



*Young Communist League street meeting, Bury New Road, 1936*

## ANTI-FASCIST ACTIVITY IN MANCHESTER'S JEWISH COMMUNITY IN THE 1930s

Sharon Gewirtz

Between 1933 and 1939, Jews in Britain fought back against their victimisation at the hands of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF). The fight against fascism in Manchester was spearheaded by the Cheetham branch of the Young Communist League (YCL) also known as the Challenge Club. With its 200 members it was probably the largest branch of the YCL in Britain and it was almost exclusively composed of Jewish young men and women who resided in the Jewish working-class districts of Cheetham and Strangeways. This article will begin by attempting an understanding of what it was that gave so many young Jewish men and women a heightened sense of class consciousness and a subsequent attraction to revolutionary politics. It will go on to look at the nature of the threat from the BUF and the way in which the Challenge Club responded to it.<sup>1</sup>

The article is written largely in response to a number of myths which have grown up around Jewish anti-fascist activity in the 1930s. Firstly there is the myth originally propagated by British fascists themselves but given wider circulation by Robert Skidelsky in his apologetic and highly sympathetic biography of Oswald Mosley. Drawing on the evidence of A.K. Chesterton — an anti-semitic and member of the BUF — as if he were a neutral and respectable witness to the events of the Thirties, Skidelsky argues that Jews themselves were responsible for the anti-semitism of the BUF. 'In December 1931', he writes,

*Mosley was assuring Lord Melchett<sup>2</sup> that 'anti-semitism forms no part of the policy of this organisation, and anti-semitic propaganda is forbidden.' A.K. Chesterton confirms that 'speakers who put over their personal views on the Jewish*

*question were barred from the rostrum; some were expelled.' Some Jews even joined. The party line had been settled and there it was to remain officially for almost two years. What started to change it was the attitude of Jews themselves, and they must take a large share of the blame for what subsequently happened. A Jewish malaise at this time was to be obsessed by fascism. If some Jews found it intolerably provoking they certainly went out of their way to be provoked. Fascist meetings drew them as a magnet.<sup>3</sup>*

One immediately senses the racism of any explanation of anti-semitism which claims that Jews were responsible for their own oppression; and one is led to question an analysis which sees a need to excuse or apologise for the kind of behaviour exhibited by Mosley and his Blackshirts. A discussion of the facts surrounding Blackshirt activity in Manchester will serve to discredit any such assertions.

Competing with the Skidelsky myth which accuses Jews of over-reacting to fascism is a second myth — tending to operate at a popular rather than historiographical level — which characterises Jews as under-reacting, as being passive in the face of attack. The stereotype here is encapsulated in a phrase usually applied in the context of the Holocaust, 'they went like lambs to the slaughter', but this representation of Jews pre-dates the Holocaust. In 1936 the Home Secretary, Sir John Simon, in acknowledging the provocative nature of anti-semitic abuse was to remark that 'the only reason there is not a row is because Jews are submissive under insult'.<sup>4</sup> As this article will demonstrate — with particular reference to fascism in Manchester — the Jewish community proved him wrong on both counts: there was a 'row' and Jews

showed themselves unwilling to submit to any form of provocation by the BUF.

A third myth evident in recent historiography emanates from the tendency to judge Communist anti-fascism in the 1930s almost entirely on the basis of official pronouncements and the statements of central Communist Party (CP) figures which appeared at the time in the *Daily Worker*. Such an approach tends to give the misleading impression that Jews were in some way used or manipulated by the CP. In this analysis it is stressed that the CP is not really the champion of Jewish interests that it claimed to be; that, in fact, there just happened to be a convergence of interests between the Communist and Jewish causes.<sup>5</sup> It has been argued, for instance, that:

*since fascist Jew baiting affected in particular the poorer strata of Anglo-Jewry, Communist identification with the Jewish cause fitted in with the party's general political aspirations and did not pose a dilemma of class expediency. While it would have been inopportune for the left to come out against the anti-Semitism that accompanied the immigration of large numbers of Jews during the 1890s, which was feared to affect the labour market, in the 1930s the support for East End Jewry was unproblematic, in that it did not conflict with the working class at large. Yet when the two were not mutually compatible, working-class interests were given priority.*<sup>6</sup>

Whilst it is substantially the case that the leadership of the CP 'was less concerned with the Jews than with the principle of attacking fascism',<sup>7</sup> accounts which rely solely on official CP sources give an incomplete and hence inaccurate picture of Jewish involvement in CP activity, leaving the reader with the false impression that Jews were somehow misled into joining the CP. By looking from a different angle — that of rank and file Jews involved in CP activity at a local level — it will become clear that Jews were not simply pawns of CP leaders or passive recipients of the CP line. It will be seen that Jews at the grassroots level shaped their anti-fascist activity in their own way even if it meant ignoring official party pronouncements on the question.

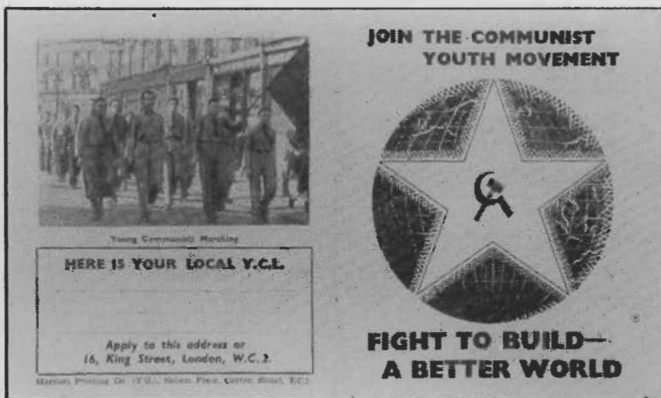
A gap in the historiography has played a large part in allowing myths such as these to circulate. Although individual Jews, Phil Piratin<sup>8</sup> or Joe Jacobs<sup>9</sup> for instance, have written about their own opposition to fascism in the wider context of a Communist response, attempts to write a history of specifically Jewish opposition to fascism are thin on the ground. With the exception of David Rosenberg's pamphlet, *Facing up to Anti-Semitism*,<sup>10</sup> there has been no effort in the literature about the thirties to go beyond the occasional and usually purely incidental mention of Jewish involvement in British anti-fascist activity. When Jews are mentioned it is usually as nameless inhabitants of the East End, faceless victims of fascism and anti-semitism, or as institutions, for instance the Board of Deputies of British Jews (BoD) or the *Jewish Chronicle*.

