**‘From the Back-to-Back to the Battlefield: West Riding of Yorkshire International Brigade Volunteers’ Motivation, Experience, and Legacy’**

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**Abstract**

In comparison to other British industrial regions, Yorkshire’s International Brigade volunteers have been rather overlooked. This dissertation aims to investigate the motivations, experiences, and legacy of volunteers from the West Riding of Yorkshire who fought during Spain’s 1936-1939 Civil War. In doing so it aims to go beyond just understanding why a place with such a strong labour movement produced fewer volunteers than other comparable British regions, but to delve into the lives of volunteers that did go, and to understand what differentiated them. It builds on this by interrogating the experiences of the volunteers during their time in Spain, helping to give a ‘voice back’ to the working-class volunteers, and to understand the way in which women responded to the conflict in Spain. Alongside this, it explores how local experience is located within a wider transnational framework across the interwar period. The project culminates in a reflection on the afterlives of volunteers, including oral history work conducted with the families of two regional International Brigaders, to understand why this rich social history has been forgotten and the relationship between deindustrialisation and the loss of popular memory.

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**Glossary**

BUF- British Union of Fascists

CPGB- Communist Party of Great Britain

IBA- International Brigade Association

IBMT- International Brigade Memorial Trust

ILP- Independent Labour Party

KPD- German Communist Party

MFGB- Miner’s Federation of Great Britain

NUM- National Union of Mineworkers

NUWM- National Unemployed Workers’ Movement

STLC- Sheffield Trades and Labour Council

YCL- Young Communist League

YMA- Yorkshire Miner’s Association

**Introduction**

In 1979, Tommy Degnan, an elderly Barnsley miner, passed away after a career that had begun at a Wigan colliery in 1912.[[1]](#footnote-2) His funeral oration was given by Arthur Scargill a rising star of the National Union of Mineworkers who would go on to become famous across Britain during the bitter miner’s strike of 1984-1985. Asked by the *Sheffield Telegraph* for his thoughts on Tommy Degnan’s death, Scargill replied ‘I have known Tommy Degnan since I was 15. He assisted me greatly in my early career. His life was like reading something out of a John Buchan novel. He was an inspiration to any youngster in the NUM today.’.[[2]](#footnote-3)

In 1937 Tommy Degnan was in a different environment to the dust, dirt, and darkness of the Yorkshire coalfield. Despite already having twenty-five years’ experience at the coalface, the 39-year-old had travelled to Spain to fight alongside other volunteers in the ranks of the International Brigades. During the fighting he would be shot, leaving a bullet which remained in his body for the rest of his life. Tommy returned from the conflict and continued his career as a Yorkshire coal miner into the 1960s.[[3]](#footnote-4)

The story of Tommy Degnan is just one example of a history that has been long overlooked. Volunteers from across the West Riding of Yorkshire, a region that encompasses the modern areas of West and South Yorkshire, have been largely forgotten by both historians and the public. This contrasts with other British former industrial regions, which produced large numbers of volunteers. South Wales, Scotland’s central belt, and County Durham have all been the focus of studies. Recent work by Fraser Raeburn has documented the intricate social, political, and familial networks which motivated volunteers to fight in Spain, by analysing the connections and socio-political circumstances of International Brigaders from across Scotland.

While the volunteers from the West Riding share common features with other British International Brigade fighters, the region contains specific politics and unique characteristics. This dissertation aims to explore the lives and experiences of volunteers and activists from this region, through their own words, photographs, and documents. It has been inspired by my own experience of growing up in a post-industrial mining town and the journey to learn about the life of Fred Spencer, an International Brigader killed in 1937, from that community. This journey culminated in a meeting with Fred’s family in the summer of 2022, which has also helped to answer questions about volunteers from across the wider region. Collaboration has been built upon by meeting the sisters of Leeds International Brigader David Buffman, a young Jewish activist who died fighting at the Ebro in the summer of 1938. Both these experiences bring a richer, more personalised understanding of the volunteers who went from the region and the diverse range of individuals recruited for the International Brigade within Yorkshire. Their stories speak to a forgotten heritage, one which it is hoped this dissertation will help to bring back to the forefront.

Hywel Francis, Richard Baxell, Tom Buchanan, and Fraser Raeburn have written excellent work on the International Brigades from across parts of Britain. However, Yorkshire has been neglected from such study, despite playing a pivotal role in the history of the British labour movement. It was not only the birthplace of the Independent Labour Party, and the Labour Representation Committee, but has faced immense political and economic changes from the 1984-85 miners’ strike, and broader deindustrialisation which stretched well into the mid-2010s. Set against this, there has been little study of the region’s men and women who volunteered to serve in Spain’s 1936-1939 Civil War.

