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# ‘I was born of working-class folks’: a study of Wakefield International Brigade Volunteers and Forgotten Working-Class History



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<sup>1</sup> George Bennett with Spanish friends, seated centre right (picture with permission of the Bennett family)

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This dissertation would not have been possible without the help of Professor Peter Anderson, who's time and support has been invaluable. I must also pay tribute to Andrew Young, Dr Brian Lavery, Tony Fox, Dilys Porter, David Pickersgill, John Bennett and the Bennett family for their knowledge and help. I hope this work is testament to the time they have given me. Without my parent's nurturing of my passion for history and the world, I would not be the man I am today.

## Glossary

ILP- Independent Labour Party

CPGB- Communist Party of Great Britain

BUF-British Union of Fascists

NUWM- National Unemployed Workers Movement

IBMT-International Brigade Memorial Trust

Daily Worker-Communist newspaper

NUM- National Union of Mineworkers

RGASPI-Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History

IWW-Industrial Workers of the World

HIBMG- Hull International Brigade Memorial Group

ARMH- Association for the recuperation of Historical Memory

PSOE- Spanish Socialist Party

PCE- Spanish Communist Party

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## Introduction

‘My name is Peter O’Day, I was born of working-class folks in a small mining village in what is known as the Heavy Woollen district, and it is in the West Riding of Yorkshire’

*Sergeant Peter O’Day* <sup>2</sup>

For seven years I attended a high school and sixth form, in the town of Featherstone, Wakefield, West Yorkshire. Down the road from this school, in January 1937, a middle-aged crane driver and Communist Party member, Frederick ‘Jack’ Spencer, would leave his home and family, to join the International Brigade in Spain. He would be killed within weeks, on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1937, at the battle of Jarama.<sup>3</sup> Frederick Spencer’s decision to go to Spain raised numerous questions. Why would a man from a small area of Wakefield decide to fight in Spain, and why had his story been forgotten? Was he the only volunteer, or were there more?

Frederick Spencer provoked a quest. Initial investigation proved unsuccessful. The NUM held very limited records from the period, with many being lost over the years. The use of the IBMT database, and RGASPI eventually allowed me to discover five volunteers, and begin to piece together their complex lives.

The first volunteer to go was Peter O’Day, born and raised in Wakefield, but living in London prior to leaving in late November 1936. He was followed by Frederick Spencer in January 1937, George Bennett in February 1938, and Samuel Taylor and John Spencer in

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<sup>2</sup> RGASPI 545/6/180

<sup>3</sup> Baxell, Richard, ‘The British Battalion at the battle of Jarama’, <[The British Battalion at the battle of Jarama – Richard Baxell](#)> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> February 2022]

April 1938. Frederick Spencer died at Jarama, while Peter O'Day was killed in Caspe on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1938, having been made a Sergeant after Jarama. George arrived home after release from a Francoist concentration camp, in October 1938, Samuel and John were repatriated from Catalonia in December 1938.

Regional studies of the International Brigades have been carried out, particularly on the South Wales and Durham coalfields, Manchester, and Scotland. However, none have been conducted on West Yorkshire, with the Wakefield volunteers completely forgotten until this research. Using the benefits of local history, and seeking to take a microscopic focus, this dissertation will argue that the five volunteers from Wakefield were a product of complex personal, political, and social lives, which all must be considered to understand why they went to Spain. It will seek fill a gap in the historiography on Wakefield and West Yorkshire volunteers. The nature of it being a micro study will also allow us to understand the unique circumstance of each volunteer, a fact which is often lost in broader studies of regional volunteering. It will provide a previously lost voice to a small group of 'proleterian' working-class volunteers, who as Tom Buchanan has identified, are a group on which far less information was obtained and survived.<sup>4</sup> As Richard Baxell has stated to really understand a soldier's day to day experiences, you must look at the world through their eyes.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter one will seek to recreate the background and motivation of the volunteers which led them to Spain, through their own words, life, and experience. It will help to bring back a sense of who these 'historically nameless strangers' were, as Michael W. Jackson commented on the lack of information about many volunteers.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, these working-

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Buchanan, 'Ideology, Idealism, and Adventure: Narratives of the British Volunteers in the International Brigades', *Labour History Review*, 2 (2016) p.135

<sup>5</sup> Richard Baxell, *Unlikely warriors: the British in the Spanish Civil War and the struggle against fascism*, (London: Aurum, 2012) p.12

<sup>6</sup> Michael W. Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War*, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1994) p.27

class volunteers have often faced having their voices drowned out, as the bulk of published first-hand accounts from British participants in the war come from middle-class volunteers.<sup>7</sup> While there are common threads that often run through and touch the men's lives, there is no simple answer that can explain their decisions to go to Spain.

Chapter two will tackle an important issue that sparked the creation of this dissertation, the loss of working-class history, particularly that of the International Brigades. Based on my own work to create a legacy for the International Brigades in Wakefield, and interviews with John Bennett, the son of George Bennett, as well as the successful International Brigade memory project in Hull, it will show the importance of historians engaging with their local community. It will challenge that a dissertation is solely just an academic work and show that it can act as a powerful tool to create meaning and restore working-class history for places such as Wakefield.

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<sup>7</sup> Fraser Raeburn, 'The 'Premature Anti-fascists'? International Brigade Veterans' Participation in the British War Effort', 1939-45' *War in history*, 3 (2020) p.412

## Chapter I: *Wakefield International Brigade volunteers, why Spain?*

The Wakefield volunteers offer a window into how religion and politics combined and clashed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the way in which this linked Yorkshire's regional politics to the men's decision to fight in Spain.

The wider West Yorkshire area had a strong Nonconformist and Catholic heritage which developed across the region throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These religious factors informed and moulded the Wakefield volunteers lives and can be seen as influencing their decision to go, particularly in the case of Peter O'Day and Frederick Spencer. However, they also show us the complexity of the men, and the society they lived in. From the personal information available on them, we can see that their interactions with religion were deeply individual and do not give a 'one size fits all' answer towards why they went to Spain. The rhetoric and morality of Nonconformity became part of the political language of the West Riding, and the interaction between morality and politics gave West Riding labour activity a potency, inspiring people to both personal and social salvation.<sup>8</sup> British workers were often alienated from theoretical Marxist socialism due to the powerful moral tradition of Christian brotherhood which had shaped the nations radical traditions.<sup>9</sup>

By looking at this, we can see that while radical religious tradition influenced the Wakefield volunteers, they allow us to understand why more volunteers did not go from Wakefield. The strong Christian socialist tradition that emerged from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in West Yorkshire had been channelled into moderate socialist organisations such as the

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<sup>8</sup> Jowitt, Tony, 'Religion and the Independent Labour Party', in *The Rising Sun of Socialism: The Independent Labour Party in the Textile District of the West Riding of Yorkshire between 1890 and 1914* ed. by Keith Laybourn and David James (West Yorkshire Archive Service: Bradford, 1991) p.129

<sup>9</sup> James K. Hopkins, *Into the heart of the fire: the British in the Spanish Civil War*, (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998) p.87



Independent Labour Party, and Labour Party, and dissuaded people from the later doctrinal Marxist ideology of the Communist Party.<sup>10</sup>

In a fascinating contradiction to this point, membership of the Communist Party itself often arose from the volunteer's personal religious upbringing and background. This is present in Rotherham volunteer Tommy James life, and that of Wakefield volunteer Peter O'Day, both of whom were raised as Catholics but later became joined the CPGB. Marxism offered Tommy an 'absolute', just as clearly as Catholicism did, which is why so many Catholics, himself, were attracted to the party.<sup>11</sup> Fraser Raeburn's study of Scottish International Brigade volunteers raises a similar point that a high number of Scottish volunteers, especially in Glasgow, had a Catholic (often Irish Catholic) background.<sup>12</sup> He also points out that reconciling active Catholicism with socialism or anti-fascism was considerably more difficult than for protestants.<sup>13</sup>

This is important to note in that both Tommy and Peter's faith lapsed prior to their involvement in the CPGB, and they faced less of an issue reconciling the two positions. In the case of Tommy James, his Catholic upbringing was vital in his journey to communism. To follow both belief systems it was necessary to have the conviction that progress was possible and that the individual was working for the liberation of humanity, something that is inherent in Catholic teaching, and communist ideology.<sup>14</sup> The 'proletarian internationalism' which emerged in South Wales following the First World War, and which helps explain the

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<sup>10</sup> Jowitt, 'Religion and the Independent Labour Party', p.121

<sup>11</sup> Brian Lewis and Bill Gledhill, *Tommy James: A Lion of A Man*, (Pontefract: Yorkshire Art Circus, 1985), p.16

<sup>12</sup> Fraser Raeburn, *Scots and the Spanish Civil War: solidarity, activism and humanitarianism*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) p.45

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.45

<sup>14</sup> Lewis and Gledhill, 'Tommy James: A Lion of A Man', p.166

regions high number of volunteers, drew from the radical features of the old religious and moral tradition- they both shared the same concern for the preservation of world peace.<sup>15</sup>

These concepts link directly to a letter written by Peter O'Day in Spain, who grew up in 'a small mining village' in the Heavy Woollen region of West Yorkshire.<sup>16</sup> His IBMT file lists this as being in Wakefield, suggesting it is the mining village of Gawthorpe.<sup>17</sup> O'Day's parent were both Roman Catholics, and while he says his father had always been a trade union man, he argues that religion stopped his father 'advancing along the lines of the class struggle'.<sup>18</sup> What is fascinating about this assertion is that while Tommy James biographers argue that many ex-Catholics were drawn to the Communist Party, working-class Catholics often had a difficult relationship with labour politics due to the Church being anti-socialist, preferring to see the Labour Party as a mildly reformist party, not a socialist one.<sup>19</sup> This is suggested in Peter O'Day's own words when he tells us that his father was not 'advancing to the class struggle' due to his religion.<sup>20</sup>

