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## Jewish Communists in Paris between Local and International

“We, Jewish communists in Paris, are conscious of the great role we have to play as members of our party and of our persecuted people. We are the future of our people. We are the heirs of its most beautiful struggle and traditions of freedom. We are the only ones who can give a fitting resolution to all its needs, just as our brothers in the Soviet Union have done.”

*Resolution adopted at the 9th conference of Jewish communists in Paris, June 1937<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

In June 1937, Jewish communists in Paris, formerly organized in the so-called *sous-section juive* of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), held their 9th conference, the first after the PCF had dissolved its language sections in March of the same year. A report of the meeting was printed in *Naye Prese* (New Press), the daily Yiddish newspaper they had been publishing for the Jewish migrant population in the French capital since January 1934. The triple allegiance pledged in the resolution to the PCF, the Jewish people and the Soviet Union reflected the various factors that shaped Jewish communist politics and strategies among Jewish migrants in France: the demands of the PCF, which sought to integrate migrants in the party in an increasingly xenophobic domestic climate; the interests of the Jewish migrant population in France at that time; and the politics of the Communist International – both with respect to the PCF as to anti-Semitism and Jewish matters. Since most of these communists originally came from Poland, previous experiences in the Polish Communist Party (Komunistyczna Partia Polski, KPP) also determined the way they operated.

The aim of this article is to show how the politics of a particular group of Jewish communists were as much shaped by local and national context as by communist internationalism. In doing so, it seeks to inject some nuance in a debate that often moves between two poles: Jewish communists, parti-

1 Di 9-te konferents fun di yidishe komunistn. Ir farloyf un ire bashlusn, in: *Naye Prese*, 22 July 1937, 2.

cularly in the post-1935 Popular Front period, are either seen as calculating internationalists for whom defending Jewish interests or fighting anti-Semitism were merely a propagandistic corollary to the Comintern struggle against fascism, or they were viewed as Jewish/Yiddish culture-loving true *Jewish* communists. This dichotomy, as we will see, is particularly problematic when analyzing the histories of Jewish sections in various communist parties which need to be contextualized in both time and space. Moreover, it suggests that communist propaganda and a defence or concern with Jewish interests were mutually exclusive, even antagonistic aims.

This analysis of the various factors that shaped the politics of the *sous-section juive* in Paris should be seen in the broader context of two important debates in the historiography of the Comintern that relate to the exercise of power and the organization of diversity within the communist movement. Recent works have stressed the complex relationship between national and international in the movement and thus problematize the question of how control from Moscow and the Comintern leadership determined communist activity on the national and local level.<sup>2</sup> Others have considered the role and importance of ethnicity in the communist movement, not only in organizational terms, but particularly in its cultural effects by questioning the extent to which 'national form' influenced 'socialist content'.<sup>3</sup> We might wonder then: how did Jewish sections function within both their national context and the international communist power structure? And, within that organizational context, we can ask: in what ways did local groups construct and instrumentalize Jewishness in their propaganda among local Jewish populations? Both debates and the questions they pose are closely intertwined, and their importance seems self-evident when looking at the histories of Jewish (and other migrant or language) sections in various communist parties but they have to date received scant attention in analyses of Jewish sections.

In the following, the relation between the PCF and its language groups will be analyzed, in particular the Jewish section, and how the party struggled to gain control until it decided to dissolve the language sections in March 1937. The consequences of the dissolution for the position of Jewish communists in Paris are evident from a close reading of Yiddish newspapers after the dissolution, which reveals much about their relations with other Jewish organizations and the difficulties they faced in balancing multiple allegiances while maintaining credibility. Meanwhile a draft resolution on the Jewish question circulating in the Comintern secretariat in the same period

2 See, for example: Tauno Saarela/Kimmo Rentola (eds.), *Communism National & International*, Helsinki 1998.

3 Yuri Slezkine, *The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism*, in: *Slavic Review* 53 (1994), no. 2, 414–452.

reveals how, in addition to the demands of the PCF, Jewish communists were also subject to Comintern pressures. Finally, representations in *Naye Presse* of the fight of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades in Spain provide a good example of how Jewish symbolism was exploited to maintain status among Jewish migrants in the context of PCF/Comintern pressures while simultaneously revealing how ‘socialist content’ could become gradually ethnicized.

### The Parti Communiste Français and its language sections

The creation of language sections by the PCF as a way of organizing migrant workers had its roots in the French trade union movement. Before World War I, the socialist trade union Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) had its affiliated language groups. Among them were also several Yiddish-speaking union sections which established the so-called *Intersektionen Byuro* (lit. Intersections Bureau) in 1910 which served as an umbrella organization to defend the interests of Jewish workers.<sup>4</sup> A key role in the CGT language groups was played by a Russian Jew named Alexander Lozovsky (1878–1952) who returned to the USSR after the Russian Revolution and became chairman of the Red International of Labour Unions (Profintern). During its first Congress in 1921, the Profintern adopted a resolution stipulating that migrant workers should be organized in special groups within a given union.<sup>5</sup> In France, the communist Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU) subsequently created so-called *groupes de travail* in 1923.<sup>6</sup> The PCF followed this model one year later and created a special commission, which fell directly under the party’s Central Committee (CC), to control the *groupes*.<sup>7</sup> The trade union model was clearly emulated by the PCF but the creation of specific sections for ethnic/national groups, not only in the PCF, but in various communist parties in Western Europe and the United States/Canada also mirrored the way the Communist Party of the So-

4 Nancy Green, *The Pletzl of Paris: Jewish Immigrant Workers in the Belle Epoque*, New York 1986, 153.

5 Stéphane Courtois/Denis Peschanski/Adam Rayski, *Le sang de l'étranger. Les immigrés de la M.O.I. dans la Résistance*, Paris 1989, 15 f.

6 Archive de la Préfecture de Police de Paris (henceforth APFP), BA 1939, Report Les Communistes Étrangers dans la Région Parisienne, December 1925, 3. See also Mariana Sauber, *Juifs communistes dans la MOE*, in: *Combat pour la Diaspora 18–19* (1986), 47–57, here 47 f. The CGTU had split from the CGT in 1921.