Rosenberg's work on the response of the Jewish communal leadership and of working-class East End Jewry to fascism is an exception and we must build on this type of work which begins to put Jews at the centre of the stage in an attempt to piece together a history of Jewish opposition to fascism in the 1930s. A fundamental weakness in Rosenberg's pamphlet, however, is that it fails to ask

some vital questions about the way in which social identities were constructed and this is largely because his sources won't let him; for Rosenberg's analysis is based almost exclusively on the *Jewish Chronicle* as a source of evidence. Although he accepts that 'an examination of the editorial policy and general content reveals that it lies broadly within the consensus of opinion of the established communal leadership', he goes on to defend his extensive use of the *Jewish Chronicle* on the grounds that it 'could offer the largest and most comprehensive coverage and claim the most broadly encompassing readership' as compared with the Yiddish newspapers and provincial Jewish papers. Therefore, Rosenberg argues, 'the *Jewish Chronicle* in the 1930s provides a most productive medium through which to study the period from within the Jewish community'.<sup>11</sup>

The result is quite a cogent analysis of the response to fascism of the representatives of the Jewish bourgeoisie, the BoD, but a correspondingly weaker analysis of that of the Jewish People's Council Against Fascism and Anti-semitism (JPC), a popular front organisation set up in the East End of London by working-class Jews to combat fascism there. The setting up of the JPC is explained in the following terms: that its members' very different analysis of anti-semitism led them to be dissatisfied with the BoD's response which — once action was deemed necessary — was essentially a campaign of anti-defamation. By analysing the response of the Jewish working-class largely in terms of a rejection of the response of the middle-class Jews who sat on the BoD, Rosenberg confers too much importance on to the communal leadership and fails to tackle the more important reasons for the radical nature of Jewish working-class activity. One is left with the impression that the JPC's understanding of anti-semitism — 'as a political instrument, but with an appeal rooted in economic conflict'<sup>12</sup> — was an inevitable or automatic outgrowth of its members' direct experience of the anti-semitic threat. What Rosenberg fails to do is to deconstruct the processes of identity or consciousness formation which lay behind the decision of Jews to join the JPC and which contributed to their assessment of anti-semitism as a political tool. It could be argued that there is no need to explain why working-class Jews set up an organisation like the JPC or joined bodies like the YCL, because it is so self-evident that this was a logical response to anti-semitism or to exploitation by capital. But this sort of argument wrongly assumes that people always choose the response which corresponds to their objective class interests. What would be interesting to know is why in this particular instance there was such a linkage between class location and political action. To obtain a satisfactory answer one must ask questions both about the objective conditions of class and ethnic oppression and also about communal traditions and culture which, although determined structurally themselves, in turn may be seen to have influenced the nature of people's identities and the choices and responses those identities informed.

By drawing on oral sources as well as more conventional evidence in the form of newspaper reportage, it is possible to address some of the problems neglected by Rosenberg whilst sustaining his overview which puts Jews at the centre of the stage. Although there are inevitable problems associated with oral evidence, the advantages more than compensate for these. Interviews with ex-YCL members may help us see what it was that motivated people to join the YCL and enable us to discover not only what



Recruitment pamphlet for Young Communist League

they saw was important but through these testimonies to identify less conscious influences on action, or at least begin to ask questions about what these may have been.

Whilst the central concern of this paper is the two hundred or so Jewish members of the Cheetham YCL, there is a need to place the activities of this group — which was after all only a small minority of the Manchester Jewish community — into perspective. There were roughly 35,000 Jews in Manchester in the 1930s. Most of these were immigrants or the children of immigrants who came to Britain at the turn of the century to escape the pogroms, economic hardship and enforced military service that was the wont of East European Jewry.<sup>13</sup> They were concentrated mainly in the working-class districts of Cheetham and Strangeways. Work-life was focused in the small workshops and factories of the garment and furniture-making industries. Like other sectors of the British economy in the 1930s, these trades were hard hit by the depression. Bill Williams has described the effects:

*Workshops were closed without notice, hours were shortened and pay cut in many that remained open. Less scrupulous masters replaced skilled union labour with cheap, unskilled workers, many underpaid on the pretence of their being 'apprentices'. Longer-term changes were also undercutting the garment trades. Cap-making was hit by what one employer saw in 1933 as the 'vogue of hatless men and women', traditional waterproofing by the advent of synthetic, chemically-treated rainproof cloth, bespoke tailoring by the mushrooming of 'cheap, multi-store tailors'... Throughout the 1930s the economic structure of the old Jewish Quarter, created by the immigrants of the later 19th century, was gradually ceasing to provide a secure and comfortable livelihood for their children. Vigorous rearguard action by the unions, designed to maintain a living wage, failed to hold back the tide of economic depression and structural decay. It was the dismal economic climate in Lancashire as a whole in the early 1930s which persuaded Sir Oswald Mosley to make Manchester an important focus of his blackshirted British Union of Fascists.<sup>14</sup>*

Joining the CP was just one response to these conditions. Involvement in trade union activity was another, more common strategy. Particularly militant was the Waterproof and Garment Workers' Trade Union, which held a nine month strike in 1934-5 for better pay and conditions.<sup>15</sup> But the most widespread reaction especially amongst the children of immigrants in the districts of Cheetham and

Strangeways was the desire to 'get on'. This was reflected in a drift of Jews northwards, away from the traditional areas of Jewish settlement, to the newer suburbs of Prestwich, Crumpsall and Sedgley Park.<sup>16</sup> However, these responses were not always mutually exclusive. Many of those involved in communist activity also played an important part in the trade union movement. Similarly, trade unionists worked together with communists in the fight against fascism. Nor was the desire to 'get on' or 'better oneself' incompatible with a sympathy with some of the aims and activities of the small group of Jews who belonged to the YCL.

### Attraction of Communism

Most young Jews' first encounter with organised politics in the twenties and thirties in Manchester would have been at the County Forum (a popular debating society amongst Manchester radicals) or at outdoor meetings held at Stevenson Square (the Manchester equivalent of Hyde Park), at street corners and at entrances to public parks. And it was often at these venues that they would first come into contact with the Young Communist League. Many of those who joined had been in the Jewish Lads Brigade (a supposedly non-political, although militarily orientated social club), but at the age of fifteen, sixteen and seventeen they were looking for something else, an organisation that would enable them to become politically active on the revolutionary left.

For those who joined the YCL in the 1930s, the growth of British fascism visible on the streets of Manchester coupled with the rise to power of Hitler in Germany were clearly the most powerful and immediate motivating forces. For the CP seemed to be the only political grouping which was waging an active campaign against fascism and anti-semitism. 'What finally decided me', Martin Bobker recalls:

*We were already worried about what was happening in Germany with the Nazis and so on and when Hitler came to power I realised then that things were very serious and I was looking ... to see what part I could play in this and I went to the Labour Party and it was obvious they were doing nothing and I was a bit worried ... about joining the Communist Party because you know the way my brother used to talk as if all the Communists were all tremendous intellectuals, 'cause you know we used to go to the County Forum and listen to people, you know, people like Moses Baritz<sup>17</sup> and I thought, 'Ooh, how can I join the Communist Party?' But they were the only ones, doing anything. You see they were going round campaigning about fascism far more than the others were doing. Anyway ... so I joined the Communist Party, but they put me in the YCL.<sup>18</sup>*

For Joe Garman as well 'the rise of Hitler in the 1930s clouded [his] entire life' and the Challenge Club, unlike the Jewish Lads' Brigade and the ordinary synagogue societies, provided young Jews with 'a means of expression' and a means 'to struggle against fascism'.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly for those who joined in the 1920s, before the rise of fascism in England, the CP was attractive because it seemed to be doing something about trying to make the revolution happen rather than just theorising about it like other revolutionary organisations some had experienced. This is Ben Ainley's description of his brief encounter with the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB)

before being persuaded by someone at the County Forum to join the CP in 1922:

*I said, 'Well, if I join the SPGB, what do I do?' So the chap said to me, 'Don't worry, you've already started. You're reading the right stuff. We've got a very good pamphlet, What is Socialism? Read that. Read Marx... Wages, Price and Profit, Wage Labour and Capital. Those will give you an idea', they said, 'of the way the system works, what exploitation is. When you've done that, oh well, try Marx's Capital, volume one,' says one person. Now I was a studious lad, I'd read novels that big many a time, you know, but a volume of six or seven hundred pages, that was a bit too much, but I said, 'OK'. You know, swallowed a bit but I said, 'I'll try it, but you tell me, what do I do then?' 'Well, there's volume two.' And the impression given me was that you could be intellectually rich for life and more and more confirmed as a socialist the more Marx you read. But I said, 'Look, I'll do the reading, you know, sometime, but what do I do when I've done the reading?... What about socialism, what about the trade unions, what about converting people?' 'You won't convert people', they used to say to me, 'events will convert them'.<sup>20</sup>*

But the active nature of CP work was what convinced neophytes to join the CP in preference to other revolutionary organisations. What was it that attracted young Jews to revolutionary socialism in the first place? Two threads run through the testimonies of Jews who joined in the 1920s and 30s. One is the experience of anti-semitism culminating in the rise of fascism in the 1930s but also expressed in memories of name-calling at school and getting into fights because of it. 'Sheeny' and 'Yid' were common insults, as were the taunts, 'Let's crucify him like they crucified our Lord' or 'Who killed Christ?'.<sup>21</sup> Also common amongst those interviewed is an awareness of the exclusion of Jews from certain sectors of industry such as mining and engineering because of racially restrictive trade union practices. A second thread running through the interviews is the experience of location in the sweated workshops of the garment industry which clearly had a vital impact on the development of an acute sense of class identity. Work was highly seasonal so that experience of long bouts of unemployment and of often fruitless searches for any kind of work was common; and those with jobs had to work long hours on low wages in poor conditions.

Communism provided an answer to both kinds of oppression, class and ethnic, by offering an analysis which linked the two together. If racism was a tool of the ruling class employed to divide the working class, then the defeat of capitalism would mean the disappearance of anti-semitism along with wage slavery. Aubrey Lewis's testimony<sup>22</sup> illustrates the way these two kinds of oppression could have a powerful impact on consciousness and work together to produce a receptivity to communist ideas. In answer to the question 'How did you become politically active?' Aubrey said:

*My childhood was spent in acute economic difficulty. I was born in a working-class district at the time of economic recession. I was eleven years old when the Wall Street crash happened — I remember vividly the effects and so many people in the area out of work, people literally dropping from starvation.*

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*People tried to commit suicide in the area where I lived. My father went to Glasgow to look for work when I was 10 or 11. He used to send me and my brother a penny stamp each week. I was thoughtful, couldn't understand why these things should be. It seemed all wrong. I didn't accept it. I never adopted the attitude, 'It was there and if I ever get the chance I'm going to get out of it, get rich', because that's not a solution. My concern was that the whole thing should be made right. At 14 or 15 I'd heard it said often enough that the problems were due to the anarchic nature of society and production and the private ownership of the means of production and people and their welfare was a secondary issue. It made sense to me — the idea that you needed a planned togetherness where people's happiness and prosperity should be the primary concern in running society. The fight against fascism was a corollary of this — the moment the ordinary people were to try to make an advance to a more equitable society, those with a vested interest in keeping things as they were would crush them. I understood that the Blackshirts swarming into the streets was necessary to divide opposition and a scapegoat like anti-semitism was the ideal thing. At 17 I joined the YCL.*

And a little later he added:

*There was every reason for doing everything. The issues were so clear. There were the Blackshirts who were the armed fist of the class enemy. In fighting them you were not only defending their chosen target, your own people — because when they shouted 'Get rid of the yids', it was you they were talking about. So you were fighting the class enemy, its mailed fist and you were the target so you were defending yourself as a Jew. In the process you were playing a leading part in changing that society which was producing this.*

YCL Report, 1937



## WE MARCH TO VICTORY

Report of the National Council to  
the 9th National Conference, Young  
Communist League of Great Britain

Covering the period Feb., 1936—April, 1937

TWOPENCE

Moreover what was appealing about communism was the immediacy of its solution, for the revolution was expected within the next ten years or so. Aubrey continued:

*You must remember it was only eighteen years or so after the Russian Revolution, in the throes of the world-wide capitalist crisis. The hope and optimism on the part of socialist revolutionaries were tremendous. At the age of 16 I really believed it was only a matter of 10 or 15 years before we had worldwide socialism... the optimism was a tremendous generator of energy.*

As well as providing hope for the future, membership of the YCL offered a whole lifestyle; it was a means of dealing with the present. Joe Garman saw it as having been in many ways a political version of the Jewish Lads' Brigade, for as well as political meetings and lessons on marxism, members would go to the Challenge Club for a chat, a game of table-tennis or to listen to music. But the social and political were firmly wedded together, as expressed in Joe's description of YCL social life:

*The Challenge Club became, oh, not only a political club. It was far from that. There'd be readings there. There'd be lectures on various things. There'd be rambles — in particular rambles. Every weekend the countryside was opened out for ... Jewish children. For the first time they were able to go out in the country and walk literally in the fresh air. It was a wonderful thing for Jewish children to do and rambling became as important a factor in Jewish progressive life as anything ... It was all coupled with this anti-fascist business ... Somehow or other it wasn't separate. Literally one can say if you were playing table-tennis you were playing it with an anti-fascist feeling about it. You didn't separate things. It was all part and parcel of the same thing ... The theatre was part of the struggle against fascism. If you went to the Hallé orchestra it was somehow or other you used to talk to people about the ... meeting next week. Everything was linked together.<sup>23</sup>*

This last point about lifestyle brings us into the realm of culture and tradition. Whilst joining the YCL was partly a response to concrete experiences of economic exploitation and anti-semitism, the decision to join may have been made easier by a pre-existing set of both radical and less radical utopian traditions in the community. Before 1914 Jewish radicalism in Britain was expressed in the anarchism of such groups as Aron Lieberman's Hebrew Socialist Union, which organised Jewish workers against the sweating system. Communists of the 1920s and 1930s may be viewed as heirs to this older anarchist tradition. Bill Fishman has described how, in 1917, many of the older members of the Jewish radical movement 'saw their millennium in the Russian Revolution... Hundreds flocked enthusiastically to join the great return', and 'a generation of immigrants' sons embraced the new Communism from afar with a fanaticism more lasting than the old'.<sup>24</sup> As well as the more radical ideologies like anarchism, bundism and zionism supported by some of the first generation immigrants, there also existed a competing — if not politically articulated — version of utopianism expressed in a faith in the democracy and fortunes which the 'New World' (America) especially but Britain as well were thought to offer. What these various strands of belief held in common was a longing for and a vision of a society free from anti-semitism and



Challenge, 30 September 1937

poverty. It could also be argued that they shared a common source: an experience of the systematic brutality of the Tsarist regime.