These words throw up a dilemma in understanding Peter O'Day, the only one of the Wakefield volunteers known for certain to have had a Catholic upbringing. If his parents had traditionally been wary of communism or left-wing politics due to their religion, what influenced him to move away from this? An answer lies in understanding the voting habits of the large Irish community in Dewsbury, a part of the Heavy Woollen region, bordering Wakefield. Here Irish Catholics made up 1/10 of the electorate around the time of Peter

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<sup>15</sup> Hywel Francis, *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2012) p.32

<sup>16</sup> RGASPI 545/6/180

<sup>17</sup> 'IBMT', *The Volunteer*, < [The volunteers | International Brigade Memorial Trust \(international-brigades.org.uk\)](http://Thevolunteers|InternationalBrigadeMemorialTrust(international-brigades.org.uk))> [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> March 2022]

<sup>18</sup> RGASPI 545/6/180

<sup>19</sup> Tom Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p.169

<sup>20</sup> RGASPI 545/6/180

O'Day's birth in 1897.<sup>21</sup> The community saw itself as Irish first and Catholic second, and largely voted for radical Liberals who promised home rule for Ireland.<sup>22</sup> It is most likely that O'Day's parents were part of this Irish diaspora in the area and therefore were already politicised. He notes that his father always held a trade union card, and O'Day describes him as being aware that 'a man without a trade was a slave in all ways', with his parents associating themselves with an Irish identity first, and a Catholic one second.<sup>23</sup> In the Durham coalfield, Irish immigrants retained their cultural and political ties to the a great extent, and the ILP gained the nickname the 'Irish Labour Party' due to the diaspora's strong involvement.<sup>24</sup> Newspaper reports from 1907 show that in Wakefield, the ILP also began to challenge previous Liberal influence, and grow in strength, as it did in Durham.<sup>25</sup> The ILP was an organisation founded in West Yorkshire, and began to grow in Wakefield during the 1890s and 1910s.<sup>26</sup> From his letters and local debates around religion and labour politics, we can see that O'Day's parents raised him with an awareness of the importance of the labour movement and organising as part of the Irish diaspora, but held a less radical political viewpoint, due to their Catholicism.

Frederick Spencer's upbringing was surrounded by a strong working-class Nonconformist tradition. He was born and raised in the mining town of Featherstone, Wakefield, which contained no less than six Methodist churches during the 1930s.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Martin Crick, 'Labour Alliance or Socialist Unity? The Independent Labour Party in the Heavy Woollen Areas of West Yorkshire 1893-1902', in *'The Rising Sun of Socialism': The Independent Labour Party in the Textile District of the West Riding of Yorkshire between 1890 and 1914'* ed. by Keith Laybourn and David James (West Yorkshire Archive Service: Bradford, 1991) p.29

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.29

<sup>23</sup> RGASPI 545/6/180

<sup>24</sup> Lewis Mates, 'The "most revolutionary" banner in British trade union history? Political identities and the birth, life, purgatory and rebirth of the "red" Follonsby miners' banner', *International labour and working class history*, 100 (2021) p.114

<sup>25</sup> 'National Independent Labour Party Wakefield Branch', *Wakefield Advertiser & Gazette*, 27<sup>th</sup> August 1907, p.4

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Rachel Adam, *When Poverty Knocks on the door, love goes out the window: Voices from Pontefract, Normanton, Castleford, Knottingley and Featherstone, 1930-1945*, (Pontefract: Yorkshire Art Circus, 1987) p.30

Methodism appealed to working-class people in Wakefield, and it was seen as going hand in hand with the district's trade union tradition.<sup>28</sup> We can see from the experience of other working-class volunteers from industrial regions, that Nonconformism held a large role in shaping their early political outlook. Wakefield, and the West Riding are unique in that, for areas with such an immense Nonconformist and socialist tradition, there has been no work done to explore how this affected volunteering to Spain, and the political culture of the 1930s. Walter Gregory, a volunteer who lived in both Lincoln and Nottingham, recounted that the three elements of continuity in his childhood, which shaped his politics, were the Nonconformist chapel, co-op, and his father's trade union membership, which inclined him to the Labour Party.<sup>29</sup> This was also the case for the South Wales International Brigade volunteers, another mining region with a very similar Nonconformist heritage to Wakefield and West Yorkshire. Gwyn Thomas, who grew up in the pit communities of the Rhondda valley, South Wales, describes how as in the mining communities of Wakefield:

*'South Wales had been lit up for a couple of generations by this great evangelical belief that things by the exchange of a few sermons and hymns were going to be transformed...The First World War saw the end of the great preachers, nobody would ever listen to them again with a grain of belief'.<sup>30</sup>*

Gwyn's words illustrate how the First World War shattered the faith of many who fought and lived through it, but it should not be forgotten just how important religious concepts and ideals remained to these working-class communities in the 1920s and 1930s. Tom Jones, a South Wales miner and International Brigade veteran stated in his 1980 interview for the BBC Wales documentary series 'Colliers Crusade', that 'in those days the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.30

<sup>29</sup> Walter Gregory, *The Shallow Grave: A Memoir of the Spanish Civil War*, (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 1996) p.159

<sup>30</sup> 'Colliers Crusade Episode 1', *Youtube*, <[Colliers' Crusade Episode 1 - YouTube](#)> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> February 2022]

adults in particular looked upon trade unionism, politics and religion as synonymous' and that hymns played a particularly important part of the political culture of the area, 'we didn't have any revolutionary political songs so we sang hymns'.<sup>31</sup> For Tom Jones hymns 'had a political significance' and 'expressed our feelings against the system under which we lived'.<sup>32</sup> This links to the large number of Methodist churches present in pit communities like Featherstone, where Nonconformism helped give them a political and moral outlook on life. As Jack Roberts, a communist South Wales miner explained, his political beliefs came directly from the Nonconformist chapels and their preaching of the sermon the mount.<sup>33</sup> In looking at what these men say, we can understand Frederick Spencer, who grew up in a very similar mining and Nonconformist town, where people held strong moral and political outlooks on life.

The social environment of late 1920s and 1930s Wakefield is critical, in understanding how each of the individual men made the decision decided to fight in Spain. While studies have taken place of wider areas such as South Wales and Scotland, there has been nothing done to focus on a specific town, which provides a microscopic lens allowing us to see how individuals interacted with local conditions. By using available personal information and building up a picture of what life was like in the town and area during the 1930s, we can begin to see how their individual outlooks were moulded. We can also begin to answer the question of what made them different from the many other left-wing people across the city, and what uniquely drew them to Spain, Perhaps the best place to start in building up this picture, is in exploring anti-fascist activity in the area, and how this linked to volunteering

A Braford Observer report from the 13<sup>th</sup> of June 1936 sheds light on the nature of anti-fascist activity in Wakefield. It details that the BUF were to hold a five-mile propaganda

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

march through the city on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, culminating in Oswald Mosley addressing the Unity Hall, however as it notes an 'Anti-Fascist Committee' had already been established, and planned to confront them.<sup>34</sup> A BUF rally was also held at Wakefield's Unity Hall in October 1935, with Mosley making a speech that appeared to have been crafted to try and appeal to local miners.<sup>35</sup> Alongside the rallies, Mosley held a separate meeting with Wakefield 'business and professional men' at the city's Strafford Arms Hotel in February 1936, in an attempt to win them over to fascism.<sup>36</sup> That these meetings were well publicised in regional newspapers, and occurred so close to the war in Spain, makes it almost certain that the four volunteers living in the city in 1935-36 would have been aware of the local fascist threat before going to Spain. It is also fascinating that the BUF showed such interest and organisation in the city, with their singling out of working-class miners for propaganda giving a nod to why Samuel Taylor a Wakefield miner and trade unionist would later go to Spain in April 1938.

Anti-fascist confrontation was also occurring in the surrounding towns and cities to Wakefield as the war in Spain erupted. The files of George Stockdale, an International Brigade volunteer from Beeston, Leeds, a few miles from Wakefield, describe how he had been involved in disrupting fascist meetings in Leeds, alongside participating in strikes at the Montague Burton factory where he worked.<sup>37</sup> This fits with the events that occurred on 27<sup>th</sup> September 1936, when Oswald Mosley, the leader of the BUF organised a march from the centre of Leeds to Holbeck Moor, where 30,000 counter protestors (organised by the Communist Party) confronted them.<sup>38</sup> The large scale, CPGB led, opposition to fascist

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<sup>34</sup> Fascists and Anti-Fascists', *Bradford Observer*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1936, p.8

<sup>35</sup> 'Fascist leader's speech', *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 31<sup>st</sup> October 1935, p.7

<sup>36</sup> 'Sir Oswald Mosley on business method', *Bradford Observer*, 18<sup>th</sup> February 1936, p.3

<sup>37</sup> RGASPI 545/6/205

<sup>38</sup> Leeds Libraries, *Oswald Mosley and Leeds- The Battle of Holbeck Moor 27<sup>th</sup> September 1936*, < [Oswald Mosley and Leeds – The Battle of Holbeck Moor 27th September 1936 – The Secret Library | Leeds Libraries Heritage Blog \(secretlibraryleeds.net\)](https://secretlibraryleeds.net/)> [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> March 2022]

meetings in the area can help explain why so many people were drawn to the party. As Andrew Thorpe identifies, the CPGB's fight against fascism, at home and internationally, was its best recruiter, particularly when the Spanish Civil War broke out.<sup>39</sup> This encapsulates why three of the five known Wakefield volunteers held CPGB membership at the time of going to Spain.

It can be confirmed for certain that in nearby towns, men who later volunteered in Spain attended BUF rallies to oppose them, suggesting the same occurred in Wakefield. In Barnsley, International Brigade volunteer and miner, Tommy Degan (a dual Labour and CPGB member), as well as ILP contingent volunteer and author, Eric Blair ('George Orwell'), were both present at a BUF rally in the town's Civic Hall, which was led by Mosley.<sup>40</sup> Tommy Degan challenged Mosley, resulting in a near riot in which he was beaten up and thrown out of the hall.<sup>41</sup> Frederick Spencer, the first Wakefield volunteer to be killed in Spain, lived 800 metres from the Railway Pub in Featherstone, where the local BUF used to gather at the rear.<sup>42</sup> These Blackshirts used to parade in Featherstone, and often spoke at the marketplace, though a local man recounted how they got 'a good hiding' particularly when they got carried away.<sup>43</sup> As an active Communist Party member, Frederick Spencer will certainly have been involved in these clashes and opposition to the local blackshirts, especially as they were agitating so close to his home.