7 This date is given by Sauber, who cites the statute adopted by the CC of the PCF to this effect in August 1924. See: Sauber, *Juifs communistes dans la MOE*, 48.

viet Union (CPSU) itself was organized. Soviet nationality policy, known as *korenizatsiia* (“indigenization”), granted each recognized nationality its own party section and corresponding organizations and means of cultural expression, such as newspapers, publishing houses, theatre companies and so on.<sup>8</sup>

The PCF thus also organized migrants in different language groups, but controlling the work of foreign communists of various nationalities, and organizing their propaganda among fellow migrants, proved difficult, not only because of frequent expulsions of foreign communists who were kept under close police surveillance.<sup>9</sup> Relations between the “camarades étrangers” and French workers in the PCF were also difficult because the former were often seen as too autonomist.<sup>10</sup> In this respect, Courtois et al. have pointed to the centripetal logic of the PCF, that tried to integrate foreigners in the party, and the more centrifugal logic of the language groups which also tried to maintain ties with the home countries, something especially true for the Italian communists in France.<sup>11</sup> In the autumn of 1925, a reorganization took place leading to the creation of several *sous-sections*, each headed by a bureau whose secretaries and members had to be approved by the party’s CC. Monthly reports and a clear top-down organizational model had to insure more effective control by the party leadership.<sup>12</sup>

The most important problem of what was now called the Main d’Œuvre Étrangère (MOE, renamed Main d’Œuvre Immigrée – MOI – in 1932) con-

8 See on Soviet nationality policy, for example: Slezkine, *The USSR as a Communal Apartment*; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*, Ithaca 2001; George Liber, *National Identity Formation, Nationalism and Nationalist Tides in the Soviet Union: A Review Article*, 3 March 2003, [http://www.bu.edu/uni/iass/conf/George\\_Liber.pdf](http://www.bu.edu/uni/iass/conf/George_Liber.pdf) (23 June 2009). For its effects on Jewish cultural life in the Soviet Union see: David Shneer, *Yiddish and the creation of Soviet Jewish culture 1918–1930*, New York 2004.

9 The following report is a good example: APPP, BA 1939, *Les Communistes Étrangers dans la Région Parisienne*, December 1925.

10 *Circulaire de la Section du Travail parmi les étrangers*, in: *Cahiers du Bolchevisme* 32 (1 December 1925), 2232.

11 Courtois/Peschanski/Rayski, *Le sang de l’étranger*, 23 f. The Italian section of the PCF was effectively the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano* or PCI) in exile and thus had very different concerns than the PCF.

12 *Le travail communiste parmi les étrangers. Thèses adoptées par le C.C. dans sa séance du 3 novembre 1925*, in: *Cahiers du Bolchevisme* 1 (1 December 1925), no. 32, 2230 f. See also Henriette Carlier, *L’organisation de notre travail parmi les étrangers*, in: *Cahiers du Bolchevisme* 2 (18 February 1926), no. 40, 482–485. This is essentially a more elaborate explanation of the “thèses”. According to Sauber, the reorganization took place during the PCF Congress in Lille in June 1926 where a heated discussion took place on the topic. By then the Central Committee had already approved the reorganization though. See: Sauber, *Juifs communistes dans la MOE*, 47 f.

cerned the relations between French and foreign workers.<sup>13</sup> MOE reports and articles in the party's theoretical journal *Cahiers du Bolchevisme* repeatedly stressed the need for French and foreign workers to be more interested in each other. French workers were told that this was not just a matter of following the correct internationalist party line but strategic necessity as well: the MOE's *section centrale* was fearful that the presence of foreign workers, especially significant in heavy industries and the mines in northern France, could be used by "the bourgeoisie" as a tool to break the workers' movement as a whole. It was therefore not considered a good thing that the *sous-sections* were exclusively headed by immigrants themselves: "Si nous nous plaignons des tendances autonomistes qui existent parmi les groupes de langue, ce n'est pas un moyen de les combattre que de laisser les groupes livrés à eux-mêmes".<sup>14</sup> The problem became more urgent after the Depression and during the 1930s, notwithstanding a sharp decrease in migrants seeking employment in French industries from 1930 to 1931.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, by 1934 the fight "contre les courants autonomistes dans les groupes de langues" was still on the agenda while the leadership of the MOI also urged the French "presse révolutionnaire" to pay more attention to the work of the MOI in order to explain French members of the PCF and CGTU that foreign workers faced the same exploitation as they did.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the question of how to shape relations with French workers, the party's language groups also faced other problems. There was a notable instability of cadres within several sections and the organization of work in the unions was difficult, having to do, among other things, with competition with the CGT and its activities among migrant workers. An important question was also how to embed migrant workers in the "anti-imperialist struggle" in

13 Despite the change in name, the acronym MOE was still used in reports as late as 1934. The renaming of MOE into MOI also happened in Belgium around 1933, see: Rudi van Doorslaer, *Joodse vrijwilligers uit België in de Internationale Brigaden. Portret van een vergeten generatie?*, in: *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 18 (1987), no. 1–2, 165–185, here 169. This suggests a certain coordination between the two CP's and possible Comintern influence, but the precise details are not clear.

14 *La Section de la M.O.E., Le rôle de la main-d'œuvre étrangère dans la période présente et nos tâches*, in: *Cahiers du Bolchevisme* 3 (15 April 1928), no. 2, 177–180.

15 In answer to anti-foreigner propaganda during the crisis, the PCF published precise statistics to its members in order to counter its "véritable prestidigitation avec les statistiques d'immigration et d'émigration". See: *La main d'œuvre étrangère en France pendant les neuf premiers mois de 1931*, in: *Cahiers du Bolchevisme* 6 (1 December 1931), no. 15, 1185–1187, here 1185.

16 *Section Centrale de la Main d'Œuvre Étrangère, Suite du Rapport sur la M.O.E.* (1934), Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (henceforth RGASPI, F. 517–1–1653, 18f.