Through looking closely at the West Riding, we can see the role that individuals, and hidden voices, such as those of female Communist Party activists, played in building up political networks from which volunteers would emerge to go on to Spain. These voices have been forgotten and this work seeks to add their involvement back into the story of Yorkshire’s working-class political activism and the International Brigades. They are marginalised voices within a neglected region. The volunteers from the West Riding were almost entirely working-class men and a handful of women who served as medical personnel. However, the region did provide a few notable middle-class volunteers alongside individuals who found themselves living abroad at the time of the War. Ralph Fox, and Bernard Knox, who scattered anecdotes of his time in Spain throughout his later academic work, are notable examples of this.[[4]](#footnote-5) Their extraordinary lives and experience warrant inclusion to provide a more rounded picture of Yorkshire’s contribution to Spain.

The region has a wealth of records from its Spanish Civil War volunteers which have long been understudied, particularly the rich Spanish Civil War collections of Sheffield City Archives. The lack of wider public awareness of the volunteers, and of the existence of these archive collections have led to them receiving little recognition. Alongside these archival sources, the memoirs of Yorkshire Communist Party organisers Tommy James and Ernie Benson provide critical details yet have remained relatively unknown since their publication in the 1980s. This project has also been aided by the personal connections made with the families of volunteers, who have allowed me to use records and photographic collections which have not previously been studied.

By bringing together diverse archival sources, and combining them with memoirs, and personal family collections, a story emerges which connects individuals on a local, national, and international level. Volunteers from the area had already had national and transnational political experiences, whether this was participating in hunger marches, meeting organisers who had lived in the Soviet Union, or fighting in the First World War. Leeds International Brigade recruiter Ernie Benson even heard later East German leader Walter Ulbricht speak on behalf of the KPD during a visit to Leeds in 1929.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Richard Baxell has estimated percentages of volunteers from across British regions, although Yorkshire is included in the north-east, making it harder to establish exact figures. His work has located at least 21 volunteers who had addresses in Leeds.[[6]](#footnote-7) Tom Buchanan’s research in the 1990s has the figure for the whole of Yorkshire at around 69 volunteers.[[7]](#footnote-8) Research for this dissertation suggests that the number of International Brigaders from across the West Riding of Yorkshire is higher than previously thought, but it remains difficult to certify an overall amount. For example, Jack ‘Larsen’ Thompson living at 14, Church Street, Leeds, is listed on archival files as being in hospital in Valencia after service with the International Brigades yet does not appear on the city’s official memorial in Leeds Town Hall.[[8]](#footnote-9)

The living legacy, in the form of volunteer’s families, is a poignant reminder of the impact the War has had on the region. Although small memorials exist in Halifax, Leeds, Rotherham, and Sheffield, those from outside these places lack any commemoration, falling into a gap in public memory between the First and Second World Wars. The effects of the Spanish Civil War lay forgotten in towns, cities, and villages across Yorkshire. Through interviews with grandchildren and siblings, of volunteers this dissertation hopes to be able to show the legacy of the War and the post-conflict journeys of volunteers. Though the majority returned to live quiet lives, some of those who fought in Spain would help shape political struggles that would last well into the 1970s and 1980s. Like the bullet that remained lodged in Tommy Degnan’s body, Spain would influence important leaders on the left of the Yorkshire NUM and trade union movement.

**Chapter 1: ‘You could count the militants on one hand’: Lives and Motivations before Spain**

To understand West Riding volunteers’ motivation in going to Spain is to investigate and interrogate the lives they lived before the conflict. It is also to explore the political circumstances existing in the region, and the way in which volunteers interacted with these. Overwhelmingly regional International Brigaders were Communist Party members, although small numbers of non-political and Labour Party volunteers went too. The Independent Labour Party was founded in Bradford in 1893, but by the 1920’s it was dominated by Clydeside MPs.[[9]](#footnote-10) It is unclear whether any Yorkshire ILP members fought in Spain.[[10]](#footnote-11) At the time of the Spanish Civil War, the West Riding was one administrative area but was covered by two Communist Party districts, with the engineering and coal mining belt around Sheffield being separated from the rest of the region.[[11]](#footnote-12) These districts were centered around headquarters in Leeds and Sheffield. Activists from both districts often worked together, and organisers from both Sheffield and Leeds left behind memoirs and written records, leaving us with a picture covering the whole area. In many ways the men who went to Spain were the tip of a larger activist iceberg, yet one which was still relatively small scale. The politics and activism of the bulk of the regional International Brigaders made them distinct from most working-class people of the period.



Figure 1: Map of Yorkshire, [Yorkshire | Association of British Counties (abcounties.com)](https://abcounties.com/counties/county-profiles/yorkshire/).