Some immigrants clung to the same utopian vision for most of their lives and consciously attempted to pass that on to their children. Mick Jenkins' father, for instance. Mick describes his father as 'an anarchist type', 'socialistically inclined' and 'an anti-capitalist'. He had left Russia partly to escape the pogroms, but also because, having bravely deserted the army to avoid fighting in the imperialist Russo-Japanese War of 1905, he was in danger of being caught and imprisoned. Mick describes his own upbringing as being in an atmosphere of political argument and he tells of the way in which once he was in the YCL his parents would facilitate his political involvement by encouraging him to hold meetings in the family house which became known by their neighbours as 'Bolshevik House'.<sup>25</sup>

Ben Ainley's father on the other hand adopted a number of alternative utopian visions throughout his lifetime:

*He had been a member of the Bund in Russia — that is the Jewish socialist organisation. He was sufficiently a socialist when he came to England that when his older son was born — my elder brother — he called him William Morris. But by the time I came on the scene 13 months later he'd suffered a change. He'd become more Jewish, and I was given a name which ... brought ... him back into the Jewish community. And a younger brother of mine — Teddy ... — was called Theodore Herzl. So you see he'd gone right over to zionism by this time. My father thought England was marvellous and Jews didn't need socialism any more ... that was his attitude, and he was quite horrified, horrified of the idea of me joining the Communist Party. It was a betrayal of the Jewish people who in this country had freedom. That was his attitude.<sup>26</sup>*

Ben, like others of his generation, whilst not directly brought up as a socialist and not supported by his parents in his decision to join the YCL, grew up with the knowledge of how his parents had suffered in Eastern Europe and what their hopes had been. For people like Ben — who in his early life had heard a lot about different ideologies which were critical of the world as it was, having alternative visions, these were acceptable and normal feelings to have. So that, whilst many immigrants abandoned their search for a utopia once in England, seeing this country as conforming (near enough) to that vision, that search was resumed by the second generation immigrants who appropriated versions of the utopian culture once held by their parents. The testimony of Aubrey Lewis indicates a sense of feeling part of a utopian tradition, of belonging to an idealised international movement of Jews who were searching for an existence without oppression:

*The Jews were a working class spread around the world whose only hope for survival seemed to be in a better society. It was in their perceived interests that there should be social justice ... Everywhere in Europe, Jews gravitated to the revolutionary movements. This was their hope for a better society, free from anti-semitism and poverty.*<sup>27</sup>

For those who joined the YCL, the Soviet Union came to represent the model of that 'better society, free from anti-semitism and poverty'. Although he is writing about the 1940s, Raphael Samuel expresses, in the following passage, the veneration of the Soviet Union also felt by Jewish Communists of the previous decade:

*The Soviet Union was, of course, our promised land, 'the embodiment of socialism in action'. It was the place where man had become a giant, both in mighty feats of construction — the hydro-electric dam at Dnieperpetrovsk was, in my child's imagination, one of the wonders of the world — and in heroic acts of resistance. It had dispensed with landlords and capitalists; it had abolished kings and queens. It was a land, as we believed, where racial discrimination was unknown ... 'the only country in the world where anti-semitism is a crime against the state'. It had emancipated its subject peoples, scattering their exploiters like leaves before the wind...*<sup>28</sup>

### Nature of the Fascist Threat

Fascist activity manifested itself in a number of ways, as did the fear generated by it. Fear for one's immediate safety was compounded by fear of what the fascists stood for. The association between the BUF and German and Italian fascism was clear for all to see; for the rise of fascism in England occurred alongside the rise of fascism on the Continent. This was clearly illustrated on the pages of the *Manchester Guardian*. An article about the violence surrounding Mosley's first rally in Manchester's Belle Vue and the brutality of the Blackshirt stewards, for instance, appears alongside an article headlined, 'Growing Reports of A Nazi Terror'.<sup>29</sup>

The BUF seemed to imitate the Nazis in every way: the paramilitary nature of the organisation; the uniform; the emblem resembling the colours of the swastika; and the leadership cult. In case people were not able to make the connection for themselves, *Manchester Guardian* leaders drew the attention of their readers to it:

*There were two meetings in Manchester last night, one to protest against the brutalities and cruelties of Fascism in Germany, one [a Mosley meeting in Belle Vue] to advocate the introduction of Fascism into this country ... If the study of demagogic arts can help a man, Sir Oswald Mosley should be irresistible. No pose of Mussolini or Hitler, no trick of floodlighting or the microphone has been missed. So far as outward trappings go, the flattery of imitation has been sincere and zealous.*<sup>30</sup>

The most organised form of BUF activity were mass meetings and rallies. These were both threatening in terms of the numbers of Blackshirts in attendance and in terms of language used. At Belle Vue on 29 September 1934 Mosley described the opposition as 'the sweepings of the continental ghetto financed by Jewish financiers' and as 'an alien gang brought from the ghettos to Britain by Jewish money'. At one point he exclaimed, 'Look at the mobilisation of Jews from Cheetham Hill Road'. Behind those 'foreign Yiddish faces' was 'foreign Yiddish gold'. Not only did Mosley adopt Hitler's accusations about Jewish finance but he borrowed the theme of a stab in the back. Referring to the Jews in the audience, he asked, 'Are those people who stabbed our men in the back when they were fighting in the trenches in the last war in a British quarrel going to lead us to war with Germany in a Jewish quarrel?'. As well as attempting to incite racial hatred, Mosley's speeches constituted a clear encouragement to violence. At the same meeting he argued:

*We have been faced with terrorism and mob rule in the streets, which we have met and broken ... Our case is being put forward tonight and being heard despite every method of the alien mob to prevent us being heard... If this was an indoor meeting with Blackshirt stewards, those hooligans would be outside to yell in the streets.*<sup>31</sup>

So far reference has been made only to the large meetings at which Mosley spoke, but other forms of fascist activity on a smaller scale could be equally, if not more, threatening. Mass meetings were occasional occurrences and could be avoided, unless of course they were held in Jewish areas, for instance Cheetham Town Hall. But other types of fascist activity, which went largely unreported in the press, were a repeated phenomenon which one could not avoid. At the least organised level there was the muttering anti-semitism of people not connected to the fascist movement, but clearly influenced by it. Weekly fascist meetings were held at such places as Stevenson Square, Miles Platting, Alexandra Park and Platt Fields where anti-semitism was propagated and literature handed out. Leaflets were posted door-to-door regarding alleged atrocities carried out by 'Communist bully boys from the local ghetto'. One member of the Manchester Jewish community remembers receiving a leaflet through his door alleging that one such 'bully boy' had bitten the jugular vein of a Briton.<sup>32</sup> As early as 1933 incidents are reported in the press of Blackshirts attacking Jewish youths in Cheetham. It should not be assumed that only CP members were threatened.<sup>33</sup>

Most importantly, these forms of activity occurred right at the heart of the area in which most Jews lived. It is no coincidence that the BUF's headquarters were in Northumberland Street and Tyson Street, both places highly populated by Jews. That the BUF acted with intention to provoke was not an idea which existed solely in the minds of Jewish extremists, as Skidelsky would have us believe. Manchester Chief Constable Maxwell could hardly be put

in this category, yet he was to express 'considerable concern' at the BUF challenge in a confidential memo to the Home Office. The fascists, he wrote, were adopting 'a policy of deliberate provocation of the Jews. Parties of fascists in uniform visit the Jewish quarter and make insulting remarks which lead to outbreaks of disorder'. Instances of such provocations, he reported, ran at between four and five a week.<sup>34</sup> One cannot exaggerate the threat posed to a Jew by a group of Blackshirts in military formation marching through a Jewish area chanting 'the Yids, the Yids, we've gotta get rid of the Yids'. The cinema was a common venue for this type of provocation. One such incident was described in the *Jewish Chronicle*:

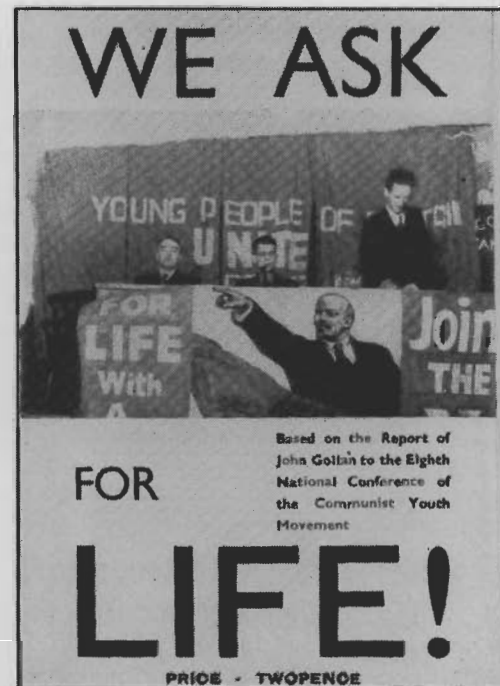
*On a Saturday evening recently, Fascists appeared in Cheetham Hill Road outside a well known cinema largely frequented by Jewish patrons selling their newspaper, Action, and calling out loudly 'the only paper in the country not financed by Jews'.<sup>35</sup>*

Would Skidelsky argue that Jews, who visited their local cinema on Saturday nights, were going 'out of their way to be provoked'?