However, anti-fascism was not just restricted to the CPGB Wakefield volunteers. Samuel Taylor, a Wakefield miner, and member of the Miners Federation Great Britain

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<sup>39</sup> Andrew Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', *The Historical Journal*, 3 (2000) pp.794-795

<sup>40</sup> 'Barnsley Borough City of Sanctuary', *Multicultural Barnsley- History of Migration*, < [Multicultural Barnsley – History of Migration \(cityofsanctuary.org\)](http://MulticulturalBarnsley-HistoryofMigration.cityofsanctuary.org)> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2022]

<sup>41</sup> 'Graham Stevenson Encyclopaedia of Communist biographies', *Degan Tommy*, < [Degan Tommy – Graham Stevenson](http://DeganTommy-GrahamStevenson)> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2022]

<sup>42</sup> Adam, *When Poverty Knocks on the door, love goes out the window: Voices from Pontefract, Normanton, Castleford, Knottingley and Featherstone, 1930-1945*, p.67

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p.67

Yorkshire Branch, wrote in his International Brigade repatriation file from November 1938, that he thought it was important for different unions and organisations to bind together to fight fascism.<sup>44</sup> John Spencer, who travelled down with Samuel from Wakefield in April 1938, is also extremely critical of fascism in his repatriation file, and his thoughtful writing disproves documents by the British Battalion leadership that describe him as ‘a complete political blank’.<sup>45</sup> John Spencer was disgusted by the ‘rottenness of the world’s governments’ and saw his role in Spain as attempting to prevent a new wider war as ‘war only destroys everything the intellectuals have built’.<sup>46</sup> This writing implies that John saw himself as fighting to defeat fascist aggression in Spain, something which he believed threatened world peace. Put in the context of global events such as the Abyssinia crisis and German rearmament, we can begin to understand why he was so concerned about beating fascism in Spain, and that this was clearly a primary motivation for him.

As Tom Buchanan has pointed out, the International Brigade volunteers were only a fraction of the active anti-fascists in Britain at the time.<sup>47</sup> This is a point which stands out when we consider the city and wider areas large opposition to Mosley and the BUF, yet relatively small number of volunteers in comparison to this. It leads to the conclusion that anti-fascism alone cannot explain just why the men went to Spain, and that as is explored, an approach examining their individual lives is necessary.

Peter O’Day’s letter shares another similarity with his fellow ex-Catholic Yorkshire International Brigade member Tommy James; service in the First World War. Tommy James had been a devout Catholic prior to going to France, however his experiences of the needless

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<sup>44</sup> RGASPI 545/6/207

<sup>45</sup> RGASPI 545/6/203

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> ‘Ideology, Idealism, and Adventure: Narratives of the British Volunteers in International Brigades’, p.11





The Wakefield men's decisions to go to Spain must be seen as being rooted in a distinctive local political culture, though one which was influenced by broader national political trends. As Lewis Mates has explored, the regional differences within industrial areas of the UK had a profound effect on the number of volunteers that went. Mates' comparison of the Durham and South Wales coalfields shows that despite similar socio-economic conditions, the South Wales coalfield provided a far higher number of volunteers than Durham, which he concludes is a result of the CPGB's unusual strength in the South Wales miner's union.<sup>53</sup> There were also strong regional political differences within the north of England.

This is present in an oral history interview conducted in the 1990s with Bessy Johnson, who grew up in County Durham and Lancashire during the 1920s and 1930s to a family of Labour and ILP supporters. Her experience of the 1926 General Strike on the coalfield motivated her to join the CPGB, and she was also exposed to large scale trade union organising and meetings on the Durham coalfield. She later moved to Lancashire 'full' of this working-class politics, to work in a factory. At a factory union meeting she addressed the trade union's chairman as 'comrade chairman'. This took the chairman aback, and he told Bessy to address him by his name, 'president', or 'chairman', as he did not like the militant connotations of comrade.<sup>54</sup> It shows how the north was not a homogenous block, and that the influence of the CPGB and other radical movements varied greatly, even within trade unions and areas with similar cultures.

Within Wakefield itself, there was a strong socialist tradition which had grown in the early years of the twentieth century. The Wakefield chapter of the British Socialist Party (a predecessor to the CPGB, which formed in 1920) was clearly engaged with international

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<sup>53</sup> Lewis Mates, 'Durham and South Wales Miners and the Spanish Civil War', *20<sup>th</sup> Century British History*, 17 (3) p.373

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Bessy Johnson, TAPE/209, (Working Class Museum Library: Salford)

politics during the First World War. The records that survive from the party in 1916 show local people debating whether the war was justified, leading to resignations- suggesting a strong tradition of political awareness from which the volunteers can be seen as part.<sup>55</sup> These socialist roots are echoed by Peter O'Day, who's time working down a coal mine exposed him to a member of the IWW a militant union with its roots in the United States.<sup>56</sup> The impact of these personal interactions with people in Wakefield who were involved in socialist politics cannot be overstated, and clearly helped O'Day gain a narrative to explain his life conditions. The older brother of Sydney Quinn, a volunteer from Lisburn, Northern Ireland, also met a member of the IWW while serving in the trenches, and after the war 'all he could do was talk about this socialism'. This rubbed off on Sydney, who had grown up in appalling poverty.<sup>57</sup> Both Quinn and O'Day went on to serve together in the French XIV La Marseillaise Brigade.

Research on the Wakefield volunteers exposes a previously overlooked part of the politicisation process for Yorkshire International Brigade volunteers. These are the trans-local connections between many volunteers from across the region, as well as Yorkshire's connections to volunteers from other areas such as South Wales. Fraser Raeburn has argued that in Scotland volunteers were a relatively homogenous grouping who were recruited from very limited socio-political circles.<sup>58</sup> Raeburn's argument does seem to account for the CPGB membership of Frederick Spencer and Peter O'Day, and Frederick Spencer's connections to other Yorkshire volunteers. However, research on the Wakefield volunteers suggests that these socio-political connections, when they occurred, were not always limited, and could be much more widespread, spanning multiple areas of the country.

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<sup>55</sup> British Socialist Party Papers Wakefield, C916, (West Yorkshire History Centre: Wakefield)

<sup>56</sup> RGASPI 545/6/180

<sup>57</sup> Imperial War Museum Sound Collection, 'Quinn, Sydney (Oral history)', < [Quinn, Sydney \(Oral history\)](#) | [Imperial War Museums \(iwm.org.uk\)](#)> [accessed 14<sup>th</sup> April 2022]

<sup>58</sup> Raeburn, 'Scots and the Spanish Civil War: solidarity, activism and humanitarianism', p.64

Writing to Spain for information about Herbert Tagg and Ralph Nicholson, two volunteers from Doncaster, South Yorkshire, Herbert Taggs' wife Rachel said that 'the Daily Worker was his breakfast' and praised the paper for providing 'real news'. Rachel Tagg reveals a surprising connection between Yorkshire and South Wales, stating that prominent South Wales volunteer Will 'Bill' Paynter, was her niece's husband.<sup>59</sup> This is a factor also suggested by Hywel Francis, who points out that Will Castell of Ammannford, South Wales, was playing Rugby League for Batley in the years before his departure to Spain, and left the town in November 1936 to fight.<sup>60</sup> Having contacted Batley Rugby Club for information, little is known as to whether Castell interacted with any Wakefield volunteers or was involved with political activism in Yorkshire. Like most volunteers, his story has been lost and forgotten. Hywel Francis' research does tell us he was involved with labour activism in South Wales, and his decision to go to Spain implies he remained politicised while living in Yorkshire.<sup>61</sup> There was also considerable migration from Yorkshire to the South Wales coalfield in the 1920s and 1930s, perhaps explaining Rachel Tagg's connection.<sup>62</sup>

Rachel Tagg ends her letter to Spain with the Spanish and German communist slogans of 'No Pasaran' and 'Red Front', praising her dead husband and his comrades.<sup>63</sup> On a human level, the letter offers a rare insight into the terrible grief that the loss of volunteers had on tight knit Yorkshire communities, exposing the anxieties that the parents of the young Wakefield volunteers must have faced.<sup>64</sup> The fascinating use of international communist slogans also shows that communist influence and politicisation was not restricted just to these male volunteers, but also women in these northern industrial communities, who as Bessy

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<sup>59</sup> RGASPI 545/3/498

<sup>60</sup> Francis, *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War*, p.159

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p.43

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p.34

<sup>63</sup> RGASPI 545/3/498

<sup>64</sup> Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War*, p.27

Johnson shows, were often politicised in the workplace too. The role of such strong, politically developed, and intelligent women can often be lost amongst the heavy focus on the male volunteers. As Fraser Raeburn's analysis of Scottish International Brigaders has shown, families, friends and colleagues often provided support networks for the volunteers, and in many cases discussed volunteering in Spain with them beforehand, as was the case in Doncaster.<sup>65</sup>

Importantly, Raeburn also points out that recruitment for the International Brigades was not just due to a relatively strong CPGB membership base, but also the influence the party had been able to build by leveraging broader political and community identities.<sup>66</sup> These points explain how while in Wakefield, there was very limited CPGB influence, the party still 'punched above its weight' in mobilising people, suggesting why two of the five volunteers from the district were involved in CPGB activism. They also point to the strength of working-class political mobilisation in the city and surrounding towns, where ordinary people discussed and debated ideas and international events, as can be seen by the activities of the British Socialist Party, and the experiences of Bessy Johnson in Durham and Lancashire.