As Andrew Thorpe has assessed, Communist Party membership in interwar Yorkshire fluctuated ‘very much indeed’, although he notes that the region remained an important centre for the Party with Sheffield, home of the early CPGB leader J.T. Murphy, particularly significant.[[12]](#footnote-13) There were also instances of grassroots Labour Party involvement in Spain too. In the case of Dewsbury, a Labour Councillor, Clement ‘Clem’ Broadbent, was killed during the Battle of the Ebro.[[13]](#footnote-14) Alan Harris, from Leeds, was active in the Labour League of Youth and had been involved in street fighting against the BUF before later joining the Brigade in Spain.[[14]](#footnote-15)

The West Riding coalfield was the primary location of International Brigade recruitment outside of the large cities of Leeds, Sheffield, and Bradford. It was the region’s largest industry, with coal mining accounting for 30.3% of the male workforce in 1931, and 22.1 of the overall workforce.[[15]](#footnote-16) Other British coal mining regions sent more volunteers than Yorkshire, with South Wales having a high figure of around 206 International Brigaders.[[16]](#footnote-17) It has been difficult to verify the overall figure for miners who went from the West Riding. In three of the key coal mining towns of the region, miners constituted a majority. All four Barnsley volunteers were miners, as were four out of six from Wakefield district, and four out of five from Doncaster. The South Wales contribution was the focus of recent works by Hywel Francis, who described the unique conditions on the South Wales coalfield which produced such a large amount of International Brigaders. South Wales had a distinct internationalism, and the Communist Party held a large amount of influence in the South Wales Miners Federation.[[17]](#footnote-18) The lower figure of Yorkshire miners fighting in Spain can be attributed to the Communist Party’s lack of wider regional influence and a strong pre-existing Labour Party tradition. This made it difficult for Communist Party activists to gain a foothold in the industry and garner political support. The region was already noted for a weak Communist presence in 1925, with the West Riding District of the Communist Party described as ‘a very poor district indeed’.[[18]](#footnote-19) The West Riding was ‘a numerically smaller’ district in the interwar period, a fact acknowledged by the region’s leadership.[[19]](#footnote-20) It, therefore, raises the question of who the miners that did go were, and what made them different from the rest of the large, Labour-voting, mining population.

The Yorkshire miners that fought in Spain provide an important insight into localised militancy on the coalfield, which can be seen in a closer study of their lives and the areas in which they came from. These were pit villages around Wakefield, Barnsley, Doncaster, and Rotherham, by and large, small areas where there had been specific local political struggles. It is striking that the towns where Yorkshire mining International Brigaders lived, such as Bolton-upon-Dearne (Tommy Degnan), Hemsworth District (John Foster), Featherstone (Fred Spencer), and Conisborough (Hector Barber), were places in the West Riding where mineworkers were the highest as a percentage of the population in 1931. In these towns and villages between 75-85% of the working male population was employed in the industry.[[20]](#footnote-21) These were single-industry, single-class societies, where cultures of solidarity and collective action emerged.

John Foster provides us with an understanding of the Yorkshire miner fighting in Spain. He was born and raised in South Kirby and Hemsworth, villages in the middle of the Yorkshire coalfield. As a young man, John fought in France with the Royal Artillery from 1917-1919. This explains why he would later serve with the Anglo-American John Brown Battery in Spain, from May 1937 to December 1938. He was born in 1899 and his parents and brothers were all involved in the Labour Party and trade union movement. John’s upbringing in a socialist family is an illuminating one. The pits in Hemsworth and South Kirby had, from 1906, a reputation for industrial militancy, and for being politically advanced, being an ILP hotspot.[[21]](#footnote-22) Miners in the area had faced a mass eviction in 1905 after protests at the Hemsworth-Fitzwilliam pit, with housing owned and controlled by the company that also owned the mine.[[22]](#footnote-23)

The evictions are an event still widely commemorated locally and would have marked John’s family- especially as his father and brothers were miners. John’s December 1938 Spanish repatriation file states that he had been a member of the MFGB since 1913.[[23]](#footnote-24) Later in his career, he moved to Hatfield and Harworth, collieries in the Doncaster area that also had militant traditions. John was certainly involved in regional activism and strikes prior to going to Spain. His own writing tells us that he had participated in the 1926 miners’ strike, an April 1934 hunger march to London, and the November 1936 Harworth miners’ strike.[[24]](#footnote-25)

Peter O’Day was another Yorkshire miner who left substantial records, allowing for analysis, and understanding of his experience. His survival at the battle of Jarama lead to his promotion as a sergeant and a trip to the officer school, where he was asked to write a two-page biography, leaving a detailed and rare source behind. This biography explains his political journey, one which shares many attributes with that of John Foster. Born in an unspecified Wakefield mining village in 1897, O’Day travelled out to Spain in December 1936 after a short period of time living in London.[[25]](#footnote-26) Growing up in a Catholic family, O’Day worked a variety of jobs throughout his life, although it is in the coal mine where he describes his politicisation. His father was already a trade unionist and told his son ‘a man without a trade is a slave in all ways’, attempting to have him train as a boilermaker before he later quit due to the conditions. On entering the pit, he met a member of the Industrial Workers of the World and subsequently joined his first trade union. This led to Labour Party membership, and in 1935, Communist Party membership.[[26]](#footnote-27)

The variety of jobs O’Day held in his ‘real workers life’, suggests he was blacklisted for his activism, and his own writing tells us he came into constant conflict with management.[[27]](#footnote-28) Like John Foster, O’Day has been raised in a family where there was a tradition of trade union membership and an awareness of a working-class political identity. Although Peter says his parents were not ‘class conscious’ due to their Catholic faith, there was still a clear recognition of injustice instilled in him, and it is obvious that Peter’s later engagement with IWW members in the coal mine furthered this. Studying the lives of these miners, we can see individuals who were often in close contact with trade unionists and Communist Party activists. As is the case of both John and Peter, they had grown up in trade union families and were already exposed to conflict in the pit and workplace. Their militancy had long roots in particular local circumstances.