It has been argued that tension between fascists, their opponents, and the police was less acute in Manchester than in London because of the 'radical initiatives' of Maxwell, and the more even handed treatment of fascists and anti-fascists by the Manchester police.<sup>36</sup> In line with Home Office recommendations, the Metropolitan police pursued a policy of 'minimum interference'. They rarely entered private meetings or took preventative action to forestall clashes. The Manchester police, on the other hand, had greater autonomy from the Home Office and their actions tended to represent the very different policy of the City Council. They had no qualms about entering fascist meetings, and if necessary ushering Blackshirts out. On 12 March 1933, for instance, at the Free Trade Hall, 12 policemen rushed into Mosley's meeting without invitation and ordered out the 130 BUF stewards. On 29 October 1933 Maxwell imposed a 5 o'clock curfew on a city centre BUF meeting. And shortly after Mosley's mass rally at Olympia in June 1934 (when Fascist stewards used extreme violence to eject anti-fascist protesters from the meeting), Manchester police refused to allow fascist meetings to take place in municipally owned halls, unless the police were to act as stewards. On 7 October 1936 Manchester became the first council in Britain to officially ban the wearing of political uniforms at public meetings.

By banning uniforms on certain occasions and controlling Blackshirt stewards on others rather more effectively than the Met, the Manchester force may clearly have relieved tension at certain junctures and paved the way for the banning of political uniforms altogether. However, it would be misleading to make too much of these instances; for the interventions of the Manchester police force could on occasions favour the fascists. In September 1934, for instance, the police banned all marches in the vicinity of Belle Vue where the BUF had been given permission to hold a rally. The *Manchester Guardian* derided Maxwell's action, which clearly discriminated against the anti-fascists.<sup>37</sup> It similarly condemned the lengths to which the police went in order to safeguard the right of fascists to propagate their hatred:

*Inside Belle Vue the police had made delectable arrangements for the comfort of Sir Oswald Mosley's party. They shepherded the Blackshirts into a 'square enclosure' formed by a 'stout wooden barrier' which*



*Title page of YCL 'We Ask For Life!' pamphlet*

*itself was lined on the inside with policemen, and when Signor Mussolini and Herr Hitler hear of our popular police interning our Blackshirts in a Zariba at Belle Vue ... they will have learnt something interesting about the standing of Fascism in this part of England.*

There are also instances in which Jews and anti-fascists experienced hostility from individual policemen. Those anti-fascists involved were certainly given the impression that the police were definitely on the side of the fascists. Aubrey Lewis remembers,

*They [the BUF] had a regular pitch on Saturday nights at Marshall Croft. They were always protected by the police. We used to turn out with anti-fascist leaflets or CP papers. I remember distinctly standing with a friend on the pavement shouting out anti-fascist slogans and two huge coppers approached us and one of them said, 'Listen you, you make one move and we'll act'. So I said to him, 'On whose behalf will you act? On their behalf?'. He said: 'I told you, not one move'.<sup>38</sup>*

Occasionally this sort of incident got a mention in the press. In one street-corner meeting in 1936, the *Jewish Chronicle* reported:

*the national anthem was unexpectedly struck up and one Jewish youth, taken by surprise, still had his hat on; it was plucked from his head by a fascist immediately. A witness nearby remonstrated, and a policeman drawn into the affray told the Jewish youth that he would have to take off his hat in the future. The same witness directed the officer's attention to the fact that he had no right to make such a remark to an unoffending citizen, and if anything he should have warned the fascist for committing what was technically an assault.<sup>39</sup>*

One cannot generalise from this example nor from the reminiscences of those involved that the Manchester police force was full of fascist sympathisers. Nor can one say that the Chief Constable was sympathetic to Mosley's cause.

But the even-handed treatment of fascists and anti-fascists

by the police leads one to suspect that Maxwell's interest in 'keeping order' overrode any desire he may also have had to defend the right of Jews not to be harassed. If the latter had been his primary motivation, even-handedness would not have been the most appropriate response. For in practice even-handedness and the associated policy of 'keeping order' could mean, as in the Belle Vue example, defending the right of fascists to incite racial hatred and violence. In fact, the very phrase 'public order problem' employed by the Home Office and the police may be viewed as a reflection of state ambivalence on the really important matter — a concerted fascist campaign of attacks against Jews. Not only were Jews threatened by fascist anti-semitism, but they were confronted by a police force acting with the authority of the state to defend the right of fascists to harass and intimidate them.

### Response of the YCL

The most active forms of opposition to fascism in Manchester were largely organised by the almost exclusively Jewish, two hundred strong Cheetham branch of the YCL, although it should be realised that it was not only communist Jews who were engaged in the fight against fascism. For example, in 1936 Manchester communists worked together with members of the Labour Party, the Workers' Circle (an organisation of Jewish workers) and the two garment workers' unions under the umbrella of the North Manchester Coordinating Committee Against Fascism, a popular front organisation. Also, the Communal Council (the formal representative body of the Manchester and Salford Jewish community and the local equivalent to the London-based BoD) after an initial period of inaction, adopted a more positive anti-fascist policy. Its initial, cautious response to fascism reflected an ongoing defensive concern of a less secure, older generation of recent immigrants that the toleration conferred on Jews in British society was conditional on their conforming to certain standards of behaviour. In accordance with this belief, it was held that Jews themselves were able to eradicate some of the causes of anti-semitism. For example, in 1934 one communal leader was arguing that the primary duty of the Council was to 'counteract anti-semitism and prevent the causes that created it. What had contributed to bringing about that position, not only in Germany but even in a mild sense here, was the one pernicious fault of our people — ostentation. The work of the Council was to try and remove that cause if possible'.<sup>40</sup> It was out of a similar concern to protect the 'good image' of the community that communal leaders called upon Jews to stay away from fascist meetings: 'We must always be on the watch that the Jewish name should be safeguarded. We should do all in our power to discourage young people from attending Fascist meetings'.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the period the leaders of the community maintained their faith in the British authorities' ability to deal with fascism. At first this faith implied that the Jewish community need not combat fascism itself. It was argued that, 'The fascist question was not a Jewish question. The police would use their best endeavours to see there was no breach of the peace'.<sup>42</sup> However, by October 1936, a member of the Communal Council executive was reported in the *Jewish Chronicle* as saying that 'Jewry in England had begun to realise they must undertake to protect themselves owing to the attacks being made upon them ... The handful of Jews in this country had to take up the cudgels'.<sup>43</sup>