Samuel Taylor, a teenage Wakefield miner, who was shot through the leg while attacking Hill 481 during the Battle of the Ebro, lists South Wales volunteers Alun Williams and Morris Davies as being able to vouch for him on his repatriation file.<sup>67</sup> This suggests that the men formed a common bond, due to their shared mining heritage. All three men came from a trade union and mining tradition, where ideas such as solidarity were common and bound people together. Alun Davies also acted as the medic for the British Battalion,

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<sup>65</sup> Raeburn, *Scots and the Spanish Civil War: solidarity, activism and humanitarianism*, p.55

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p.55

<sup>67</sup> RGASPI 545/6/207

meaning he will have helped Samuel after he was wounded during the attack.<sup>68</sup> Morris Williams was highly regarded for his political knowledge, and had been a miner for 18 years. He was wounded during the attack on Hill 481 and was sent to Santa Coloma hospital- the same assault and hospital as Samuel.<sup>69</sup> From this we can see that Samuel will have interacted with and been looked after by the two, showing the close connections developed between working class volunteers during the fighting.

From the writing of Tommy James, we know that he was acquainted with both Herbert Tagg, and Frederick Spencer, as well as Communist volunteers from Hull and Leeds prior to going to Spain, therefore it is highly likely that Tagg and Spencer also knew each other.<sup>70</sup> Tommy James recruited both Herbert and Frederick to go to Spain, travelling to their homes in Doncaster and Wakefield to do so<sup>71</sup>. Interestingly, this shows a high degree of politicisation and education amongst the CPGB volunteers and implies that there was a wider Communist network in Yorkshire that spanned further than just Wakefield. What is meant by this is that volunteers like James, Tagg and Spencer were clearly reading and discussing events that they saw in the Daily Worker, and then made the decision to go to Spain- showing organisation among these CPGB Yorkshire volunteers.

These trans-local connections in Yorkshire are further evidenced in newspaper reports from the volunteers return to the region. The Yorkshire Evening Post on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 1938 described the returning men as a 'Yorkshire Contingent' who were travelling back home together from London. Amongst volunteers from Hull and Leeds, it names two of the surviving Wakefield volunteers, Sam Taylor, and John Spencer, who had originally travelled

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<sup>68</sup> Imperial War Museum Sound Collection, 'Williams, Huw Alun Menai (Oral history)', < [Williams, Huw Alun Menai \(Oral history\) | Imperial War Museums \(iwm.org.uk\)](#) > [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> April 2022]

<sup>69</sup> RGASPI 545/6/122

<sup>70</sup> Lewis and Gledhill, *Tommy James: A Lion of A Man*, p.31

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p.31

down together in April 1938.<sup>72</sup> However in the case of Taylor and Spencer, they were trade unionists and did not hold CPGB membership, though it suggests that Yorkshire volunteers did bond together while serving in Spain.

The impact of the frequent hunger marches of the 1930s on volunteering for Spain has been noted by historians, and is mentioned in first-hand accounts from many International Brigaders themselves, such as Peter Kerrigan from Clydeside, who had been involved in the final NUWM march before he went to Spain.<sup>73</sup> However, in West and South Yorkshire (the West Riding) these marches have not been studied, and as with the local volunteers from Wakefield, such politicised protests have become entirely forgotten by the public and researchers. From regional newspapers, it is possible to see that these marches affected Wakefield in both a localised and national manner during the 1930s, and at least two of the volunteers were directly affected by unemployment and lack of work prior to Spain.

As with other economically depressed areas in northern England, Wales and Scotland, unemployment was a political catalyst, and affected the lives of the Wakefield volunteers. This is not to say that the volunteers were simply adventurers or went to make money, as they were often accused by elements of the national press at the time.<sup>74</sup> Instead, unemployment and hunger should be viewed as politicising the men and giving them a taste of political organisation. As Hywel Francis has argued, opposition to unemployment in the South Wales coalfield created a depth of feeling and helped build a working-class and community conscience.<sup>75</sup> While Wakefield's politics differed from South Wales, lacking the strength of

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<sup>72</sup> 'Spain Volunteers', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 8<sup>th</sup> December 1938, p.15

<sup>73</sup> Peter Kerrigan, 'Peter Kerrigan', in *The Road To Spain: anti-fascists at war 1936-1939* ed. by D.Corkill & S.Rawnsley (Dunfermline, Fife: Borderline Press, 1981) p.57

<sup>74</sup> Tom Buchanan, 'Loss, memory and the British "Volunteers for Liberty"', in *The Impact of the Spanish Civil War on Britain: War, Loss and Memory* by Tom Buchanan, (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2007) p.125

<sup>75</sup> Francis, *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War*, p.64

CPGB influence, the party still held a degree of sway, and unemployment rallied people in the area, just as it did in Wales.

In Spring 1933, Sarah Jobson, a Communist council candidate in the mining town of Wombwell, South Yorkshire, helped to organise localised hunger marches to Wakefield, with the support of the NUWM and the ‘Unemployed Council’ that had been formed in the area, with the marcher’s main grievance being the much-hated means test.<sup>76</sup> As further newspaper reports establish, this initial march in March 1933 was large scale and attracted unemployed workers from across the whole of Yorkshire to Wakefield, due to the city functioning as the seat of the West Riding County Council who were held responsible for means test implementation.<sup>77</sup> George Orwell, who toured Yorkshire shortly before leaving to fight in Spain himself, commented that the revolutionary NUWM, was incredibly well self-organised, and in his view did ‘the best work for the unemployed’.<sup>78</sup>

Prior to the first Wakefield volunteers going to Spain, in December-January 1936/37, the Jarrow March also stopped through the city in October 1936, with the marchers being provided with tea and cinema tickets.<sup>79</sup> From the documents available through RGASPI, we can see that at a minimum George Bennett and Peter O’Day were affected by the struggle for work. The Communist Party assessment of George Bennett describes his reason for coming to Spain as ‘‘Hadn’t a good job, trade was slack, etc.’’.<sup>80</sup> Likewise, Peter O’Day’s 1937 letter shows that he flitted from job to job, being a boilermaker, miner, sailor, soldier, builder, and butler, before going to Spain.<sup>81</sup> In his own words he was ‘in and out of work that damned

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<sup>76</sup> ‘A Woman Communist’, *South Yorkshire Times and Mexborough & Swinton Times*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1933, p.10

<sup>77</sup> ‘March on Wakefield’, *Shipley Times and Express*, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1933, p.7

<sup>78</sup> George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, (London: Penguin Classics, 1986) p.77

<sup>79</sup> ‘Geordstoree’, *Jarrow March: Ripon to Wakefield*, < [Jarrow March: Ripon to Wakefield - Geordstoree](#) > [accessed 24<sup>th</sup> March 2022]

<sup>80</sup> RGASPI 545/6/105

<sup>81</sup> RGASPI 545/6/180



often' in the five years prior to arriving in Spain with his move to London probably a result of this search for employment.<sup>82</sup>

The life experiences of Sam Taylor, John Spencer and George Bennett offer up a counterpoint to Fraser Raeburn's argument that volunteers were a product of limited socio-political circumstances. Put together we can see that the CPGB Wakefield volunteers fit with this argument to an extent in terms of that they often knew other volunteers, with Frederick Spencer knowing fellow CPGB volunteers from the region, and Peter O'Day having been involved with the Communist Party in London since 1935. However, Taylor and Spencer were not members of political parties, and George Bennett only joined the CPGB to help his passage to Spain- suggesting they were not under the social and community pressures that Raeburn mentions many of the Scottish volunteers faced to go.<sup>83</sup> George Bennett also travelled down from Wakefield on his own, and records showing his arrival do not list any volunteers from other parts of Yorkshire.<sup>84</sup>

From John Spencer's own words we know that his family and friends were not aware that he had planned to go to Spain, writing this in his repatriation file in November 1938.<sup>85</sup> Though Spencer and Taylor travelled to and from Spain together, reports from July 16<sup>th</sup> 1938 suggesting Spencer tried to desert from the Ebro (and had already deserted the British Army to go to Spain) state that he had no friends in other units.<sup>86</sup> While Spencer lists Sam Taylor as somebody who can vouch for him on his repatriation form, Taylor does not do the same for Spencer.<sup>87</sup> This does not confirm that the men were not friends, but certainly suggests that their relationship was not as close as that of other volunteers from small communities, and

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid

<sup>83</sup> Raeburn, *Scots and the Spanish Civil War: solidarity, activism and humanitarianism*, p.79

<sup>84</sup> RGASPI 545/6/89

<sup>85</sup> RGASPI 545/6/203

<sup>86</sup> Ibid

<sup>87</sup> RGASPI 545/6/207

casts doubt on the argument that volunteers were always part of the same socio-political circles.

The Wakefield volunteers were products of uncertain and tough personal lives, factors which are impossible to ignore, and which show that the decision to volunteer was an intricately personal one. Samuel Taylor faced legal trouble before and after he went to Spain, appearing in court in January 1940 for breaching a recognisance that he entered in January 1938 owing to a conviction for office breaking and theft.<sup>88</sup> He also exhibited signs of post-traumatic stress disorder after his arrival home from Spain, being found ‘very drunk, shouting and using obscene language’ on Wakefield’s Kirkgate in October 1939, where after a confrontation with a police officer Samuel threw him through a glass shop front.<sup>89</sup> John Spencer was reported to have deserted from the British Army, and it was alleged that he ran away from his position on the Ebro in July 1938. He left behind his rifle, taking only cooking utensils, although he was either caught or returned.<sup>90</sup> Spencer was also called ‘mentally sub-normal’ and a ‘Trotskyist agent’ by the Battalion leadership, though the reasoning for this probably lies in his subtle criticisms of the political commissars, which is expressed in his repatriation file.<sup>91</sup>

George Bennett joined the Communist Party in 1937, and stated his age as 23 although investigation in to his life disproves the notion that this was for ideological motivations.<sup>92</sup> George was actually 17 on arriving in Spain, and joined the British Armed Forces within months of his release from San Pedro de Cardena concentration camp in October 1938, where he was subsequently monitored by MI5.<sup>93</sup> MI5 stated that George’s

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<sup>88</sup> ‘Wounded in Spain’, *Bradford Observer*, 9<sup>th</sup> January 1940, p.3

<sup>89</sup> ‘Assault on Police’, *Bradford Observer*, 31<sup>st</sup> October 1939, p.2