Activists of various left-wing political persuasions frequently worked together on the ground in the region because they operated in tight-knit communities. These connections would contribute heavily to International Brigade recruitment after the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Joe Kenyon, an unemployed activist in the interwar period perhaps best explains how the movement operated in small Yorkshire communities. Joe was a miner in the village of Carleton, Barnsley. His political journey began in the early 1930s when he would travel to the village of Grimethorpe. There, his friend’s stepfather Ernie Spooner, an autodidact coal miner converted him to socialism and signed him up to the Left Book Club.[[28]](#footnote-29) By the mid-1930s Joe had joined the small branch of the NUWM in the nearby village of Royston, which was based on its unemployment office. His memoir recalls that although the branch only had seven local activists, they had almost every unemployed man signed up as a paying member of the NUWM. However, by 1938 with miners being awarded a week’s paid holiday there was only Joe and his friend Harry, a keen ILP member, left as activists.[[29]](#footnote-30) The success of a political activist was subject to the ups and downs of conditions, and only a committed few remained active consistently. An even smaller number of these would then go on to fight in Spain, while even some of the most politically educated and active, such as Joe, did not. It speaks to the struggle the Communist Party had in rooting itself in communities, a struggle which would then translate into a smaller number of volunteers.

The NUWM was a space where many of the unemployed became political and is a frequent feature in records of West Riding International Brigaders, which demonstrates its importance as a place for politicisation and Communist Party influence. It is through this organisation that many volunteers gained their first taste of politics, and how individuals who would later go to Spain, came to know each other. The photographs left behind by International Brigade volunteer Fred Spencer, who was killed at the Battle of Jarama, show striking NUWM connections across the region. These pictures, which are in family possession, connect to others held in local archives. Fred Spencer had been born and raised in the mining town of Featherstone at the turn of the twentieth century and served in the First World War on the Western Front and in the Middle East. Little is known about his life in the 1920s, except that he worked at Ackton Hall colliery, a pit with a militant tradition stretching back to the Army’s shooting of strikers in 1893.[[30]](#footnote-31) Herbert Smith, head of the YMA and MFGB, told *The Times* in July 1919 ‘We do not forget the shooting in Featherstone in 1893, nor the evictions at Wheldale and Fryston, at Castleford and Hemsworth’.[[31]](#footnote-32) It was an incident that stayed long in the memories of the local community. Arrested for agitating in the nearby pit village of Altofts during the 1926 general strike, Communist Party activist Isabel Brown told her solicitor ‘Remember Featherstone!’.[[32]](#footnote-33)

A group of men posing for a photo

Description automatically generatedFred’s photo shows him participating in a November 1936 NUWM hunger march to London. On the image can be seen at least two men who would be in Spain within weeks, Fred, and Arthur Newsome, a 24-year-old YCL activist from Sheffield who was later also killed. Both men were regional organisers of the march, a fact confirmed by a separate photograph in Sheffield picture archive.[[33]](#footnote-34) Fred is also present in a photograph with a Featherstone NUWM contingent, taken in the same location with many of the same individuals. Across these series of images, we can clearly see how future International Brigaders were embedded within their local communities and played important roles as organisers and activists. They not only speak to the ability the Communist Party had to organise in these localities through the NUWM, but also suggest that the International Brigaders were people of influence and significance in the local NUWM, and this set them apart from other members who did not go to Spain.

Figure 2: Featherstone hunger march, Fred Spencer bottom row second right.

This example in Featherstone is representative of what Stuart Macintyre calls ‘a relatively small number of committed militants who were able to reach out to the bulk of the working-class inhabitants at particular moments of crisis’.[[34]](#footnote-35) Although Featherstone would only provide one volunteer, it still stood apart from other towns nearby with similar socio-economic circumstances, such as Castleford, from where there are no known International Brigaders.

This appears to be because of specific local conditions unique to Featherstone and a radical tradition emanating from Ackton Hall colliery, which produced the circumstances under which a committed individual like Fred Spencer would then go to Spain. This analysis is supported by a 1937 report in the *Bradford Observer* which states that there were large numbers of strikers at Ackton Hall pit, due to a strong Communist presence and that strikers preferred the advice of the Communists to that of official union leaders.[[35]](#footnote-36) The circumstances of Fred Spencer, and his photographs, suggest we should consider Featherstone, although not previously termed this, an example of a ‘Little Moscow’. Given its radicalism and the clear influence the NUWM and Communist Party had, it appears it is such a phenomenon.