A local Defence Committee was set up under Council

auspices. Its work was largely of a defensive nature, continuing an earlier trend of answering the BUF at the level of argument, point by point. Thus the Committee was concerned to prove that Jews were loyal citizens who did not control the press, the Government, finance or the BBC.<sup>44</sup> However, between the end of 1936 and 1939 the Council, through its Defence Committee, played a more positive role in the fight against fascism than it ever had before. This shift in strategy towards greater surveillance of the BUF came in the wake of prolonged discussion both in the national media and in Parliament about fascist activity and Jew baiting in particular, culminating in the Public Order Act (1936), which banned political parties from wearing uniforms in public. As it became acceptable for central government and for local chief constables under the auspices of city councils to restrict BUF activities, so the Communal Council felt able to assist in that process.<sup>45</sup> It is possible therefore to distinguish between two phases of Council activity. In the first phase, from the intrusion of the BUF into Manchester in 1932 until September-October 1936, the communal leadership had no coherent policy of opposition. In the second phase, from 1936 until the demise of the BUF, the Council took seriously the task of monitoring the BUF and combating its actions.

In contrast, the YCL strategy was clear and consistent throughout the 1930s, reflecting the self-confidence of a younger generation of Jews who had been brought up in Manchester and who felt more secure of their place there and more able to defend it vigorously. Within the CP Jews proved themselves to be perhaps more militant than any other sector. In London Jewish militancy created a conflict in the CP. Phil Piratin spoke disparagingly of those Jews who said 'Bash the fascists wherever you see them'.<sup>46</sup> Yet it was only as a result of pressure from advocates of such a policy, both in and outside the Party, that CP leaders eventually came out in support the Cable Street anti-fascist action, which they had initially intended not to do. For, having abandoned the 'class against class' policy in 1933-4, the CP had in accordance with Comintern directives adopted the strategy of 'a united front of working class parties and a popular front of those parties with all who would combine against Fascism and War'.<sup>47</sup> The subsequent concern to develop a relationship with the Labour Party precluded any form of activity on the part of the CP members which might alienate Labour support. In the words of Harry Pollitt:

*It will be fatal for us if the CP's opposition to Mosley is looked upon by the working class as in the nature of a brawl and not a real political struggle.*<sup>48</sup>

The shift in strategy led to the conflict (articulated particularly in the London Borough of Stepney) between those rank-and-file members who advocated 'streetwork' — for example, party members engaged in the fight against fascism in the streets and in organisations like the National Unemployed Workers Movement — and full time functionaries who wanted people to give up 'streetwork' for trade union work. For, it was argued that if the CP had greater influence in the trade unions and the Labour Party, it would be possible to generate more united front action which would be more effective in the long run in the fight against fascism.<sup>49</sup>

In Manchester the type of conflict which eventually led to expulsions in Stepney was not apparent. Trade union work and a popular front strategy, expressed most clearly in the first half of 1936, were executed alongside the type of policy derided by Phil Piratin, Harry Pollitt and other CP leaders, that of, where possible, driving the fascists off the streets. Whilst, after the Party's strategic shift of 1934, forces at

the top may have been disapproving of some of the tactics being employed in Cheetham, there appears to be no evidence of interference 'from above' with anti-fascist activity initiated at a local level.

The policy of driving the fascists off the streets was pursued in response to every level of fascist activity. At the personal level, one-to-one fights would very often break out where a Jewish youth was subjected, to anti-semitic abuse by a fascist. As one ex-YCL member remembers:

*A verbal encounter would very often lead to physical attack. Many of my contemporaries would not stand for it... it would end up with fisticuffs on the spot, maybe on a bus, maybe in a cinema queue, maybe in a dance hall. Any reference to 'Jew boys' could end in a fight. That was as common as anything ... My immediate reaction to any expression of fascism was 'knock their bloody head off'.<sup>50</sup>*

Or as another ex-member put it: 'I am a man of peace, but I had no qualms about putting my boot in'.<sup>51</sup>

At the slightly more collective level of street-corner activity, the attitude of the YCL is clearly encapsulated in the following report which appeared in the *Daily Worker*:

*For nearly two years now the workers and anti-Fascists of Manchester have shown the Blackshirts where to get off. Time and again the Fascists have only got out of Stevenson Square with only a whole skin as a result of quick mobilisation of the police force — I'll never forget the Sunday afternoon when about two thousand workers determinedly drove them out of the square into Lever Street ... Last Saturday saw this militant record upheld when the Blackshirts were driven off town sales quite early in the evening. They returned with increased forces, but this resulted in hundreds of workers taking up their cudgels and standing no nonsense. They drove the Fascists off Oldham Street.<sup>52</sup>*

The *Daily Worker* may or may not have exaggerated the numbers involved, but it captures the essence of such incidents, according to the recollections of those involved.

Where it was not possible to physically remove the Blackshirts from the scene, for instance in the case of Mosley's mass meetings, the YCL and their supporters would use disruptive tactics, such as those described in the following extract from the *Manchester Guardian*:

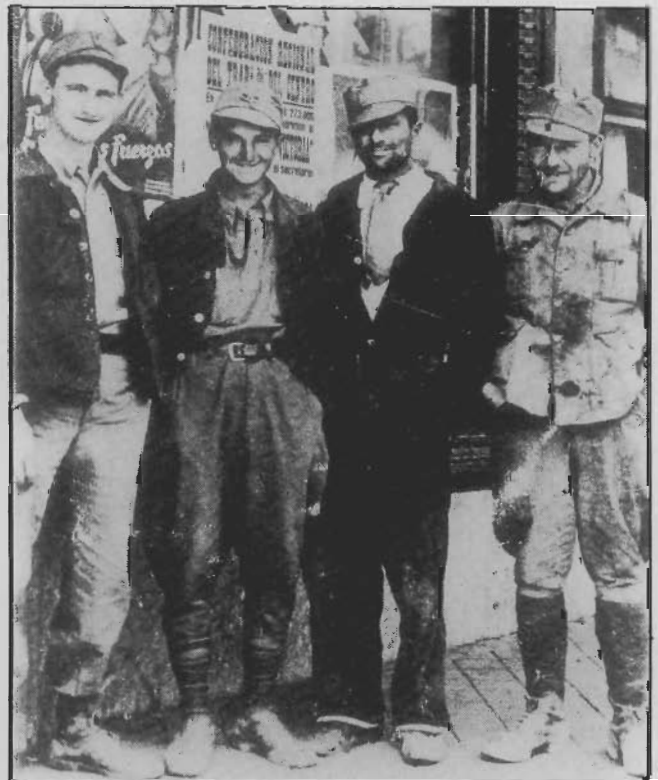
*As soon as Sir Oswald appeared on the platform the presence of a compact and rowdy opposition declared itself ... For [the first] quarter of an hour not a single phrase of the speech was understood, except by those on or near the platform. The interrupters stood shoulder to shoulder at one corner of the square yelling systematically. 'One, two, three, four, five — we want Mosley dead or alive' was repeated continuously in chorus for minutes together ... One group sang the 'Internationale'. Another followed it with the 'Red Flag'.<sup>53</sup>*

The YCL had an effective and well oiled system of mobilisation which sprang into action the moment spies in the BUF informed the YCL leadership of Blackshirt plans.