<sup>90</sup> RGASPI 545/6/203

<sup>91</sup> Ibid

<sup>92</sup> RGASPI 545/6/89

<sup>93</sup> Email from Professor Richard Baxell containing George Bennett’s MI5 file, 18<sup>th</sup> January 2022

‘chief motive in life is personal advancement’ and that ‘it is not suspected that he has enlisted for the express purpose of carrying on subversive propaganda in H.M. Forces’. He discontinued his membership of the CPGB by March 1939, although MI5 kept a file on him until 1950.<sup>94</sup> Peter O’Day was praised for his ‘extraordinary morale’ during the fight for Teruel, and documents reveal that after being sent to the rear-guard due to his age, he continuously requested to be returned to the frontline to fight.<sup>95</sup> Immediately preceding his travel to Spain, O’Day said that he was spurred to leave as the Harley Street doctor he worked for began to suspect he was holding CPGB talks at his home, and disapproved.<sup>96</sup>

The timing of George, Samuel and John’s travel to Spain raises a broader point about the city’s engagement with Spain, and the culture of solidarity that existed. As has been discussed earlier, Fraser Raeburn argues that many volunteers were the product of family and social pressures and were a homogenous group. This does not apply to these three volunteers, who appeared to have made the decision to go to Spain independently of specific Communist or Labour Party politics. Their decision is instead likely to have been prompted in part by the heavy pro-Spanish Republic activism that took place within Wakefield, particularly from late 1936 onwards. Arthur Greenwood, the Labour MP for Wakefield, and deputy leader of the Labour Party, speaking on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 1936 criticised the rebel rising, saying it was not the revolt of a ‘supressed people’ but instead a ‘carefully engineered conspiracy’ helped by foreign powers.<sup>97</sup> Greenwood expressed his anger at Non-Intervention and it’s repeated violation, calling for the British Government to sell the Spanish Republic the weapons that it was legally entitled to buy.<sup>98</sup> That Greenwood, the deputy leader of Labour, would refute his party’s official policy (the Labour Party supported non-intervention from August 1936 to

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid

<sup>95</sup> RGASPI 545/6/180

<sup>96</sup> Ibid

<sup>97</sup> ‘Spain the Pawn’, *Sheffield Independent*, 30th October 1936, p.1

<sup>98</sup> Ibid

October 1937) suggests that he was aware the policy was unpopular in his constituency, and that there was anger at the Government's lack of support for the Republic.<sup>99</sup>

The city took in 65 Basque refugees in July 1937, and 5000 people turned out to Wakefield Westgate Station to welcome their arrival.<sup>100</sup> Prior to this on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May 1937, the Duchess of Atholl, a prominent humanitarian activist and politician, spoke to Wakefield Spanish Relief Committee alongside the Bishop of Pontefract and Professor Selig Brodetsky of the University of Leeds. During this talk, she informed the committee of what she had seen on her visit to Republican Spain.<sup>101</sup> These three Wakefield volunteers were all present in the city as these events occurred, with George travelling to Spain in February 1938, while John and Sam travelled in late April 1938. The high level of engagement with the Basque Refugees, and the local Spanish Relief Committee shows the culture of solidarity that existed in Wakefield at the time. Such a culture was fostered by a society that often-faced tragedy and devastation daily, through regular mining and industrial accidents, like the 1930 Hickson & Welch explosion.<sup>102</sup> It is not surprising then, that in the face of such a localised solidarity culture, combined with activism on behalf of the Spanish Republic, that these young men would see the fight in Spain as something deeply personal.

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<sup>99</sup> Sarah Jackson, 'The British International Brigades as Labour Party dissidents', *International Journey of Iberian studies*, 1 (2005) p.18

<sup>100</sup> Basque Refugees at Wakefield', *The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 24<sup>th</sup> 1937, p.12

<sup>101</sup> 'Spanish Civil War Stories', *The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, May 31<sup>st</sup> 1937, p.10

<sup>102</sup> 'Youtube', *HICKSON & WELCH 1930S EXPLOSION- CASTLEFORD*, < [\(38\) HICKSON & WELSH 1930's EXPLOSION - CASTLEFORD - YouTube](#)> [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> April 2022]

## Chapter II: *Working-Class History and Memory*



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In December 1938, at a talk on Spain organised by the Hemsworth (Wakefield) and District Left Book Club, Stephen Ward, a miner from Grimethorpe, South Yorkshire took to the stage. Stephen, released only a few weeks earlier from San Pedro concentration camp, told the assembled audience that the fight in Spain was a fight for democracy against fascism, and warned of what had happened to workers in Germany.<sup>104</sup> Even as the Spanish Republic faced its final few months, local veterans passionately spoke about the need to defend a cause they had fought so hard for. The talk is symbolic of the level of working-class debate and discussion that took place throughout the war in Spain. But it also offers up a mirror to the present day. Discussion of ideas and the past can be a powerful vehicle for change and engagement. Now, because of this dissertation, the stories and memory of these volunteers will once again be brought back to life for a public audience in Wakefield.

<sup>103</sup> RGASPI 545/3/424 (illustration from a Spanish Republican newspaper)

<sup>104</sup> 'Left Book Club', *Wakefield Express*, 17<sup>th</sup> December 1938, p.20

The second half of this work will explore the engagement between community and historian in bringing back to life forgotten working-class stories, with a particular focus on my own work in Wakefield, and the work of the HIBMG in Hull. It will challenge the accepted notion that a dissertation has to act solely as an academic piece of work. Of course, that is the aim of this paper too, but the process of this research has gone beyond this scope. It opens questions about what the nature of a dissertation is, and what it can do for a community. My research has led me engaging with the public and creating a new legacy and memory for Wakefield.

The past we remember and bring to life matters. Since the 1980s and 1990s specific visions of history have been fostered by political parties in the UK to meet their arguments and agendas.<sup>105</sup> Margaret Thatcher's governments devoted closer attention to history than any other subject in the National Curriculum.<sup>106</sup> In Poland, the past and memory of the nation's communist dictatorship has become a policy tool, and contemporary history has become heavily politicised.<sup>107</sup> Researching and recovering the stories of the Wakefield International Brigade volunteers has resulted in engagement with relatives, the local community and trade unions, and is now on the road towards the creation of a permanent memorial to these men. In a radical sense this dissertation has not just put forward an argument and historical record but has created an active memory of the volunteers in Wakefield that had been lost for decades. It has resulted in both a historical and physical reminder that working-class solidarity and labour movements were once a vital force; that provided:

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<sup>105</sup> John Tosh, Sean Lang, *The pursuit of history: aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history*, (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2006) p.xiv

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, p.xiv

<sup>107</sup> Valentin Behr, 'How Historians Got Involved in Memory Politics: Patterns of the Historiography of the Polish People's Republic before and after 1989', *East European politics and society*, (2021) pp.1-2

*'a counterculture in which people lived their lives, and the main source of education for men and women condemned to live short, bleak lives and dream of impossible futures'.*<sup>108</sup>

The search for Wakefield's International Brigade volunteers has exposed the loss of working-class heritage and history that has occurred; the de-industrialisation of the late twentieth century served as a *coup de grace* for many of the rich social and political traditions of communities across Yorkshire and the UK. In South Yorkshire, the coalfields and large-scale manual industries produced a distinct working-class consciousness that existed up until the 1980s.<sup>109</sup> James Hopkins encapsulated this highly political tradition, when he wrote that the British volunteers, communist and non-communist alike were the product of a unique working-class culture which made them the most politically conscious British soldiers ever to shed their blood on a foreign battlefield.<sup>110</sup> The Brigade volunteers represent an incredible example of ordinary people attempting to effect change in the world. Their complex lives and motivations have been discussed in the preceding chapter, but what is so radical about the memory of the volunteers is the fact that they were just ordinary people. They saw in Spain something which led them to ultimately fight for a better world and a better life.

The recovery of the Wakefield volunteers' stories, and the opening of them up to a wider audience, something which has already taken place in Hull, would not have been possible without the emergence of public spaces to discuss ideas and commemoration. The most crucial public space that has enabled this dialogue has undoubtedly been the emergence of the internet since the end of the 1990s. There is little doubt that the creation of these public platforms has contributed to the 'memory boom' which has exploded over the past 20 years. This 'memory boom' describes a global phenomenon in which increasing societal and

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<sup>108</sup> John Grayson, 'Developing the Politics of the Trade Union Movement: Popular Workers' Education in South Yorkshire, UK, 1955-1985', *International labor and working class history*, 90 (2016) p.114

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p.115

<sup>110</sup> Hopkins, *Into the heart of the fire: the British in the Spanish Civil War*, p.78

political value is attached to the process of uncovering or transmitting collective memory.<sup>111</sup> The use of these public spaces has played a vital role in being able to find and facilitate conversation with the Bennett family, whose father and grandfather George Bennett is discussed in Chapter I. Myself, and the Bennett family came into informal contact through an appeal on social media. These new platforms have allowed for new democratic history making, something that has been put into practice in my own research using digitised archives, and community outreach on social media.<sup>112</sup>

Communities and historians play a crucial role in working together to open local spaces to the discussion of working-class history and memory, something which has been increasingly common in northern England with the end of historic local industries such as coal mining. Lewis Mates has identified this in his study of the Follonsby miner's banner, which was created in the Durham pit village of Wardley in 1928 as a response to the defeat of the 1926 General Strike. It contains an image of Vladimir Lenin, as well as British and Irish radicals.<sup>113</sup> The original banner had endured decades of defacing and had been hidden away, before in 2009 interested locals, activists and members of Tyneside IWW, with support from Gateshead Councillors formed Follonsby Banner Association.<sup>114</sup> The group managed to successfully recreate the banner in 2011, when it was paraded through the streets of Durham during the annual Durham Miners Gala, even receiving a blessing at the city's Cathedral.<sup>115</sup> Within Wakefield itself, there has been a resurgence in the movement to remember and explore memory of the city's own industrial, labour and trade union history. In 2018 the 'with banners held high festival' held the first miner's banner march since 1986, since becoming a

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<sup>111</sup> Iris Brown, 'Commemoration as Symbolic Repatriation: New Narratives or Spaces of Conflict?', *Human rights review*, 3, (2013) p.275

<sup>112</sup> Lorraine Sitzia, 'Telling people's histories: an exploration of community history-making from 1970-2000' (unpublished doctoral theses, University of Sussex, 2010) p.3

<sup>113</sup> 'The "most revolutionary" banner in British trade union history? Political identities and the birth, life, purgatory and rebirth of the "red" Follonsby miners' banner', p.110

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, p.122

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, p.123



yearly event.<sup>116</sup> It is as part of this event, that the Wakefield International Brigade talk will be taking place, opening a new space, and bringing the story of the volunteer's activism and lives to a new generation.