**A group of men posing for a photo

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Figure 3: Fred Spencer seated bottom row second right; Arthur Newsome central back row.

Tommy James, Rotherham Communist Party activist, NUWM organiser, and International Brigader, knew Fred Spencer and Doncaster volunteer Herbert Tagg. Tommy had also been involved in recruiting for the International Brigades, and in the weeks before a contingent was leaving for Spain, he would call at houses across Yorkshire to test political attitudes and gather details. Volunteers would then gather in Sheffield and embark together on the train to London.[[36]](#footnote-37) Both Herbert and Fred were of a very similar background to Tommy, First World War veterans and coalminers, and both members of the Communist Party. Doncaster miner Hector Barber knew George Allison, secretary of the Communist Party in Sheffield, and had participated in Left Book Club and Worker’s Educational Association classes.[[37]](#footnote-38) Leeds organiser Ernie Benson travelled to Wakefield in the spring of 1938 to interview ‘two lads who had recently joined the Party’ and wanted to join the International Brigade.[[38]](#footnote-39) These men were likely the Wakefield volunteers Sam Taylor and John Spencer, who arrived in Spain together in late April 1938.

Such connections show that volunteers in the West Riding already knew Communist or NUWM activists in either Leeds or Sheffield prior to going to Spain. They are a good illustration of how organisers moved across the region to recruit. Although there are a few anomalies, a study of surviving files from West Riding volunteers shows that they primarily knew Communist organisers in their locality before volunteering, despite age differences or working in different industries. As Fraser Raeburn has pointed out, success in building ‘communities of the faithful’ was only ever local and incomplete, but it was these spaces which saw the most effective recruitment for Spain.[[39]](#footnote-40) Such communities are certainly visible across the West Riding, and it is to the faithful that organisers in Sheffield and Leeds turned to when the International Brigades were formed.

Participating in NUWM marches required discipline, and there was a correlation between former First World War veterans, the NUWM, and service in Spain. John Foster is perhaps one of the best examples of these three interconnecting experiences due to his surviving files, but he is far from alone. Other aforementioned First World War veterans, such as Fred Spencer, Peter O’Day, and Herbert Tagg would also have been desired as volunteers with military experience were initially prioritised.[[40]](#footnote-41) The NUWM had roots in unemployed ex-servicemen’s associations and Yorkshire veterans were involved in the movement from its first march.[[41]](#footnote-42) Those too young to fight in the First World War still experienced the misery of interwar unemployment in Yorkshire and were politicised by it. International Brigader Clarence Wildsmith, a former foundry worker, and electrician who lived in Barnsley and Doncaster, was the organiser and secretary of the Doncaster NUWM branch.[[42]](#footnote-43) Sheffield’s Joe Albaya, who would also fight in Spain, kept a diary of his 1934 hunger march. He recalled being asked to carry the Yorkshire banner, although he refused as he considered the person asking him ‘a rat and a bible thumper’.[[43]](#footnote-44) It was on this march that Joe encountered local anti-fascists in Bedford, who told him of clashes with the blackshirts and about the burning of Luton town hall by ex-servicemen in 1919.[[44]](#footnote-45) The NUWM not only organised national marches but was also involved in setting up marches within the West Riding, with around 800 unemployed marching on the seat of the West Riding County Council at Wakefield, exacting a promise from the Council to look into their grievances.[[45]](#footnote-46) As Tom Buchanan has pointed out, for those involved in radical politics and anti-fascism before the Civil War, including the unemployed, joining the International Brigades was a logical, if more challenging and dangerous, continuation of their activism.[[46]](#footnote-47)

Communist organisation in a locality clearly affected volunteering, and in Yorkshire, this was very much a ‘patchwork quilt’. Even Ernie Benson acknowledges this, with the Party instructing members to form ‘cells’ in the workplace, a word he disliked, and a hard task with no training; though there were instances of limited organisational success such as Thorne colliery, Doncaster.[[47]](#footnote-48) Instances of success are reflected in the volunteering efforts for the International Brigade. Both John Foster, and a Durham migrant to South Yorkshire, Robert Brown, would leave Harworth colliery for Spain. These volunteers knew Jock and Mick Kane, Communists from an Irish-Scotch family that had migrated to Yorkshire due to blacklisting. The village Mick and Jock grew up in West Lothian was ‘ran’ by the Communist Party, and some of the family was also involved with the ILP.[[48]](#footnote-49) In the mid-1970s Jock Kane and his wife Betty would be recorded by BBC producer Charles Parker, with the interviews providing a vivid record of their activism. However, their links to International Brigaders have not become apparent until now.

