared sense of being considered low in status by others helped to crystallise a commitment to radicalism. This process developed in a few areas to the point that the YCL became a predominately Jewish organisation. Although it can hardly be considered a totally trustworthy source for information on labour history, Derek Jameson's autobiography can be taken seriously when he remembers being 'a very rare fish indeed in the Hackney YCL – the first among them who was not Jewish Many belonged to orthodox families who did not mix with gentiles. Even the hall where we met belonged to the local synagogue'.

During the 1930s many young Jews joined the communist movement. Mike Waite examines what inspired them

Ewan MacColl has also recorded ways in which communism and Jewish culture overlapped in the YCL, this time back in Manchester, 'We used to meet in the room of the YCL secretary at the time... below a shul – and we used to meet on a Friday so you'd see everybody going upstairs to the shul with their kind of yamulkas on and all the rest of it. We'd be going in the backdoor to a YCL meeting, and then after the meeting some of us would stay and we'd go in and eat gefilte fish – so in a way, those of us who weren't Jews were being initiated into the Jewish way of life as well'.

The way the YCL put down roots amongst Jewish youth in the Thirties is further illustrated by one young Jewish woman concerned about plans by Mosley's British Union of Fascists to open a headquarters in her area of Manchester. She was drawn into activity alongside communists. The extent to which communism was accepted in her circles, making it seem quite natural to take the steps that she did, is conveyed by her casual references to recognising familiar things – she hears of an anti-fascist circle through an old school friend, she mentions the meeting place in relation to a place she already knows,

'On the day of the official opening (of the BUF headquarters), I went along to witness the event.... I came face to face with an old school friend.... She was enthusiastic about a new club she had joined called The Youth Front Against Fascism and War, which was situated over Syd Abraham's garage in Waterloo Road. She asked me if I'd like to go, and I agreed.

'It was a social and political club, whose members, many of them Jewish, were very concerned about the growth of fascism in Europe and particularly about the way it was manifesting itself in this country under the leadership of Oswald Mosley.'

In his sociological study of British communism, Kenneth Newton identifies some factors in the conditions and life-style of Jewish communities in the Thirties, and in aspects of Jewish culture and belief, which helped lay the basis for the significant levels of recruitment of Jewish people into the communist movement. These included established traditions of Jewish radicalism and political activism; affinities between communism and Judaism in relation to such shared values as non-asceticism and the importance of learning, and a belief in social justice; 'the slum conditions and economic instability of the east end which contrasted strongly with other parts of London'; and the fact that both communism and Judaism were cast within an internationalist framework.

Thus for some young Jews whose parents were Jewish emigres from Russia, joining the communist movement could serve the function of creating a link – more psychological than real – with the 'old country'. Emanuel Litvinoff's autobiography provides a wealth of images which suggest the ways in which Jewish messianism and socialist or communist radicalism had common roots, 'One of

my jobs at 14 was as an apprentice in the ladies garment trade... elderly tailors sat cross-legged on their benches stitching away... waiting – according to their predilection – for the Messiah or the red day of reckoning.'

While these factors and pictures tend to stress the affinities between some peoples' Jewish identity and their communist sympathies, other explanations of the attractions of communism for young Jewish people present the political creed as an escape route from a marginalised identity – a way of handling and expressing an identity that was in no way mainstream. The experience of being Jewish, working class and young was already to feel oneself 'in opposition' in a number of ways. Becoming a communist was a way of building on that identity, of turning it around and using it positively.

Although becoming a communist could be a step that simply confirmed how marginalised one was from the mainstream political culture, it could also represent a way of promoting your concerns more effectively. It did link you into a national political party – one that affirmed your entitlement to live as a full member of the community in Britain, and fought those on the fascist right who opposed that entitlement. Raphael Samuel has written that 'for my mother's generation, commu-

nism, though not intended as such, was a way of being English, a bridge by which the children of the ghetto entered the national culture'.

One interesting area to consider in looking at the way that the class politics of communism operated within the Jewish community is how it allowed young people to see through and criticise the myths about 'us all being Jews together'. The exploitation of Jewish workers by Jewish bosses was often justified by such assertions of com-

mon identity, but YCL sponsored opposition to such devices helped lay the basis for the left wing anti-Zionism which has been a significant if minority response to the course of mainstream Jewish politics over the last five decades and more.

The complexity of such processes can be further illustrated by looking at one example of how communism caused one young woman to alter her attitude to the Jewish faith. Breaking with religion was a feature of many young peoples' socialisation into the communist movement, but in the case of people from minority groups which faced oppression and prejudice, a distinction was sometimes drawn between the rejection of belief, and continued respect for the cultural background they were from.

Rose Kerrigan had always been pragmatic about religion, going to the synagogue because she 'liked to listen to the choir....and another reason was it took me away from the chores'. Her move to atheism came at sixteen when somebody said to her, 'people say God knows, it means nobody knows', and she realised it was 'absolutely true'. She emphasises that she rejected her religion, 'though not her people'.

'For my mother's generation, communism, though not intended as such, was a way of being English'

● Further reading:

Ewan MacColl, (1990) 'Journeyman' – an autobiography, London: Sidgwick and Jackson

Derek Jameson, (1988) 'Touched by Angels', London: Ebury Press

Hilda Cohen, (1989) 'Bagels with Babushka', Manchester: North West Shape/ Gatehouse Project

Emanuel Litvinoff, (1972) 'Journey Through a Small Planet', London: Michael Joseph, reissued in 1993 by R.Clark, London

Joe Jacobs, (1979) 'Out of the Ghetto', London: J.Simon, reissued in 1993 by Phoenix press, London