The resurgence in interest in memory of the mining past, suggests that historical memory can allow for defiance and political solidarity, to give people back control of their historical narrative. In a symbolic gesture Native American activists in New Mexico attempted to saw off the foot of a statue of conquistador Juan de Onate, who had carried out the same act on those who resisted his conquest of the region in 1599.<sup>117</sup> Though thousands of miles from West Yorkshire, the act illustrates the power of memory and counter-narratives, with the activists seeing themselves as enacting symbolic revenge on a figure who had oppressed their communities, even though it had occurred hundreds of years ago.

This also brings to life the dilemma historians face in community and memory activism. It is a process in which the historian has a critical role to play, but which can also present an issue in ensuring factual accuracy and fairness are not blurred by emotion and agenda. E.P. Thompson's concepts of 'listening' and 'commitment' are useful for understanding how historians can work between the two conflicting aims of politics and history. Thompson believed that, firstly, the aim of historical writing is to provide the most accurate and comprehensive account of past events. Secondly however, that historian's role could be explicitly political, by studying the actions and choices of past individuals to clarify the political and moral questions facing active citizens in the present day.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> 'Yorkshire Post', *Marching with pride as With Banners Held High festival returns to Wakefield during TUC festival*, < [Marching with pride as With Banners Held High returns to Wakefield during TUC festival | Yorkshire Post](#) > [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2022]

<sup>117</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*, (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2003) p.38

<sup>118</sup> MD Bess, 'E.P. Thompson- The Historian As Activist', *The American historical review*, 1 (1993) pp.32-33

In Wakefield, my research into the narratives and life stories of the International Brigade volunteers has attracted interest from the public, and the local trade union movement, culminating in upcoming plans to create a permanent memorial to the volunteers, and hold public talks around their lives. Within the examples of lost mining heritage, and the international brigades, we can see echoes of Thompson's points. The loss of working-class identity has raised profound political and moral questions for communities, and historians play an important part in the process. They both keep discussion of memory active as Lorraine Sitzia mentions; but can also help invigorate and literally recover the past, as in the case of the Follonsby banner.

The political power of memory is a point which is interwoven with working-class history and explains why British International Brigade volunteers' stories can also serve as a rallying cry. They also help explain why the International Brigades are part of the collective memory of areas who sent a large number of volunteers, like South Wales.<sup>119</sup> Hywel Francis wrote and launched his book on the South Wales International Brigade volunteers just as the 1984-85 miner's strike erupted in the region.<sup>120</sup> Francis acknowledged that his own views and politics were shaped by the courage of those who went to Spain, and that copies of *Miners Against Fascism* were read on the picket lines during the strikes of 1984-1985.<sup>121</sup> He discusses that from his perspective, the strikes of 1984-1985 were a 'mirror image' of the threats facing British society due to fascism in the 1930s.<sup>122</sup>

Drawing from this, it's possible to see how historical narratives can resonate so strongly with communities. In the case of South Wales, the International Brigade volunteers have been remembered and commemorated so actively because they became part of the

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<sup>119</sup> Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*, pp.3-5

<sup>120</sup> Francis, *Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War*, p.XVII

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, p.XVII

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, p.XVII

collective memory of the region, with their struggle linked to the miner's strike, and this past becoming an integral part of people's identity.<sup>123</sup> For Francis, the International Brigade volunteers of the 1930s were not just historical figures, but an example for a community whose way of life once again faced an existential threat. We can also see this in the timing of interest in the Follonsby mining banner. Its recreation took place between 2009-2011 in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent period of austerity in Britain, the historic banner once again becoming imbued with a radical sense of defiance 80 years later.<sup>124</sup> In Wakefield the International Brigade stories were lost and have not been part of this collective memory. By telling the stories through this publicly engaged dissertation, the possibility is opened that the volunteers now become part of a new memory, bringing into question how people will use and identify with this.

Memory work and research has also opened due to political changes on a global and national level. In the context of the International Brigades, much of the historiography prior to the 1990s was coloured by Cold War ideology and assumptions. Michael W. Jackson gives an example of a Jewish American International Brigade veteran, who when interviewed for a documentary film, expressed fear of the Soviet Union, and was subsequently told that his interview would be jettisoned.<sup>125</sup> British International Brigade veterans who fought in Spain could often be the victim of prejudice within the British Armed Forces throughout the Second World War.<sup>126</sup> Even some modern scholars have painted a picture of the British volunteers as Soviet dupes and 'agents of the Kremlin'.<sup>127</sup> The end of the Cold War has allowed for the

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<sup>123</sup> Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*, p.38

<sup>124</sup> 'The "most revolutionary" banner in British trade union history? Political identities and the birth, life, purgatory and rebirth of the "red" Follonsby miners' banner', p.110

<sup>125</sup> Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War*, p.32

<sup>126</sup> 'The 'Premature Anti-fascists'? International Brigade Veterans' Participation in the British War Effort', 1939-45', p.431

<sup>127</sup> Rob Stradling, 'English-speaking Units of the International Brigades: War, Politics and Discipline', *Journal of contemporary history*, 4 (2010) p.753

opening up of the Moscow Archives, where much of the International Brigade data was held, and has helped to disprove many of these myths and prejudices.<sup>128</sup>

But political change is also necessary to allow for the opening of previously repressed conversations and memories. The Cold War loomed so heavily over the earliest International Brigade memory project in West Yorkshire, that some relatives refused to participate. In 1951 a memorial was unveiled by a committee led by historian E.P. Thompson, to commemorate Halifax volunteer Ralph Fox, becoming the first fixed International Brigade memorial in the U.K.<sup>129</sup> While Fox's wife approved, his parents put out a statement saying that due to political differences they were unable to attend, and that he had died before communism became "the evil thing it is now".<sup>130</sup>

The end of the Cold War and opening of the archives has allowed for new and personalised understandings of the British volunteers, which were not previously available to historians. The work of the group in Hull has helped dispel any existing stigma around the International Brigades and restore a sense of pride for relatives and activists. During initial conversations, some relatives of the volunteers in Hull expressed a degree of wariness due to a lack of knowledge about the conflict in Spain and what had occurred.<sup>131</sup> Local historians and researchers such as Andrew have played a crucial role in helping to educate the public about the International Brigades, something which had proved much harder when the original plaque was put up in Hull's Guildhall in 1990 due to lack of access to sources held in RGASPI.<sup>132</sup> With my own research in Wakefield, the digitisation of the RGASPI archives has allowed me to access the individual files and sources of the volunteers, which would have been impossible in the Cold War era.

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<sup>128</sup> Richard Baxell, 'Myths of the International Brigades', *Bulletin of Spanish studies*, 1-2 (2014) p.11

<sup>129</sup> *The Impact of the Spanish Civil War on Britain: War, Loss and Memory*, p.140

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p.140

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Andrew Young HIBMG, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2022

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*

The way in which we remember the individuals who fought in Spain is important. As chapter I has uncovered, each of the men were complex individuals, but all had a sense of anti-fascist identity. In the case of Frederick and Peter, their identities were also linked to their roles as CPGB activists and members. Peter O'Day's letter is a physical statement of his strongly held communist beliefs, and this identity is used by him to chart a course through his life story.

In Spain, the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1975 is often discussed in terms of the 'pact of forgetting' that occurred and allowed for the impunity of many individuals who committed abuses during the Civil War and dictatorship.<sup>133</sup> In the immediate years after the end of the regime, family members and relatives fought back against the erasure of the identity of relatives who had been killed. In one example, the family of two teenagers who had been executed at the end of the Civil War, were able to persuade their local authorities in 1978 to allow them to excavate and rebury them. Permission was granted on the condition of no political displays, which was subsequently ignored by relatives who covered the coffins in PSOE and PCE flags, as well as inviting a journalist to cover the event.<sup>134</sup> This dissertation pushes back against the volunteer's erasure of identity through the passage of time. It is not just a written record of why they went, but an understanding of who they were. The further work to be conducted by gaining a memorial and holding public talks will build on this and cement an active legacy.

The initiatives and changes in Spain demonstrated the power of community action and mobilisation. The use of political flags in defiance of the authority's conditions links to a point Andrew Young mentioned that arose during consultations between group members

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<sup>133</sup> Omar G Encarnacion, 'Reconciliation after Democratization: Coping with the past in Spain', *Political Science Quarterly*, 3 (2008) pp.438-439

<sup>134</sup> Paloma Aguilar, 'Unwilling to Forget: Local Memory Initiatives in Post-Franco Spain', *South European Society and Politics*, 4 (2017) pp.418-420

within the HIBMG around the Hull memorial sculpture. When plans were being made for the sculpture, the group agreed that it would be wrong for it to become a completely apolitical memorial, as each of the volunteers expressed strongly held political beliefs which led them to Spain.<sup>135</sup> It would be unfair to devoid the statue of any political symbolism, as it would in effect strip the men of their individual identities. The community reburial in Spain acts as a mirror example of this. By defying the authorities and politicising their funeral, the family were giving their relatives back the sense of identity that they felt through being political activists, and which the Franco regime has sought to strip them of in death. In Hull, the sculpture evoked the politics the men stood for, allowing them to be remembered as anti-fascist activists.