By the early to mid-1930s, Jock and Mick Kane played important roles in the Yorkshire labour movement and proved influential in recruiting future International Brigade volunteers, into the Communist Party. The brothers injected a tradition of Scottish militancy into the region.[[49]](#footnote-50) Harworth even came to be called ‘Little Madrid’ in 1936/37, as parallels were made between the bitter dispute there and the war in Spain.[[50]](#footnote-51) Jock Kane frequently moved around pits in areas of modern South Yorkshire, before going to the Lenin School in Moscow and working full-time for the Communist Party in Sheffield.[[51]](#footnote-52) Mick Kane became an influential figure in the regional MFGB and a union leader in Harworth pit, the same mine where John Foster worked at. There, Mick lead a campaign against the breakaway Spencer union in north Nottinghamshire, eventually winning this struggle in 1937.[[52]](#footnote-53)

Fraser Raeburn has pointed out that his analysis of volunteering networks in Scotland suggested that similar clustering existed in other parts of the UK.[[53]](#footnote-54) These wider networks have been little investigated, yet we can begin to see a glimpse of them when we delve into the world of the West Riding volunteers. Such connections are inevitably the product of a pattern of migration between British coalfields. Welsh International Brigade volunteer Will Paynter was known to Robert Brown and Paynter was also married to the niece of Rachael Tagg, the wife of Doncaster miner and International Brigader Herbert Tagg.[[54]](#footnote-55) The letter to Spain written by Rachel Tagg reveals her husband knew International Brigaders from the Midlands area, including Eric Whalley from Mansfield, where Herbert Tagg had previously worked. Houghton Le-Spring, Robert Brown’s hometown, was the only place on the Durham coalfield to have a Communist councillor in 1936. [[55]](#footnote-56) There was certainly a class consciousness among migrant miners, Harworth migrants from Durham and Northumberland ‘would talk of the struggles’ in their native counties, and the part their forebearers played in building up the mining organisation.[[56]](#footnote-57)

As Hywel Francis has written, the first South Wales International Brigaders were unemployed mining migrants, and this explains why one of the earliest Welsh volunteers, Will Castell, was playing Rugby League for Batley at the time of going to Spain.[[57]](#footnote-58) The Yorkshire coalfield organiser of the Communist minority movement, writing in 1926, mentioned that the area had numerous ‘class conscious’ migrants from Durham and South Wales.[[58]](#footnote-59) The movement of activists from more militant areas to Yorkshire demonstrates how there were connections between pockets of radicalism across Britain, and how International Brigade recruitment slotted into this. That this coalfield migration was often spurred on by the practice of blacklisting, resulting from political activism, provides a good explanation for these connections.

Leeds, unlike other Yorkshire cities, had a large Jewish population, with the community based around the tailoring industry. By the late 1920s, 62% of men who married in Leeds synagogues were tailors or connected to the clothing industry.[[59]](#footnote-60) Both the Manchester and London Jewish communities produced large numbers of International Brigaders, and for the whole of the British contingent somewhere between 150-250 volunteers were Jewish.[[60]](#footnote-61) Although it is hard to ascertain exactly how many, due to the anglicisation of names, a substantial amount of the Leeds International Brigade contingent was from the city’s Jewish community. By 1936, Jews constituted up to half of the Leeds Communist Party.[[61]](#footnote-62) The same year saw the ‘Battle of Holbeck Moor’, with 30,000 Communist-led demonstrators opposing Oswald Mosley’s march in the city. With the outbreak of the war in Spain, the Jewish community raised funds for the International Brigade, with a mass collection at Burton’s hailed as ‘the most amazing thing ever seen in Leeds’.[[62]](#footnote-63)

Local experiences of antisemitism were a clear reason for Jews joining the Communist Party in Leeds. Writing in Spanish, David Buffman tells us that he joined the Communist Party in 1932 to fight against fascism. David had also been involved in anti-fascist activities in Sheffield, demonstrations which were planned by future Brigaders, such as Arthur Newsome.[[63]](#footnote-64) Other Leeds Jewish volunteers included Phil Elias, who anglicised his name to Ellis, a member of the Tailor and Garment Workers Union. Maurice Miller grew up in a socialist family from Leeds, showing the influence radical politics already had within the community well before the interwar period.[[64]](#footnote-65) Syd Harris was born in Leeds to a First World War veteran, and after his mother died in 1919, was sent to a Chicago orphanage, going on to fight with the American Lincoln Battalion.[[65]](#footnote-66)

What is visible in Leeds is the way in which members of the Jewish community held a sense of solidarity which was expressed far further than the city itself and was moulded by the severe antisemitism surrounding them. There was an existing community awareness of antisemitism in Europe. In 1919 Leeds Jews participated in a day of mourning in protest at pogroms then taking place in Poland.[[66]](#footnote-67) Leeds has been described as ‘an exceptional circumstance’ for Jewish immigrants in Britain because its inhabitants noted an especially sharp antisemitic feeling, which fostered a distinct shared experience.[[67]](#footnote-68) The Leeds Jewish International Brigaders were over-representative of the actual size of the Jewish population in Leeds (an inflated estimate put the community at 25,000 in 1922, 5.61% of the total).[[68]](#footnote-69) The Jewish Brigaders from Leeds are unique in that their lives are not only shaped by an awareness of antisemitism but that the community was already active in opposing pogroms and violence in Europe. For these men volunteering in Spain, expressing solidarity with the oppressed, was not as radical a leap as may appear on the surface.