*... the moment news came, say of a fascist march or street corner meeting ... there was a network immediately ... It was a close knit area: terraced houses, streets close by one another, everybody on foot ... people used to legging it. You used to get*

*on a bike, race round the area and our first weapon to mobilise people was a leaflet. We used to run off leaflets like a flash. Printers in the area were sympathetic to us. It was a whole community involvement ... Someone would knock on your door one evening. 'Come out with us, we've got leaflets to give out.' 'Right, on your bike' ... Someone would run off these leaflets, 'All out, Marshall Croft, such and such a date, such and such a time'. We would collect about twenty people, race out all round the area — word of mouth — people going shopping the next day — women talking to each other ... buzzing round the whole area...<sup>54</sup>*

It has already been noted that the YCL represented only a small proportion of the Jewish community as a whole. But there is evidence that there was support for some of the League's activities in the wider Jewish community. Obviously, without the evidence of opinion polls, it is difficult to assess the exact degree of this support, but the events of the first half of 1936, as reported in the *Manchester Guardian*, indicate that a significant minority of Jews were willing to work with communists in protesting against fascist provocation. On 26 February 1936, the day before the BUF proposed to hold a meeting in Cheetham Town Hall, a crowded meeting in the YCL's Challenge Club, Hightown, protested, 'against the deliberate act of provocation on the part of Fascists preparing to hold a meeting in the heart of the Jewish population in Manchester'. It called on the Chief Constable and the City Council authorities immediately to withdraw permission for the meeting.<sup>55</sup> The fascist meeting, allowed to go ahead, was followed a week later by a demand by residents of the Cheetham area for an official inquiry into the reasons for the failure to ban the meeting. The protest meeting was held at a larger venue than the Challenge Club, the Cheetham Public Hall. Yet, according to the *Manchester Guardian*, hundreds of people were unable to gain admission to the meeting and an overflow meeting had to be held.<sup>56</sup>



Maurice Levine (2nd from right) in Spain, May 1937

# THE WATERPROOFER

(YOUR INTERESTS)

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE WATERPROOF GARMENT WORKERS' TRADE UNION  
 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 527, 528, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547, 548, 549, 550, 551, 552, 553, 554, 555, 556, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 571, 572, 573, 574, 575, 576, 577, 578, 579, 580, 581, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 594, 595, 596, 597, 598, 599, 600, 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 615, 616, 617, 618, 619, 620, 621, 622, 623, 624, 625, 626, 627, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634, 635, 636, 637, 638, 639, 640, 641, 642, 643, 644, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 658, 659, 660, 661, 662, 663, 664, 665, 666, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 672, 673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 688, 689, 690, 691, 692, 693, 694, 695, 696, 697, 698, 699, 700, 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 716, 717, 718, 719, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 735, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 751, 752, 753, 754, 755, 756, 757, 758, 759, 760, 761, 762, 763, 764, 765, 766, 767, 768, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 779, 780, 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 796, 797, 798, 799, 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818, 819, 820, 821, 822, 823, 824, 825, 826, 827, 828, 829, 830, 831, 832, 833, 834, 835, 836, 837, 838, 839, 840, 841, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847, 848, 849, 850, 851, 852, 853, 854, 855, 856, 857, 858, 859, 860, 861, 862, 863, 864, 865, 866, 867, 868, 869, 870, 871, 872, 873, 874, 875, 876, 877, 878, 879, 880, 881, 882, 883, 884, 885, 886, 887, 888, 889, 890, 891, 892, 893, 894, 895, 896, 897, 898, 899, 900, 901, 902, 903, 904, 905, 906, 907, 908, 909, 910, 911, 912, 913, 914, 915, 916, 917, 918, 919, 920, 921, 922, 923, 924, 925, 926, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 932, 933, 934, 935, 936, 937, 938, 939, 940, 941, 942, 943, 944, 945, 946, 947, 948, 949, 950, 951, 952, 953, 954, 955, 956, 957, 958, 959, 960, 961, 962, 963, 964, 965, 966, 967, 968, 969, 970, 971, 972, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 978, 979, 980, 981, 982, 983, 984, 985, 986, 987, 988, 989, 990, 991, 992, 993, 994, 995, 996, 997, 998, 999, 1000

*The official organ of the Waterproof Garment Workers' union*

Two months later the BUF was again given permission to hold a meeting in Cheetham Town Hall. A resolution was again passed against the letting of public buildings in Cheetham to fascist organisations and was presented to the Lord Mayor, accompanied by a petition signed by 3,500 residents of the Cheetham district. The resolution read as follows:

...that in view of the fact that the Fascists have again and again been given permission to hold a meeting in the Cheetham area in spite of a tremendous protest aroused by their last visit, we, the general public of the North Manchester area, strongly protest to the city authorities against their action in again letting a public building to the said organisation, knowing full well that the meeting must result in the provocation of the residents of that area.<sup>57</sup>

The protest was coordinated by a newly formed group, the North Manchester Coordinating Committee Against Fascism, founded at the instigation of the CP, but representing an array of groups including the Labour Party, the Tailors' and Garment Workers' Union, the Waterproof and Garment Makers' Union and the Workers' Circle.

As long as Mosley and his fascists continued to thrust themselves on to the North Manchester area, the community's protestations continued. On 28 June 1936, 'a crowd of some thousands' formed around Hulme Town Hall to protest at Mosley's presence there.<sup>58</sup> On 19 July 1936 a crowd of five thousand people 'overwhelmingly hostile to the Fascists' gathered at Albert Croft, Miles Platting where Mosley spoke once again.<sup>59</sup> Such activity at the high point of the Blackshirt invasion of North Manchester represents a clear refutation of the Home Secretary's assertion that Jews were submissive under attack.

It has even been suggested that from 1937 certain communal leaders were engaged in joint anti-fascist action with members of the CP, although the informal nature of such links makes it difficult to ascertain their frequency or intimacy. Possible evidence of contact between Communal Council leaders and the CP is a meeting of protest against anti-semitism held at the Blackley Institute which the Defence Committee of the Council claimed

to organise and at which Carl Ross presided.<sup>60</sup> According to Mick Jenkins (a full-time CP organiser in the 1930s), Ross was on intimate terms with members of the CP.<sup>61</sup> Jenkins observes that it was through people like Carl Ross — with a 'clean sheet' as regards political agitation — that the CP was able to gain much needed financial support in the fight against fascism. As far as members of the Council were concerned, they were directing resources into acceptable channels. Such an arrangement, Jenkins argues, served the interests of both parties: neither the CP nor the Communal Council wanted to risk being discredited by being seen to be associated with the other; yet both had a shared interest in combating fascism. As Jenkins explains, 'All would agree because no one was being exposed individually ... It was a question of tactics. We weren't conceding any principles if we shook hands with Laski<sup>62</sup> and said *sholom aleichem* at a time when that was all that we wanted, a united front for peace'.

### Conclusion

By using oral history as a technique it has been possible to explain why so many young Jews of the Cheetham and Strangeways districts of North Manchester came to be attracted to communism. It has been argued that there was a culture or tradition of utopianism in the community already which encouraged a critique of society as it was and that the combination of this pre-existing culture and objective conditions of economic and ethnic oppression gave rise to a high Jewish membership of the YCL. However, this analysis does not pretend to be complete; and further interviewing could reveal other dimensions — most importantly the role of gender — in shaping consciousness. But what this article does hopefully indicate is the way oral history interviewing might be fruitfully used 'to get inside' the process of identity construction in order to understand the key mediating role of identity in the relationship between structural and cultural conditions on the one hand and political action on the other. For, if we are to accept that there is no necessary or automatic correspondence between objective class interests and revolutionary political action, we must also look at factors other than class-related ones which constitute the way individuals identify themselves and at the way those multi-faceted identities in turn inform action.