France without cutting them off from the political struggle in their countries of origin.<sup>17</sup>

Within this context, the *sous-section juive* was formed in the late 1920s. Its pre-history is difficult to establish. Police reports suggest that small non-affiliated Jewish communist groups functioned in Paris as early as 1921.<sup>18</sup> They were in contact with what is described in one police report as the newly founded propaganda bureau of the “section juive” of the 3rd International in Berlin (meaning the Comintern’s West European Bureau, which was housed in Berlin until 1933).<sup>19</sup> According to another police report, a *groupe du travail des communistes juifs* was formed in July 1927, but it is not entirely clear if this was the main section or a local sub-group.<sup>20</sup> The estimated membership of Jews in 1927 in the PCF was around 200.<sup>21</sup> By 1934, according to MOI estimates, there were around 600 Jewish members in the Paris region, half of them in the Jewish groups.<sup>22</sup> From January 1934 onwards the *sous-section* published a daily Yiddish newspaper, *Naye Prese*, which sold at least 3,000 copies a day in the late 1930s.

Adding to the general problems of the MOE-MOI as mentioned above were problems more specific to the *sous-section juive*. Shortly after its foun-

- 17 RGASPI, 517–1–1133, Section Centrale de la Main d’Œuvre Étrangère, Resolution sur le travail du parti dans l’immigration polonaise et les nationalités opprimées de l’immigration (1931).
- 18 See several reports in: Centre Historique des Archives Nationales (henceforth CHAN), F7–13943, file Mouvements sionistes et Bound. Notes et presse (1915–1935). One report dated 30 November 1921 stated that a new Russian-Jewish communist group had been established with the purpose of spreading Bolshevik propaganda among Jewish workers in the unions. Szajkowski, in his overview of Jewish organizations in Paris until 1939, also refers to the existence of loose groups before the PCF created the *sous-section*. See: Zosa Szajkowski, *Dos yidishe gezelschaftleke leb in Pariz tsum yor 1939* (loyt di enquete fun YIVO), in: Elias Tcherikover (ed.), *Yidn in Frankraykh. Shtudyen un materialn*, New York 1942, 207–247, here 213.
- 19 See CHAN, F7–13943, Report (6 January 1922). Typed on top of the comment “generally well informed but perhaps tendentious”. What is clear though is the international network in which this group operated.
- 20 See: Courtois/Peschanski/Rayski, *Le sang de l’étranger*, 25. The report itself, dated 29 June 1927, contains only the following phrase: “La réunion constitutive du groupe de travail des communistes juifs aura lieu le 1er Juillet à 20 H 30, dans les sous-sols de la Bellevilloise.” The Bellevilloise was a coopérative in the Belleville founded in 1877. For the report, see: CHAN, F/7/13112.
- 21 Archives Départementales de la Saint-St.Denis, Fonds des archives microfilmées du PCF, 1921–1939 (henceforth ADPCF), 3 Mi 6/35–250, Rapport de la section centrale de la M.O.E sur son activité pendant la période qui va du 25 avril au 25 mai.
- 22 RGASPI, 517–1–1653, Section Centrale de la Main d’Œuvre Immigrée, Rapport Main d’Œuvre Immigrée, 20 September 1934, 26 f.; RGASPI, 517–1–1653, Section Centrale de la Main d’Œuvre Immigrée, La Section centrale de la M.O.I. – Aperçu sur sa composition son travail, 1934, 57. The latter contains a more elaborate version of the condition of the Jewish section.

dation, a report of the Central Committee of the MOE noted the internal conflicts and relative popularity of the “Trotskyist opposition” among Jews in the Paris region.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, what was perceived to be the “narrow-minded nationalism” of the “Jewish comrades” was sharply denounced:

“Quoique la situation intérieure est améliorée, [la *sous-section juive*] n’est pas encore réussi à entraîner dans le travail du Parti, l’ensemble des camarades juifs, membres du Parti. [...] Ainsi les camarades juifs ont organisé les chômeurs de leur immigration. Ils ont recueilli en quelques jours 17.000 francs et ont ouvert un restaurant pour les chômeurs, ces camarades se réfugient dans un nationalisme étroit et résistent à la lutte commune avec les chômeurs français. Les adhérents des Comités de chômeurs français de leur côté s’inquiètent de ce que font les camarades juifs, et sous la poussée des réformistes, prennent la position antisemite.”<sup>24</sup>

Other worries were the supposed lack of a “vie politique intérieur suffisante,” prompting debate about sending some Jewish members to the International Lenin School in the Soviet Union.<sup>25</sup>

### The dissolution of the Main d’Œuvre Immigrée

The perennial problems of the party to control its language sections, in which it never fully succeeded, in combination with an increasingly xenophobic climate in France led to a national conference of MOI cadres in March 1937. The result of the meeting was a thorough reformation of the relation between the PCF and the MOI and its language sections.<sup>26</sup> Referring to the Jewish case, David Weinberg contends that the *sous-section juive* was simply dissolved.<sup>27</sup> Courtois, Peschanski and Rayski, on the other hand, do not concur with Weinberg that whatever measures were taken amounted to a “dissolution,” neither for the Jewish nor other language sections:

“Le PCF n’interdit pas aux communistes étrangers de continuer à militer dans les organisations syndicales ou culturelles spécifiques, mais il ne tolère plus que les sections ai-

23 ADPCF, Rapport de la section centrale de la M.O.E., 26 décembre 1927.

24 RGASPI, 517–1–1133, Section Centrale de la Main d’Œuvre Immigrée, Projet de rapport sur la M.O.E., 18 January 1932, 63 f.

25 RGASPI, 517–1–1653, Rapport Main d’Œuvre Immigrée, 20 September 1934, 26 f.

26 It should be noted that the PCF archives in Moscow contain no MOI-related sources after 1936 and the only information about the conference is a report by MOI leader Giulio Ceretti, whose origins remain unknown. It is mentioned without a source in: Courtois/Peschanski/Rayski, *Le sang de l’étranger*, 45 f. This means that we lack the sources to establish what really happened at the meeting.