This dissertation, and the community talks and memorial plans that follow, have recovered the volunteers' identities. For 85 years their stories have been completely forgotten. Most strikingly, in Frederick Spencer's hometown of Featherstone, despite excellent memorial projects for the town's First and Second World War casualties, his story has gone unnoticed.<sup>136</sup> In speaking to John Bennett his recollection of his father's conversations about Spain has allowed me to understand and uncover details of George's capture at Calaceite in March 1938, while my research has been able to give him and his family documents and wider knowledge about George's time there. While discussing whether George often spoke of Spain, John commented that his father had often discussed his roles in the Second World War and Korean War, rather than what he did in Spain.<sup>137</sup> However, John did remember his father telling the story of how he was captured.

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<sup>135</sup> Interview with Andrew Young HIBMG, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2022

<sup>136</sup> 'BBC News', *War horse sculpture unveiled in Bristol*, < [War horse sculpture unveiled in Bristol - BBC News](#) > [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> April 2022]

<sup>137</sup> Interview with John Bennett, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2022

The RGASPI files found stated that George had been captured at Calaceite, but John's recollection of his father brought this incident to life. George and his comrades were behind a wall, when they saw tanks coming towards them, and believed from the insignia that they were Republican. They got up to cheer them on, before realising they were in fact fascist tanks, while George said 'oh fuck, they're not ours'. The group was subsequently captured.<sup>138</sup>

The bringing together of activists and historians can have an illuminating process on both. This has been shown by Thomas Dublin and Kathryn Skylar who found such a dimension while working with women's activists involved with the UN during the 1960s and 1970s. It has also been my own experience while conducting oral history interviews.

Collaboration between these two groups for the conference in 2011 led to:

*'Brilliant talk, warm humour and lots of intergenerational interactions about what historians and activists share in their work for a better tomorrow'.<sup>139</sup>*

Dublin and Skylar have commented on the rare nature of historians being able to meet those who they write about, and equally that while the activists felt that the historians were impressive, for the historians the feeling was reciprocated.<sup>140</sup> This experience of first-hand interaction became apparent during the discussion on Calaceite. When John told me this story, the recollection immediately corresponded with my own knowledge of Bob Doyle's capture, as he was with the same group as George on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1938. Bob recounted their surrounding by elite Italian mechanised troops for a recorded interview in 2008.<sup>141</sup> His interview helped me provide context to the story George told John. Bob mentions that he had seen fascist tanks before so immediately recognised them as such, whereas George, who had

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid

<sup>139</sup> Kathryn Kish Skylar, Thomas Dublin, 'Historians Meet Activists at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women', *Journal of women's history*, 4 (2012) p.175

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, p.183

<sup>141</sup> 'Imperial War Museum Sound Collection', Doyle, Bob (*Oral history*), < [Doyle, Bob \(Oral history\)](https://www.iwm.org.uk/sound-collection/oral-history/doyle-bob) | [Imperial War Museums \(iwm.org.uk\)](https://www.iwm.org.uk) > [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> April 2022]

only been in Spain for a few weeks, would have believed them to be Republican as he lacked the military experience.

This discussion added to my own historical knowledge. As Gregory Kealey reflected on his career, he noted that community, and engagement with a wide cross-section of people can have a hugely important impact on a historian's work.<sup>142</sup> This work and research has also helped John and the family, with documents and information discovered helping them to learn more about George's service in Spain. It has proved the point that memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creations of meaning.<sup>143</sup> Unfortunately, due to the passage of time and culture of discussion, only so much was spoken about Spain and George's time there during his life. When I approached John to give him the documents and information, he was at first shocked and surprised by what they revealed.<sup>144</sup> He did not know his father had held CPGB membership, and found this information interesting, as to reach George's later rank in the British Army (Warrant Officer) required a high level of vetting, something John knew about as he later reached the same rank as his father.<sup>145</sup>

John's information combined with the archival documents held on George, and his MI5 file, allowed us to understand that he was not an ideological communist and went to Spain to gain military experience and escape the poverty of home. These experiences show that a dissertation can be more than just an academic writing. In the interview process, we have uncovered new details and perspective on George's life. They have provided information and new meaning for the family, as well as for me as a historian. This process has been illuminating and represents the power of public engagement. In Spain, as Civil War

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<sup>142</sup> Gregory S. Kealey, 'Community, Politics and History: My Life as a Historian', *The Canadian historical review*, 3 (2016) p.424

<sup>143</sup> Alistair Thomson, 'Making the Most of Memories: The Empirical and Subjective value of Oral History', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 9 (1999) pp.292-293

<sup>144</sup> Interview with John Bennett, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2022

<sup>145</sup> Ibid



era mass graves are exhumed, they provide a ‘public performance’ that helps relatives and the community to unlock and elaborate memories of the Republican dead.<sup>146</sup> In Wakefield, uncovering the volunteer’s stories, and engaging with their families, has helped unlock memories of the men’s time in the International Brigade.

The excavation of more mass graves and shifts in historical narratives around the International Brigades in the 2000s, has given hope to British veteran’s relatives, and is allowing for a cathartic release by their descendants. It also links to the need for physical spaces and memorials to invigorate and keep memory alive, a factor that has resulted from this work.<sup>147</sup> During fighting at Gandesa in July 1938, the brothers Gordon ‘Dusty’ Bennett and Don Bennett from Walsall were manning a machine gun, until Gordon was hit and killed.<sup>148</sup> Don pulled a wall over his brothers body, but died in 1974 never knowing what had really happened to the remains. For decades, the agonising search for information was continued by both Don’s sons. In 2021 they were contacted by Spanish authorities who had found a body in a mass grave with a gold ring stamped by a Birmingham jeweller, with Don’s younger son Paul providing a DNA sample in the hope of a definitive identification.<sup>149</sup> An incredible detail that is mentioned within this story is that, due to the lack of physical space to commemorate, Don and Paul used to visit the cenotaph in Walsall every November 11<sup>th</sup> to remember Gordon’s death in Spain and ‘people uniting against fascism’<sup>150</sup>

While the cenotaph has traditionally been a space associated with British Army casualties since the First World War, in the immediate years after the Spanish Civil War it

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<sup>146</sup> Francisco Ferrandiz, ‘Cries and Whispers: Exhuming and Narrating defeat In Spain’, *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 2 (2008) p.182

<sup>147</sup> Lorraine Sitzia, ‘A Shared Authority: An Impossible Goal?’, *The Oral history review*, 1 (2003) p.90

<sup>148</sup> ‘Express and Star’, *DNA test could solve the mystery that haunted Civil War fighter to his grave*, <[DNA test could solve the mystery that haunted civil-war fighter to his grave | Express & Star \(expressandstar.com\)](https://www.expressandstar.com/news/uk-news/2021/11/11/dna-test-could-solve-the-mystery-that-haunted-civil-war-fighter-to-his-grave/)> [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2022]

<sup>149</sup> Ibid

<sup>150</sup> Ibid

was a common occurrence for International Brigade veterans to also pay their respects at these memorials. The British contingent laid a wreath at the national cenotaph in London, upon their return.<sup>151</sup> The veterans needed a space to validate and remember their experiences, particularly after the outbreak of the Second World War, when Spain came to be viewed as part of a wider anti-fascist war in which many veterans were prevented from fighting. One British Battalion veteran ending up sentenced to hard labour in Wakefield prison due to his attempts to re-join the new anti-fascist fight.<sup>152</sup> In the absence of a body, local cenotaphs became space for ex-volunteers to remember, and validate their experiences as anti-fascist fighters, despite the discrimination they faced.

The death of volunteers in Spain permanently bonded local communities and ex-volunteers to the country. The Hull memorial is made from Basque marble and Catalan steel, with the ex-volunteers unrecovered bodies symbolising ‘a part of Hull that remains in Catalonia’ while the memorial is ‘a part of Spain that now remains in Hull’.<sup>153</sup> It is why the work of this dissertation is so important. It creates a new memory of the Wakefield volunteers and recognises their role as fighters in a larger anti-fascist conflict, a fact that has been denied to them through the passage of time, and lack of commemoration. As John Bennett mentioned, when I asked him what he thought to the idea of a memorial including his father; it is a part of British history that should be commemorated and not forgotten.<sup>154</sup>

In the absence of a body, and prior to a physical space for memory, in the form of the sculpture, the family of a Hull volunteer killed in Spain began a unique tradition of physical legacy. After his death in Spain, the family started to give all its first-born sons his name, an

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<sup>151</sup> Baxell, *Unlikely warriors: the British in the Spanish Civil War and the struggle against fascism*, p.186

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, p.196

<sup>153</sup> ‘Hull News’, *New Memorial Recognises Hull’s International Brigade*, < [New memorial recognises Hull’s International Brigade - Hull CC News](#)> [accessed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2022]

<sup>154</sup> Interview with John Bennett, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2022

act which has continued to this day.<sup>155</sup> A parallel to this incredible routine is discussed by Paloma Aguilar in her study of the mourning traditions of the relatives of Francoist victims in Spain. In this, she identifies that this same method of commemoration was carried out in southern Spain ‘to keep their memory alive and prevent them falling into oblivion’.<sup>156</sup> In both circumstances, we can see that the names of the dead relatives became symbolic of resistance and family pride. It is emblematic of the meaning of memory, for all these families their relative’s resistance to fascism and oppression was passed on to each new generation, ensuring an unbroken link with the past.

The HIBMG was founded in 2016, 80 years on from the conflict, though a memorial plaque had been installed in Hull Guildhall in 1990.<sup>157</sup> It began after a call was put out in a local newspaper that a commemoration would take place in the Guildhall to pay respect to the local volunteers. Around fifty people attended this commemoration, bringing together local historians, trade unionists, and the volunteers’ relatives, who were galvanised to form a group and build a permanent memorial.<sup>158</sup> Interestingly, the desire to commemorate the volunteers meant a variety of different things to all these groups. To some, it symbolised a very real connection to Hull’s political past, and an example for the future, to others, it was a fascinating chapter of local history, and to relatives it symbolised a connection to their own lost family.<sup>159</sup>

This can be analysed by a process that Iris Brown highlights, that commemoration can provide society with a moral framework into which it can organise its experiences. Brown points out that this framework is not rigid but has enough bend and give in it to accommodate

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<sup>155</sup> Interview with Andrew Young HIBMG, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2022

<sup>156</sup> Paloma Aguilar, ‘From Mourning Severed to Mourning Recovered: tribute and remembrance strategies for families of victims of the Francoist repression’, *Memory Studies*, 3 (2020) pp.283-284

<sup>157</sup> Hull News, ‘New Memorial Recognises Hull’s International Brigade’, < [New memorial recognises Hull’s International Brigade - Hull CC News](#) > [accessed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2022]

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Andrew Young HIBMG, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2022

<sup>159</sup> Ibid

differing outlooks.<sup>160</sup> As can be seen, the desire to build a memorial and commemorate the Hull volunteers has allowed the different groups and stakeholders to organise their experiences, but in a manner which has been able to account for the differing outlooks and aims of relatives, historians, and trade unionists.