In the second section the provocative and threatening nature of BUF activity was considered along with the ambivalent attitude of the British state to the baiting of Jews, as expressed in its overriding concern for the 'keeping of order'. The final part highlighted the way in which the Challenge Club, in its determination to physically remove the fascists from the areas where Jews lived, worked independently from the CP leadership who opposed physical confrontation with fascists in the popular front period. It was also stressed that the YCL was not alone in actively opposing the Mosleyite invasion of Manchester, as evidenced in their united action with other local labour organisations against the City Council's decision to permit a fascist meeting in Cheetham Town Hall. It is hoped that these latter sections will have served the purpose of dispelling much of the mythology which has tended to obscure the true nature of Jewish anti-fascist activity. But there is plenty of scope for further investigation not only of YCL activity but of the role of other groups within the Jewish community in the anti-fascist struggles of the 1930s.

### Acknowledgments

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Representative Council of Greater Manchester Region for giving me access to the Council minutes for the 1930s. The interviews with Ben Ainley, Martin Bobker, Joe Garman and Mick Jenkins were recorded by Manchester Studies, Manchester Polytechnic and are now housed in the Manchester Jewish Museum.

#### NOTES

- 1 The Challenge Club was also very active in the Aid-for-Spain movement and a number of members joined the International Brigade. See Maurice Levine's *Cheetham to Cordova*, (Manchester, 1984).
- 2 Acquaintance of Mosley and Conservative MP from 1929 to 1930 when he inherited the peerage of his father, Alfred Mond, the Jewish industrialist and government minister.
- 3 R. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, (1975), pp. 380-1.
- 4 Quoted in P. Cohen, 'Police and Home Office Attitudes to the BUF in the 1930s', (unpublished thesis, 1985) (hereafter — Cohen, 'Police').
- 5 C. Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939* (1979), (hereafter Holmes, *Anti-Semitism*), p.199.
- 6 G. Lebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism in England 1918-1939*, (1978), p.159.
- 7 Holmes, *Anti-Semitism*, p.159.
- 8 P. Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red* (1948) (hereafter Piratin, *Our Flag*).
- 9 J. Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto. My Youth in the East End* (1978).
- 10 D. Rosenberg, *Facing up to Anti-Semitism: How Jews in Britain Countered the Threats of the 1930s* (1985).
- 11 *Ibid.* pp. 12-14.
- 12 *Ibid.* p.54.
- 13 The population of the Manchester Jewish Community of 1875 has been estimated at between seven and ten thousand, of which roughly one third were of East European origin. (Figures cited in B. Williams, *Manchester Jewry: A pictorial history 1788-1988* (1988) (hereafter — Williams, *Manchester Jewry*), p.20). By 1929, according to the *Jewish Year Book*, there were 33,000 Jews in Manchester and Salford and 37,500 in 1939.
- 14 Williams, *Manchester Jewry*, p.97.
- 15 Manchester Jewish Museum archive, Interview No. J89 (Joe Garman, b. Hightown, Manchester, 1916).
- 16 Williams, *Manchester Jewry*, pp.81 and 98.
- 17 A well-known character in Manchester radical circles. See H. Pollitt, *Serving My Time. An Apprenticeship to Politics* (1941), pp.37-41.
- 18 Manchester Jewish Museum archive, Interview No.J43 (Martin Bobker, b. Hightown, Manchester, 1912).
- 19 See note 15.
- 20 Manchester Jewish Museum archive, Interview No.15 (Ben Ainley, b. Ancoats, Manchester, 1901).
- 21 Ben Ainley and Martin Bobker. (See notes 18 and 20).
- 22 Interview in author's possession. (Aubrey Lewis, b. Hightown, Manchester, 1918. Recorded by the author on 6 April 1986).
- 23 See note 15.
- 24 W.J. Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals 1875-1914* (1975), pp.307-8.
- 25 Manchester Jewish Museum archive, Interview No.J130 (Mick Jenkins, b. Hightown, Manchester, 1906).
- 26 See note 20.
- 27 See note 22.
- 28 R. Samuel, 'The Lost World of British Communism', *New Left Review*, 154 (1985), p.38.
- 29 *Manchester Guardian*, 13 March 1933.
- 30 *Manchester Guardian*, 16 Oct. 1933.
- 31 *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Oct. 1934.
- 32 Aubrey Lewis. See note 22.
- 33 *Manchester Evening News*, 29 June 1933.
- 34 Quoted in Cohen, 'Police'.
- 35 *Jewish Chronicle*, 24 July 1936.
- 36 This argument is put forward by Cohen, 'Police'.
- 37 *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Oct. 1934.
- 38 See note 22.
- 39 *Jewish Chronicle*, 9 Oct. 1936.
- 40 Alderman J. Finburgh JP, reported in *Jewish Chronicle*, 2 Feb. 1934.
- 41 Nathan Laski, President of Communal Council, minutes of the Jewish Communal Council of Manchester and Salford Jews (hereafter — Communal Council minutes), 18 April 1937.
- 42 Nathan Laski, *ibid.*, 7 July 1936.
- 43 Louis Kletz, *Jewish Chronicle*, 9 Oct. 1936.
- 44 This line of opposition is illustrated by the BoD leaflet, *The Jews of Britain* (1936) distributed outside fascist meetings. Talks were held for non-Jewish audiences along the same lines 'to refute anti-semitic lies' on such topics as, 'Some Dangerous Fallacies about Jews'. See *Jewish Chronicle* 20 Nov. 1936.
- 45 The Defence Committee would, for instance, inform the police if it heard of the dissemination of anti-semitic literature. Or if it heard through its informers that a Nazi meeting was to take place in the Manchester area, efforts would be made to prevent it going ahead. This was a far cry from earlier assertions that 'the community desired that... there should be no denial of the right of free speech, which had been so dearly won'. (Leslie Lever speaking at local Labour Party branch meeting, *Jewish Chronicle*, 20 Nov. 1936.)
- 46 Piratin, *Our Flag*, p.17.
- 47 See Jim Fyrth, *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (1985), p.11.
- 48 Quoted in N. Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1927-1941* (1985), p.161.
- 49 For both sides of this conflict see Piratin, *Our Flag*, pp. 17-27 and Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto*, pp.204-241.
- 50 Aubrey Lewis. See note 22.
- 51 Joe Garman. See note 15.
- 52 *Daily Worker*, 22 Sept. 1934.
- 53 *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Oct. 1934.
- 54 Aubrey Lewis. See note 22.
- 55 *Manchester Guardian*, 27 Feb. 1936.
- 56 *Manchester Guardian*, 9 March 1936.
- 57 *Manchester Guardian*, 15 June 1936.
- 58 *Manchester Guardian*, 29 June 1936.
- 59 *Manchester Guardian*, 20 July 1936.
- 60 Communal Council minutes, 21 January 1937.
- 61 The following comments were made in a conversation with the author on 28 April 1986.
- 62 Jenkins is referring to Nathan Laski, widely regarded as the representative of establishment Manchester Jewry. Amongst the communal posts he held were the presidencies of the Communal Council and the Jewish Board of Guardians. On his death in 1941 the *Jewish Gazette* described him as 'Manchester Jewry's Communal King'.