27 David Weinberg, *A Community on Trial. The Jews of Paris in the 1930s*, Chicago 1977, 134–136.

ent pignon sur rue. Il ne s'agit donc pas, comme cela a pu être avancé, d'une dissolution de la MOI, mais d'une sérieuse reprise en main par un parti qui applique là les principes intangibles qui devraient, en bonne doctrine, régler ce type de rapports, à savoir un seul parti par pays et une intégration par son entremise dans la classe ouvrière d'accueil."<sup>28</sup>

It is indeed clear that foreign communists, at least in the Jewish case, remained active on the Jewish street in various ways.<sup>29</sup> But that does not say anything about what happened to the MOI (and the *sous-section juive*) as an organization and, moreover, the principles that are mentioned had guided PCF/MOE-MOI relations since the inception of the MOE in the mid-1920s.

A survey of Yiddish sources shows there was indeed a reformation of relations between the PCF and its language sections in March 1937 with a profound impact upon relations between the various political voices on the Jewish street in Paris. Moreover, both Jewish communists themselves and their opponents spoke of a dissolution of the MOI and its *sous-section juive*.<sup>30</sup> In fact, *Naye Prese*'s editor-in-chief Lerman wrote on 2 March 1937 that "all the special organizations of the foreigners are [now] dissolved."<sup>31</sup> He suggested the dissolution was befalling the foreign communists in the party without their knowledge, and so tried to maintain an illusion of Jewish communist independence. Thus, he explained that the many rumors circulating about the *sous-section* had prompted *Naye Prese* to ask the PCF what was going on, which had led to the information that he could now convey to the readers. Of course, Lerman, being editor-in-chief of *Naye Prese* and former member of the now defunct *sous-section*, knew perfectly well what had happened.

Explaining that the party had effectively left it to migrants to take care of their own affairs in the MOI, he wrote that French comrades never really knew the problems facing their foreign comrades, although they themselves were also to blame for being too disinterested. According to Lerman, this situation impeded closer relations between French and foreign workers, which he suggested was highly important to gain the support of the French population for the new legal *statut*. This was a reference to new legislation about

28 Courtois/Peschanski/Rayski, *Le sang de l'étranger*, 46.

29 My use of the phrase "Jewish street" is a literal translation of the Yiddish expression "der yidisher gas" as it was frequently used in the Yiddish press of that time to denote the Jewish migrant population in Paris.

30 Several articles in *Naye Prese* and *Parizer Haynt* document the dissolution and its resonance among Jewish migrants in Paris. Some of this material was also used by Weinberg, *A Community on Trial*, 134–136 and 146, fn. 135–140. Since Courtois et al. quote Weinberg, it remains a mystery why they ignore this evidence.

31 Y. Lerman, *Di komunistishe partey un di oyslender-frage* 1. *A nayer shrit faroyts*, in: *Naye Prese*, 2 February 1937, 3.



foreigners in France being debated at that time, and Lerman's reference to it indicates one of the prime reasons that had motivated the PCF to reform its relations with the language groups: to lower the visibility of migrants in the party.<sup>32</sup> Lerman went on to explain that all affairs pertaining to foreigners would, from that moment onwards, be dealt with by regular party comités on the level of the region, the rayon and the local cell, the same comités where "questions of propaganda among women, young people and other categories of workers" were already being discussed. This, he argued, would ultimately allow for better communication of the party with its cadres and faster mobilization of the French population.<sup>33</sup>

In practice, the changes meant that Jewish workers in a certain cell would no longer be called to a meeting by a member of the *sous-section*, but rather directly by the local cell. But, as Lerman clarified, Jewish communists would also cease to represent Jews in the Mouvement Populaire Juif (MPJ), a co-operative venture between the Jewish section, the Parisian Bundists organized in the Medem-Farband (Medem Association), and the Linke Poale Zion (Workers of Zion, Left). The MPJ had existed since 1935 and was the Jewish variant of the Popular Front: "up until now the communist representative in the Jewish popular movement represented the Jewish groups. From now on he will be a representative of the Parisian communist region which counts 30,000 members." Lerman claimed this would only heighten the prestige of the MPJ, but inadvertently he highlighted precisely what would become the main problem for the other participating organizations: how could they be expected to co-operate with Jewish communists if these no longer officially represented Jewish migrants?

Seen from the perspective of the PCF, which had never really succeeded in controlling the sections and now also sought to confront increasingly ne-

32 Ibid. The information that Lerman conveys was related to him by "the person responsible for foreigners at the communist party," in other words the head of the MOI, Guiglio Ceretti. For a good overview of the discussion on the statute, see: Rahma Harouni, *Le débat autour du statut des étrangers dans les années 1930*, in: *Le Mouvement social* 188 (1999), 61–75.

33 A similar analysis was given much later by former member of the Jewish section Alfred Grant, who described the events as follows: "Le PCF, grandi dans le combat, ayant formé des cadres compétents, désirant connaître de plus près les problèmes de l'immigration qui étaient pour lui inséparables de la lutte générale du prolétariat français, supprime un système qui doublait l'adhésion d'un immigré: d'une part dans sa cellule, d'autre part dans son groupe de langue. Par la nouvelle formule, le représentant des communistes juifs, par exemple au comité de coordination des partis prolétariens juifs, ne parle plus au nom de la *sous-section* mais au nom du comité central du PCF. C'était une adaptation aux nouvelles conditions." Quote from his unpublished work *Le Mouvement juif progressiste en France* as cited in: Maurice Rajsfus, *L'an prochain, la révolution. Les communistes juifs immigrés dans la tourmente stalinienne, 1930–1945*, Paris 1985, 44.

gative public sentiments towards migrants and xenophobia among its own rank and file, the move was not entirely surprising, and Lerman was not far off the mark in his explanation. In fact, his version corresponds closely to the state of affairs as described in various MOE-MOI reports from the very beginning of its operations in the 1920s.<sup>34</sup> The PCF, however, did not forbid Jewish communists to continue their propaganda on the Jewish street, and group meetings continued as before according to later interviewed militants.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, a look at Jewish communist activity after the spring of 1937 indicates such continuity as was reflected, for example, in the conference of the “Jewish communists from the Paris region” on 17–18 June 1937. At the same time, this conference highlighted the new situation: Lerman gave a speech that was subsequently published as “In Dinst Fun Folk” (At the Service of the People) and, according to a small editorial imprint, was “presented in the name of the Paris region of the communist party”.<sup>36</sup> The very title of the speech was simply the Yiddish version of the PCF motto *Au service du peuple*.<sup>37</sup>