Parallels can be seen between the work of the HIBMG and the work of Republican historical memory organisations in Spain, where the emergence of the ARMH organisation in 2000 to excavate Republican civilians and soldiers executed by the Francoist regime has reignited a massive popular engagement in Civil War memory, and national debate about how to commemorate the war dead.<sup>161</sup> It epitomises how it often takes a younger generation, or large passage of time, to break the taboo of hesitation to discuss what can be seen as unsavoury or difficult historical topics. For myself personally, my time as an undergraduate has allowed me to develop my historical skills and recover such memory with my own family. My great-grandfather Robert, an intelligent and talented man, was haunted by his experiences during the Battle of France in 1940, something that was not discovered until we worked to gain receipt of his war records in 2021; throughout his life he would never discuss it.

Such issues have faced volunteers' relatives in Hull too and can often lead to a sense of regret that the International Brigades and Spanish Civil War were not discussed more widely within the family. Andrew Young, a local historian involved with the HIBMG, was able to give one volunteer's son a cache of files about his father, as well as to show him pictures of a mural his father had drawn while serving, as the Spanish conflict had not been discussed within the family.<sup>162</sup> This had led to the volunteer's son becoming emotional and

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<sup>160</sup> 'Commemoration as Symbolic Repatriation: New Narratives or Spaces of Conflict?', p.276

<sup>161</sup> Layla Renshaw, 'The Scientific and affective identification of Republican civilian victims from the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Material Culture*, 4 (2010-12) pp.450-451

<sup>162</sup> Interview with Andrew Young HIBMG, (13<sup>th</sup> April 2022)

wishing that the topic had been discussed further among his family.<sup>163</sup> However such interactions could often be enlightening for both local historian and family. In another case the same volunteer's son remembered his father humming the tune to 'Red River Valley' after a drink on an evening, and both were gobsmacked when their combined knowledge revealed that this song was the famous International Brigade song 'A Valley in Spain called Jarama' which had been adapted from the former tune.<sup>164</sup>

These memories and interactions are invaluable for historians. As Lorraine Sitzia has explored in her own personal history work with Hull born Korean War veteran, activist, and pacifist Arthur Thickett. Sitzia argues that we need historical projects that involve people in exploring what it means to remember, and what to do with memories to keep them alive and active, rather than allowing them to become mere objects of collection.<sup>165</sup> The HIBMG is an example of these memories being not just collected, but brought back to life in the public domain, something which has been achieved through the cultural projects that they have initiated.

It is fitting and poignant that community activists and local historians carry on the work of recovering working class history in the context of the International Brigades. The very act of the working-class telling and 'making' their history can be a political one and allow people to claim authorship of their own history and 'democratise' the practice.<sup>166</sup> Though one of the most well-known tropes about the International Brigade volunteers is that their ranks were dominated by middle-class intellectuals, writers, and poets, this is not the case. Overwhelmingly the British Battalion was composed of ordinary working-class men from across the UK.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid

<sup>164</sup> Ibid

<sup>165</sup> 'A Shared Authority: An Impossible Goal?', p.90

<sup>166</sup> 'Telling people's histories: an exploration of community history-making from 1970-2000', p.52

<sup>167</sup> Hopkins, *Into the heart of the fire: the British in the Spanish Civil War*, p.75

Indeed, this is the same for every Wakefield volunteer, who all grew up in poverty that would be unimaginable to us now. John Bennett remembered going back to visit his father's childhood home with him, the conditions still being so appalling and unsafe that he was almost severely hurt in an accident.<sup>168</sup> Out of such conditions many of these men showed incredible intelligence and aptitude to learn about history, poetry, and politics. James Brown, another early working-class British volunteer from London, lived in conditions so disgustingly dire that five of his siblings died. Yet from this, James learnt how to read, devouring works of poetry by Shelley, and political theory such as Marx's *Das Kapital*, as well as taking up running and sport.<sup>169</sup> Peter O'Day describes himself as having 'little schooling' yet he is able to express his life story in an entertaining and self-aware style, which mirrors the storytelling still heard on the streets of Wakefield, and gives a sense of the character he was.<sup>170</sup> John Spencer is criticised heavily in his personal assessments, yet his files tell us that he could speak English and French, and possessed skills in a number of trades.<sup>171</sup> George Bennett got out of the poverty he experienced at home, going on to have a career in the British military and intelligence, speaking German, and cooking recipes he learnt from his time abroad for his family.<sup>172</sup>

These experiences symbolise how many of the men can be considered what James Hopkins calls 'the cream of the working class', people who despite growing up in poverty participated in debate and sport through groups such as Socialist Sunday Schools, Methodism, cycling and rambling.<sup>173</sup> The legacy of these organisations still exists in the

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<sup>168</sup> Interview with John Bennett, (8<sup>th</sup> April 2022)

<sup>169</sup> 'Imperial War Museum Sound Archive', *Brown, James, D (Oral history)* < [Brown, James, D \(Oral history\) | Imperial War Museums \(iwm.org.uk\)](#) > [accessed 14<sup>th</sup> April 2022]

<sup>170</sup> RGASPI 545/6/180

<sup>171</sup> RGASPI 545/6/203

<sup>172</sup> Interview with John Bennett, (8<sup>th</sup> April 2022)

<sup>173</sup> Hopkins, *Into the heart of the fire: the British in the Spanish Civil War*, p.88

Wakefield area today with Calder Clarion Cycling Club (originally formed as a socialist cycling club in 1922) still surviving as an active group<sup>174</sup>

Just as many International Brigade volunteers participated in self-education and advancement, in Hull, this is how the Brigade's memory has been kept alive in local communities. Andrew Young, who has conducted detailed research, advanced his own understanding of local history through attending social history courses, as well as liaising with the volunteers' relatives and staff at the University of Hull.<sup>175</sup> Having an attachment and affinity for an area helps to break down barriers and strike up a rapport with veteran's relatives, something which is evident in the research in Wakefield, and Andrew's work in Hull. Arthur Thickett and Lorraine Sitizia both had a working-class background, and their families came from the same part of Hull, with this shared class background helping Arthur to tell his story to her.<sup>176</sup> In conversation with John, our similar northern background helped to build up a rapport, particularly as my own great-grandfather grew up in the same part of Wakefield, and initially served in the same unit as George in the Second World War. John's own military stories, such as his brief encounter with Francoist Spain when his troopship was forced to land at La Coruna, were extremely interesting.<sup>177</sup> They gave an understanding of his father's adventurous spirit and life, something which had been passed to his family who now live around the world.

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<sup>174</sup> 'Calder Clarion', *History*, < [History – Calder Clarion](#) > [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> April 2022]

<sup>175</sup> Interview with Andrew Young HIBMG, (13<sup>th</sup> April 2022)

<sup>176</sup> 'A Shared Authority: An Impossible Goal?', p.95

<sup>177</sup> Interview with John Bennett, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2022

## Conclusion

The Wakefield volunteers show that there is no simple narrative to explain the decision to fight in the International Brigades. The men were products of a complex politicised society, and each had multifaceted personal lives and circumstances. By investigating and understanding these lives we not only understand the social environment of 1930s West Yorkshire, but each of them as individuals. Their stories have been lost to history for 85 years, and now through this micro study we regain a sense of who they were, and what drew them to fight in Spain.

The juxtaposition of Samuel Taylor's bravery on the Ebro, and comradeship with Welsh volunteers, with reports of his criminal activity and trauma in Wakefield is symbolic of this point<sup>178</sup> To read either side of this on its own, would give you a particular narrative, criminal or hero. The Wakefield men cannot be interpreted in a binary fashion, they are individuals. In Spain they saw a cause worth fighting for, even if that cause was a unique cocktail of their own views and circumstances.

By recovering the volunteers' stories, new memory has been added to the working-class history of Wakefield and West Yorkshire. This dissertation has not only put forward an argument but created a legacy and meaning for the men's stories, challenging the boundaries of what it is traditionally expected to do. By being able to discuss George Bennett's life with John, he has learnt more about his father's role in Spain, and I have been humbled with the experience of learning more about George, and his truly extraordinary life.<sup>179</sup> It shows the power historians can have by engaging with local communities, as the work Andrew Young and HIBMG are testament to.

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<sup>178</sup> RGASPI 545/6/207, 'Assault on Police', *Bradford Observer*, 31<sup>st</sup> October 1939, p.2

<sup>179</sup> Interview with John Bennett, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2022



The process will not end here. With this study, the talks to be held on the Wakefield volunteers will be able to inform the public further and ensure that their stories are widely known and understood. With work being done to secure a permanent memorial to the men, it is intended that a public space to reflect and learn will soon be in place. It is hoped that more volunteers' families will be found, and that with this even more information will be available to add to the work produced here.

With this dissertation Peter, Frederick, Sam, George, and John are now part of the historical record, five working-class men from Wakefield who defied the ordinary.

## Epilogue

This dissertation has not only allowed an understanding of the volunteers but has transformed and shaped my own understanding of myself. Through this research I have learnt about who I am as an individual. Faded sepia photographs flicked through have gained meaning and context. As with Peter O'Day, I am descended from Irish immigrants who settled in Heavy Woollen at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 1930's newspaper clippings of my great grandma, debating with a National Government candidate in her Wakefield factory, and stories of her attempt at unionising, took on a new meaning. My grandfather's work down a coal mine, the davy lamp that rests on the fireplace, all understood more vividly. It is on all of them that this work rests.

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