The tailoring industry was a place where the Communist Party successfully recruited in Leeds. It helps to explain the reason behind the large Jewish Communist membership in the city, but also why many non-Jewish volunteers worked in the industry. Ernie Benson the Communist Party organiser for Leeds worked with a local member, Jim Roche, inside the Montague Burton factory, the biggest tailoring employer in Leeds, to produce a Communist newspaper, the ‘Burton’s Red Leader’. The Communist Party would go on to have success recruiting members within the factory through its campaign, and this success is reflected in the Leeds International Brigade volunteers who were not only involved in the tailoring industry but also worked at Montague Burtons. George Stockdale provides an example of this, having been a shop assistant in the factory, with previous experience during the General Strike, and disrupting fascist meetings.[[69]](#footnote-70) George knew Jim Roche, whose brother Clem was killed in Spain, and Communist organiser, Marion Jessop, who would marry Brigader Bert Ramelson.

Ernie Benson was personal friends with many of the International Brigade fighters from Leeds and in 1938 was made recruiting officer for Leeds and the surrounding region. This explains why a high proportion of the Leeds volunteers lived in the Hunslet district of the city, as Ernie was from the area. Other Leeds volunteers were personally known to Ernie Benson and are listed in his later memoir, including his brother Thomas, wounded in Spain, and school friend Walter Dobson.[[70]](#footnote-71) International Brigade recruitment in Leeds stemmed from the work of a small, but dedicated, core of organisers, and was mainly reliant on the success they had within in particular industries and among the networks of individuals, broadly of a similar age group and social background, that they mixed with. This explains both the grouping of individuals around certain industries, such as tailoring, and the personal connections between Ernie Benson, Marion Jessop, and the volunteers.

We can see similar recruitment methods in Sheffield, although its politics were more radical than those of Leeds. Sheffield was known within the Communist Party as ‘the place where local party members meant the AEU, and not the party itself when they referred to the ‘district committee’. The engineering industry in Sheffield was one of the ‘CPGB’s great areas of strength.[[71]](#footnote-72) As Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn argue the ‘obvious parallel’ to Sheffield is South Wales’.[[72]](#footnote-73) Communist Party headquarters in Sheffield even gained the nickname of ‘Smolny’.[[73]](#footnote-74) The 1934-1935 branch minutes of the Foundry Workers Union in Sheffield show the involvement of Arthur Newsome in a variety of political initiatives, such as opposing fascist meetings at the City Hall, and anti-war demonstrations.[[74]](#footnote-75) Newsome’s short life was immersed in a world of radical politics and militancy. Interviewed years later, his friend Bill Keen recalled that Arthur was a member of the Spartacus rambling society, had been involved in the Kinder mass trespass, attended the Lenin School in Moscow, and returned home to become the Secretary of the Sheffield YCL.[[75]](#footnote-76) Walter Ryder would also leave Sheffield, and was a member of the YCL executive in Sheffield for only three weeks, before going to Spain.[[76]](#footnote-77)

The process of getting recruits for Spain was not dissimilar to that in Leeds. Bas Barker was responsible for Sheffield’s recruitment to Spain. He was helped by Tommy Degnan after his return from the battlefield. Bas’s memoir recounts that he interviewed ‘young men who contacted us or who were sent to us…to see if they would play an active role in the International Brigade’ and that ‘the question of who should be allowed to go was not too difficult’.[[77]](#footnote-78) There was an active Communist and YCL presence in Sheffield and in surrounding towns such as Rotherham and Worksop, which provided a flow of volunteers. It is interesting that Basil is relatively vague on the actual recruitment process, and it seems likely that he had a hand in approaching recruits. Former International Brigaders also helped to rally for the cause, and Aid for Spain organiser Tom Crookers heard at least three International Brigaders speak at the Midland Hotel in Sheffield.[[78]](#footnote-79)

**Chapter 2: Divergent Experiences in Spain and the West Riding**

Recent scholarly work has documented Brigaders’ experience of Spain, such as Harry Owens exploration of Brigaders ‘Memories of defeat and exile’ and their interactions and perceptions while fighting.[[79]](#footnote-80) Fraser Raeburn has published work on British Brigaders’ experience of transnational encounters in Spain, and their participation in the British war effort between 1939-1945.[[80]](#footnote-81) There has also been much recent interest in the ‘transnational’ dimension of the fight against fascism between 1936 and 1945, particularly in Robert Gildea and Ismee Tames ‘Fighters across frontiers’. This chapter seeks to add a further local dimension to this transnational experience by exploring the volunteers’ participation in the Spanish Civil War, whilst also looking at its effect on Yorkshire and the involvement of women in fundraising, organising, and experiencing loss. As Valentine Cunningham has pointed out, the majority of the International Brigaders were not writers or intellectuals.[[81]](#footnote-82) In cases where working-class volunteers did write, their experiences have never been published or have remained obscure. For example, Joe Albaya sent home a series of postcards with reflections on Spain, but these have remained unstudied. He even tried his hand at war poetry-although he called his attempt ‘moronic’.[[82]](#footnote-83) Tommy James account of his time in Spain was stored in a friend’s loft until 1986. Such recollections are valuable and important. They offer a window into the connections between the local and Spain. As John Mehta has written, with such a large period now elapsed since the Civil War, personal memories of individual Brigaders have often disappeared.[[83]](#footnote-84) This adds an additional impetus to explore these personal experiences, and local connections to a wider global framework.