It is also true that Lerman, who had defended the dissolution of the section in early 1937, wrote later in his memoirs that the PCF asked him in the autumn of 1938 to become the new head of the MOI.<sup>38</sup> This prompts the question as to how long the dissolution actually lasted. Police reports from the period December 1937 to August 1939 do not specifically mention a *sous-section juive* until October 1938. Yet when speaking about Jewish communists, they refer to *Naye Prese* and discuss conferences organized under its aegis or meetings of its (editorial) committee, suggesting that the newspaper had replaced the former *sous-section* as the organizational focal point for Jewish communist activity after March 1937.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, in the months following the dissolution, a campaign took place to recruit members

34 In interviews given after the war, Lerman and others denied or could not remember the dissolution. See: Weinberg, *A Community on Trial*, 146, fn. 135. Lerman does not refer to it in his memoirs either, see: Louis Gronowski-Brunot, *Le Dernier Grand Soir. Un Juif de Pologne*, Paris 1980.

35 Rajsfus, *L'an prochain, la révolution*, 44.

36 Y. Lerman, *In dinst fun folk. Barikht gehaltn oyf der konferents fun yidishe komunistn fun Parizer gegnt dem 17-tn yuni 1937*, Paris 1937.

37 See, for example, a speech by Maurice Thorez published a year earlier: Maurice Thorez, *Au service du peuple de France. Rapport prononcé le 10 juillet 1936, suivi du discours de clôture prononcé le 11 juillet 1936 et de l'appel voté par la conférence nationale du Parti communiste français*, Paris 1936.

38 See: Gronowski-Brunot, *Le Dernier Grand Soir*, 90.

39 Centre des Archives Contemporaines (henceforth CAC), 20010216/38, 1014 & 1015, *Informations au sujet du journal communiste juif »Nouvelle presse« édité à Paris. According to Szajkowski, a group of Jewish communists was nominated immediately after the dissolution who subsequently led the communist movement among Jewish migrants. See: Szajkowski, *Dos yidishe gezeshaftelekh lebne*, 213.*

for the newspapers' support organization Fraynt fun Naye Prese (Friends of Naye Prese).<sup>40</sup> The Fraynt effectively replaced the *sous-section* as a Jewish communist point of identification and organization.

### Reactions to the dissolution in Jewish Paris

Among Jewish migrants in Paris, speculation was rife about what had prompted the move of the PCF. *Parizer Haynt* (Paris Today), the other Yiddish daily in Paris and the direct competitor of *Naye Prese*, suggested that suspicions of Trotskyist sympathies, especially within the *sous-section juive*, lay behind the decision, and derided Lerman's late response to rumors on the Jewish street about an impending dissolution.<sup>41</sup> A week after Lerman's explanation in *Naye Prese*, it reported that Jewish communists had declared their withdrawal from the so-called Koordinir-Komitet (Coordination Committee) in which the Linke Poale Zion, *sous-section juive*, and Bund took part.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the changes were more than cosmetic and Jewish communists acted in accordance with their newly given position. In response to the whole affair, the Bund decided to organize a discussion evening that took place on March 13.<sup>43</sup> During this meeting, the Jewish communist representative, called Radler, who attended to explain the situation, faced a highly suspicious, if not outright hostile audience. As far as the Bund was concerned, the Jewish communist explanation was full of contradictions and, as *Parizer Haynt* wrote: its "speaker laughs at the communist revolutionaries who find it possible to break the united front of the Jewish workers' parties, and on the other hand look to bond with rabbis and the bourgeoisie."<sup>44</sup> The latter remark pointed to the difference between the United Front that Bund and Poale Zion wished for (a union between workers' parties as it had existed in Paris in the form of the Koordinir Komitet) and the

40 The Fraynt were modelled on the so-called Comités de défense de L'Humanité (CDH), which were created in support of the PCF newspaper. They were renamed Amis de L'Humanité in 1938. See: Alexandre Courban, *Une autre façon d'être lecteur de L'Humanité durant l'entre-deux-guerres: "rabcors" et "CDH" au service du quotidien communiste*, in: *Le Temps des Médias* 2 (2006), no. 7, 205–217.

41 Vos kumt for bay di idische komunisten? Funandergelozt di idische seksye, in: *Parizer Haynt*, 7 March 1937, 4.

42 Vos kumt for bay di id. komunisten?, *ibid.*, 10 March 1937, 1.

43 Farvos iz oyfgeleyzt gevorn di idische komunistishe su-seksye? Diskusye-farzamlung shabes ovend, *ibid.*, 11 March 1937, 3.

44 Di idische arbeyter darfn fershtarkn zeyere organizatsyes erklaren Bundishe firer oyfn miting vegen der likvidatsye fun der idisher komunistisher su-seksye, *ibid.*, 15 March 1937, 3.

communist Popular Front tactic that also prescribed co-operation with non-workers parties.

In a scathing critique during the meeting, Abraham Menes (1898–1970), a historian and Bundist who was one of the co-founders of the YIVO Institute for Historical Research and a member of its historical section, analyzed the PCF's move and the liquidation of the *sous-section* as a return to the era of *shtadlanut*: “henceforth the problems of Jewish workers in France will not only be decided by foreign workers themselves, since their sections have been liquidated, but by the communist party with the help of ‘*shtadlonim*’.” The traditional practice of intercession as a way of defending Jewish interests denoted a practice of traditional Jewish politics that was resolutely rejected by the Jewish left as a passive way of laying one's fate in the hands of Gentiles. Menes' labeling of Jewish communists as *shtadlonim* was thus an effective way to claim Jewish communist impotence and, as many seem to have interpreted it, submissiveness.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Radler's intervention, in which he tried to explain the dissolution and noted that the dissolution of the Evseksiia in the Soviet Union in 1930 had not hurt Jewish interests there, did not convince many during the meeting.

In an attempt at damage control, Jewish communists themselves also organized meetings in which they tried to explain why the *sous-section* had been dissolved.<sup>46</sup> However, it was not just the dissolution but especially the step Jewish communists had consequently taken to withdraw from the Koor-dinir-Komitet that provoked strong reactions. In another article in *Parizer Haynt* entitled “Our new assimilationists”, editor Aharon Kremer pointed out that the committee had been unique in the world in bringing together Jewish communists, Bund and Linke Poale Zion in a structural way to deal with the problems of Jewish workers.<sup>47</sup> Kremer made clear that the Jewish-communist loss of control and decision-making power in Jewish matters extended not only to the committee but also to the Mouvement Populaire Juif, Ligue Internationale Contre l'Antisémitisme (LICA) and Kultur Liga (Culture League) in which they partook as Jewish communist *sous-section*.<sup>48</sup>

45 Melekh Epstein, a former journalist for the American Yiddish communist newspaper *Morgn Freiheit*, recalls how the work of many Jewish scientists with socialist preferences, including Menes, was labeled by the *Morgn Freiheit* as “fascist-yiddishist science” in the period before the advent of the Popular Front tactic. See: Melech Epstein, *The Jew and communism: The Story of Early Communist Victories and Ultimate Defeats in the Jewish Community, U.S.A. 1919–1941*, New York 1959, 257.

46 A referat fun Y. Lerman, shef-redaktor fun der “Naye Prese” vegn di sibes fun opshafn di oyslender-grupn bay der kompartay, in: *Naye Prese*, 6 April 1937, 5.

47 Aharon Kremer, *Unzere naye “asimilatoren”*, in: *Parizer Haynt*, 17 March 1937, 2.

48 The Kultur Liga was a cultural organization set up by Jewish leftist organizations in 1923. In its building at Rue de Lancry, it had a library, choir and theatre rehearsals took place, conferences were organized and it functioned as an information center for newly

How, did he ask, could the Jewish “Stalinists” explain to the Jewish workers that PCF leaders Maurice Thorez (1900–1964) and Marcel Cachin (1869–1958) were more capable of addressing their specific Jewish problems than Jewish workers themselves?

Discussing the retrospective justification of several Jewish communists, that Jewish immigrants were here to stay in France, and thus all impediments to a speedy fraternization between foreign and French workers should be abolished, Kremer wondered if they had considered those words before uttering them. He concluded: “the Jewish ‘Stalinists’ adopt the role of assisting in the assimilation of the Jewish masses in France! Because of that they allowed themselves to be liquidated as a language group. [...] And they [...] still dare to speak of the Jewish people, Jewish culture, Jewish interests?” In his conclusion, he thanked them for demasking themselves. Kremer’s analysis articulates well what loss of credibility Jewish communists had suffered among other Jewish organizations in Paris, and it is clear that Bundists and Linke Poale Zion were reluctant to work together with the Jewish communists after the dissolution.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, a new Farshtendikungs Komitet (Agreement Committee) of Bund, Linke Poale Zion and Jewish communists was established at the end of July some time after the 9th Congress of Jewish communists was held.<sup>50</sup>

arrived immigrants. See: Gronowski-Brunot, *Le Dernier Grand Soir*, 64f.; Nathan Weinstein, *Le pain de misère. Histoire du mouvement ouvrier juif en Europe. Tome 3. L’Europe centrale et occidentale, 1914–1945*, Paris 1984, 130–142, here 135.

49 See this advertisement for a meeting: Farshtendikung-komitet fun yid, sots Medem-Farband, Y.K.P. Poale Tsyon far tshurik oyfshteln dem eynehayt front oyf der yidisher arbeter-gas, in: *Naye Prese*, 4 June 1937, 6. The meeting was called in order to “re-establish unity on the Jewish street.” The acronym Y.K.P. refers to the Jewish communists and probably stands for “Yidishe Kom(munistishe) Partey.” However, the addition that a spokesperson of the Jewish communists had also been invited to “take the word” suggests that the meeting was not a communist initiative and the advert not placed by them. Of course, *Naye Prese* claimed victory in the discussion that took place, see the article: Hunderter arbetndike Lermanen un Shragern oyfn diskusye-ovnt vegn arbeter-eynhayt, in: *Naye Prese*, 6 June 1937, 7. In reality, the review shows the deep divisions between the parties involved. The Linke Poale Zion, for instance, was only willing to re-install a Koordinir Komitet in its old form. This was impossible, as Jewish communists had left the old committee following the dissolution because they could no longer sit in it as a Jewish section.

50 See: A farshtendikungs-komisye fun yidishe komunistn, Medem-Farband un Linke Poale-Tsyon, in: *Naye Prese*, 25 July 1937, 1.

### The international dimension

The dissolution of the *sous-section* and its negative reception demonstrate the delicate balancing act in which Jewish communists were engaged, forced to obey the demands of the PCF on the one hand while trying to maintain, quite literally, street credibility among Jewish migrants on the other. But there was also an international dimension to be negotiated as the Comintern attempted to steer Jewish communist activity in Paris in a different direction. A “first draft of the concept resolution on the Jewish question” that circulated within the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) in May/June 1937 reveals what concerns existed within the organization.<sup>51</sup> Outlining the ECCI position on anti-Semitism (in a somewhat intriguing mix of a class-based analysis coupled with a tacit, if implicit, recognition of the racial aspect of Nazist anti-Semitism), the document presented fascism as the “main enemy of the Jews” and asserted communists all over the world were obliged to take part in the struggle of Jews for equal rights. However, to do so also implied that Jewish communists had to fight “certain tendencies within their own ranks” which not only consisted of “declared Jewish fascists” but also “Jewish nationalists” (Bundists) and Zionists who created “ideological confusion” within Jewish ranks.

The resolution furthermore stipulated that in order to successfully fight anti-Semitism, communists should aim for “the inclusion of the Jewish masses and their organizations in the ranks of the anti-fascist front.” In this respect the draft resolution contained a clear recommendation: communist parties should be actively interested in the World Jewish Congress (WJC) movement and both the KPP and the Jewish section of the PCF were criticized for boycotting it.<sup>52</sup> The KPP had allegedly succumbed to Bund pressure and the Jewish section of the PCF had to beware of further “sectarian” mistakes. The document also discussed the *Ershter Alveltlekher Yidisher Kultur-Kongres* (First World Yiddish Culture Congress) that was held in Paris from 17–21 September 1937 and declared that efforts had to be made to involve all Jewish cultural “non-fascist” organizations in its preparations.<sup>53</sup> The resolution left no doubt as to how keen the Comintern was on exploiting its propagandistic potential, unsurprisingly so as culture and poli-

51 RGASPI, 495–20–944, First draft of the concept resolution on the Jewish question, 5 May 1937. My thanks go to Marja Boogert and Floribert Baudet for their translation.

52 The WJC was established formally in 1936 during a conference in Geneva and aimed to be a representative body in defense of Jewish interests.

53 *Ershter Alveltlekher Yidisher Kultur-Kongres*. Pariz, 17–21 Sept. 1937, Paris 1937. For an overview, see: Sima Beeri, *World Yiddish Culture Congress of 1937*, paper presented at International Conference Yiddish / Jewish Cultures. Literature, History, Thought in Eastern European Diasporas, New York University, 26–27 February 2006.

tics were closely intertwined in the communist universe, particularly so in the Popular Front period (which of course does not say much about the cultural merits of the Congress as it was held).<sup>54</sup>

If the widespread suspicion in non-communist circles that the Congress was a Jewish communist propaganda circus is any measure, the ECCI was quite successful in exerting influence on the Jewish communists in Paris. Though several non-communist Jewish writers participated and it was intended to attract a wide audience, the Congress remained to a large extent a Jewish communist affair, and the atmosphere surrounding it was politicized from the beginning. The Medem-Farband did not participate, and one of the editors of *Undzer Shtime* (Our Voice) published a critical article in the main Bundist newspaper in Poland, *Folks-tsaytung* (People's Newspaper).<sup>55</sup> *Parizer Haynt* also denounced the Congress as a communist-dominated event.<sup>56</sup> Similarly in the United States, the *Forverts* (Forward), and other non-communist Yiddish newspapers strongly opposed the gathering.<sup>57</sup> Still, nearly 4,000 delegates from 22 countries attended the Congress.<sup>58</sup> It also marked the beginning of the Alveltlekher Yidisher Kultur Fareyn (World Jewish Culture Association), better known as YKUF, with local branches in several countries.

The Congress shows that while the national context in which Jewish communists found themselves in 1937 hardly worked to their advantage on the Jewish street, the international context offered better opportunities for propaganda and could be used as a counterweight to the negative publicity asserting Jewish communist submissiveness that had followed the dissolution. And if the Congress advertized a Jewish communist celebration of Jewish culture, another international event was instrumental in showing a Jewish communist readiness to fight in defence of Jewish interests: the Spanish Civil War that was raging at that time, and in particular the participation of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades. Diverse as they might seem, both events were an integral part of Jewish communist politics and its advocacy of the Popular Front among the Jewish migrant population in France.<sup>59</sup>

54 On the cultural politics of the PCF, see: Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France. Defending Democracy, 1934–38*, Cambridge 1988, 113–145.

55 Beeri, *World Yiddish Culture Congress of 1937*, 6.

56 See the reaction of *Naye Prese*: A. Galitsin, *Der kultur-kongres un dos yidische Pariz*, in: *Naye Prese*, 11 September 1937, 2.

57 Bat-Ami Zucker, *American Jewish Communists and Jewish Culture in the 1930s*, in: *Modern Judaism* 14/2 (May 1994), 175–185, here 180 and 184, fn. 35.

58 Annette Aronowicz, *Spinoza among the Jewish Communists*, in: *Modern Judaism* 24/1 (2004), 1–36, here 31, fn. 9.

59 Generally speaking the Spanish cause served as a crucial propaganda tool for the Comintern and its member parties to raise awareness about and maintain support for the Popular Front. Within the International Brigades were presented as the example of united anti-fas-

They were linked as well; a greeting sent to the Congress by the editors of *Frayhayt-kemfer* (Freedom Fighter), a short-lived Yiddish front newspaper published in the International Brigades, illustrated how politics and culture were intertwined:

“We send a fierce ‘Salud’ on behalf of all Jewish fighters in Spain and a heartfelt wish for successful work for your and our freedom to the first meeting of Jewish culture against fascism and medieval barbarism.” (Editorial board of “Frayhayt-kemfer”, organ of the Jewish volunteers in republican Spain [Albacete]).<sup>60</sup>

A week before the Congress opened, another event took place in Jewish Paris that had been organized by Jewish communists; the opening of an exhibition dedicated to the fight of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades in Spain that was organized by a committee linked to *Naye Prese*. Various guests who had come for the Congress also participated in the opening of the exhibition. While it served obvious propagandistic purposes in rallying support for the Spanish cause, the volunteers in the brigades, and the aid campaigns Jewish communists were engaged in, there was also a subtext to the exhibition that was particularly Jewish. In a front-page editorial in *Naye Prese* on the day of the opening entitled “A Golden Page,” editor David Kutner (1899–1943) wrote about the role of “the best sons of the Jewish people” and emphasized that their struggle was a dignified answer to the enemies of the Jews and their accusations of “Jewish cowardice.”<sup>61</sup>

While borrowing the “best sons” metaphor from Comintern propaganda, the reference to accusations of Jewish cowardice obviously pointed to a specific Jewish concern, and should be seen in the context of Polish-Jewish relations in the International Brigades as well as in France which Jewish communists sought to address. Indeed, one of the most important tropes present in representations of Jewish volunteers in *Naye Prese* was that of Jewish courage or, more precisely, the negation of alleged Jewish cowardice that their presence on the Spanish battlefield represented. The ultimate symbol of such Jewish (communist) readiness to act and fight became the so-called Naftali Botwin Company, a Jewish military unit that was formed in December 1937 within the Palafox Battalion of the 13th Polish Dąbrowski Brigade

cist action in practice. For an elaborate discussion see especially: Dan R. Richardson, *Comintern Army. The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War*, Lexington 1982.

60 Ershter Alveltlekher Yidisher Kultur-Kongres, 355.

61 David Kutner, A goldn bletl, in: *Naye Prese*, 11 September 1937, 1. Kutner was a Polish-Jewish communist whose real name was Aron Skrobek. In addition to being an editor of *Naye Prese* he was also secretary of the Fraynt. Active in the Jewish resistance in France during the war, he was interned by the Nazis in the Natzweiler-Struthof camp and executed in 1943.



following efforts made by the Parisian Jewish communists.<sup>62</sup> On the pages of *Naye Prese*, it not only became the prime symbol of the Jewish anti-fascist presence and struggle in Spain but also of Jewish heroism in battle. Thus, the message presented to Jewish migrants in Paris was not only political: the participation of Jewish volunteers, symbolized by the Botwin Company, provided an emancipatory example, a means of empowering Jewish immigrants in France by instilling a Jewish pride in them and showing them a path to emancipation. If Jewish volunteers in Spain could show that activism earned respect and equality, so too could Jewish immigrants in France conquer their position in a society where xenophobia and anti-Semitism were on the rise and where Jewish migrants were under increasing pressure both politically and economically. Indeed, much of the engagement of Parisian Jewish communists with Spain might have been propagandistic, and a Yiddishized version of the Comintern/PCF position on the war, but the subtext became quite Jewish.<sup>63</sup>

The mix of factors influencing Jewish communist activity in the late 1930s are well illustrated in a speech given by Lerman on 12 June 1938 during the annual outing organized by *Naye Prese* in *Parc de Garches*.<sup>64</sup> During this meeting, the official flag of the Botwin Company was presented, described by Lerman as symbolizing “our readiness [...] to be available for our party in the ranks of the Spanish soldiers.” Without a *sous-section juive*, and as editor-in-chief of *Naye Prese*, Lerman was effectively the un-official head of the Jewish migrant communists in France, and his speech was clearly tailored to suit multiple audiences. The PCF was reassured that the struggle of Jewish workers, in Spain and France, was first of all in the service of the party and the country. Similarly, French workers were told that Jewish migrant workers were their brothers in arms in the struggle against fascism in France. At the same time, Jewish migrants were told that their struggle would assure a future in a free France that would welcome Jews in

62 The company was named after the young Polish-Jewish communist Naftali Botwin, who was executed in Poland in 1925 for having assassinated a police infiltrator.

63 The use of the Botwin company as a symbol in *Naye Prese* contradicts Weinberg’s contention that after the dissolution of the *sous-section juive* of the PCF in March 1937 Jewish communists were careful not to stress their Jewishness in favor of an alignment with the interests of the French working class in general. See: Weinberg, *A Community on Trial*, 134f. For a more elaborate discussion on representations of Jewish volunteers in *Naye Prese* see: Gerben Zaagsma, *Between propaganda and fighting the myth of pakh-dones: Naye Prese, the Popular Front, and the Spanish Civil War*, in: Shiri Goren, Hannah Pressman and Lara Rabinovitch (eds.), *Choosing Yiddish: Studies in Yiddish Literature, Culture, and History* (forthcoming).

64 This location was also used by the PCF and L’Humanité for gatherings. See, for example: *La province aussi sera à Garches!* (Le 30 août, grand rassemblement autour de “L’Humanité”), in: *L’Humanité*, 8 August 1936, 6.

its midst. Within this context, the Botwin Company, the “vanguard of Jewish migrant workers” in France, represented a readiness to struggle for both French and Jewish migrant interests. There was no sign of the “narrow-minded nationalism” the Comintern had alleged a year earlier.

Lerman’s use of the presence of Jewish volunteers in Spain was functional and devoid of specific Jewish emphasis, unlike the many celebratory articles that had appeared in *Naye Prese* since the company’s creation. His speech thus illustrates that Jewish communists regarded their newspaper as a place where they could be more outspoken than in a public setting, such as the meeting in *Parc de Garches*. It also demonstrates a clear understanding of the balancing act they had to perform: without openly glorifying “Jewish heroism”, Lerman succeeded in conveying a message of *Au service du peuple* that was cloaked in the ultimate symbol of Jewish prowess, a Jewish military unit. The implicit Jewish symbolism might have escaped the PCF, but within a Jewish migrant context such representations had an obvious resonance.

### Conclusion

As has been shown in this article, the politics and strategies of Jewish communists in Paris in the late 1930s resulted from multiple factors and pressures exerted upon them which constantly had to be negotiated. The result of that process shows that, despite the constraints put in place by the party and the watchful eye of the Comintern, room existed for maneuvering. As is shown by the problems that the PCF had with controlling migrants in the party, as well as by the “draft resolution on the Jewish question” that circulated in the ECCI, neither PCF nor Comintern exerted absolute control over the activities of this specific group of Jewish communists. The events surrounding the dissolution of the MOI in March 1937, resulting from the acceleration of the PCF’s drive to integrate migrants in the party, shows the balancing act Jewish communists were engaged in: they were careful to stress their allegiance to the PCF in public while being forced to give up their role as a *Jewish* communist partner in various organizations. Simultaneously, however, they continued to work as Jewish communists with *Naye Prese* as organizational nucleus and, as the example of the Botwin Company shows, did not shy away from using some stark Jewish symbolism to propagate their cause.

The latter was particularly significant, as it shows how communist propaganda and a particular *Jewish* message could go hand in hand in a particular context. It also highlights how the lines between “national in form and so-

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cialist in content” could become blurred: the creation of the exhibition on Jewish volunteers, their glorification in *Naye Prese* and the emphasis on Jewish heroism, particularly after the formation of the Botwin Company, served obvious propagandistic purposes; but they can hardly be interpreted as downplaying Jewish concerns. In that sense, Jewish communist activity in Paris in the period of the Spanish Civil War is an example of the assertion of Yuri Slezkine that Soviet nationality policy effectively encouraged ethnic behavior. It was an illusion to believe that national form would not influence socialist content, and the example of Jewish communist behavior in Paris in the late 1930s clearly proves the point.