The experiences of West Riding volunteers were far from uniform. What is also often lost from the picture is how going to Spain affected family and friends back home. The adversity the wives and mothers faced have been particularly ignored. Relatives and friends were devastated by the loss of young and idealistic volunteers. Bill Keen, a Sheffield Communist, and rambler, was greatly affected by the death of Arthur Newsome, as was his family, whom Arthur had been living with prior to going to Spain. The Sheffield YCL organised a whist dance in commemoration, with a jazz band and drama group.[[84]](#footnote-85)

Upon arriving in Spain many of the region’s volunteers were shocked by cultural differences and the way the conflict was being fought. Writing home in a series of postcards, Joe Albaya commented ‘most of them who have been in the Great War admit that conditions out here are entirely different to those they saw. The warfare is more concentrated out here’.[[85]](#footnote-86) Joe would continue to send home the postcards to friends in Sheffield, who requested the vivid propaganda designs by Spanish artist ‘Bardasano’. Despite coming from a Basque family, Joe still found life in Spain hard to adapt to and jokingly told a friend ‘I’ve had the shits for the last day or two- and that’s probably because I’m drinking quite a lot- you’ve got to do something to combat the heat’.[[86]](#footnote-87) George Ives from Bradford was put off by the diet he was fed while in Francoist captivity, ‘Beans- I never want to see a bean again’.[[87]](#footnote-88) George Stockdale had a thick Yorkshire accent and tried to learn Spanish, but difficulties in understanding his accent left Spanish soldiers ‘with bemused smiles’.[[88]](#footnote-89)

Comparisons to the First World War were common, as were complaints about equipment. Bradford-born Cambridge graduate Bernard Knox said, ‘we came from countries which had been through the 1914-1918 war, and we had learned from what little our fathers would tell us…what modern war was like’.[[89]](#footnote-90) John McGee, another Bradford volunteer, told *The Yorkshire Observer* that ‘we were short of equipment. There was one rifle to three men and we had to wait for one until someone got knocked out’.[[90]](#footnote-91) Walter Ryder commented ‘They had 200 planes in the sky and we had one anti-aircraft gun, an old Bofors from the First World War.’.[[91]](#footnote-92) Such references to the First World War, and to the negative aspects are in line with David Heywood’s argument that British combatant writers in Spain were influenced by the writing of First World War combatants; and that it was largely the experience of war which created critical attitudes among British volunteers in Spain.[[92]](#footnote-93) As Heywood has pointed out individual negative and positive experiences impacted how people wrote about Spain. Despite John McGee’s mention of poor equipment and suffering a severe head injury, he asserted that he would return to fight given the opportunity. Bernard Knox had the advantage of an excellent education and continued his opposition to fascism by joining the US Army. Neither of these men appeared to express regret at fighting in Spain, although Knox did later become aware of Communist repression and purges, and ‘it took him a long time to accept the facts’.[[93]](#footnote-94) It should be taken into account however that context varied between accounts, with McGee writing immediately upon his return, while Knox did not write his experiences down until the late 1980s, as the Cold War came to a close.

Although West Riding volunteers did not serve in a regional contingent, they did travel to and from the battlefield together, a journey that offers a window into interactions between the men. Tommy James describes how he travelled from Sheffield in January 1937 ‘with four more Yorkshire comrades’, Jack Atkinson from Hull, a fellow Communist, and three trade unionists, including Arnold Hoare from Leeds.[[94]](#footnote-95) Returning in December 1938, volunteers arriving in Leeds were described as a ‘Yorkshire contingent’, and included Thomas Benson from Leeds, and the Wakefield volunteers Sam Taylor and John Spencer.[[95]](#footnote-96) Such regional identification is not surprising, neither is a close relationship between the volunteers. As Fraser Raeburn has noted of Scotland, among volunteers from there 85% lived nearby to at least five other volunteers.[[96]](#footnote-97) The five International Brigade volunteers from Doncaster certainly knew each other while serving in Spain. Ralph Nicholas and Hector Barber returned to the town with news of the three other volunteers, and Ralph Nicholas had unsuccessfully tried to recover Herbert Tagg’s body from the battlefield.[[97]](#footnote-98)

The journey to and from Spain offered an opportunity for men from different parts of the region to discuss international events. Although part Republican propaganda and part memoir, Tommy James provides an insight into how the Yorkshire volunteers perceived the conflict in Spain. He begins with a question by Arnold about whether most of the International Brigades members were communists, a point which Tommy explains is true, but ‘they are not in Spain to fight for communism or even socialism but the elementary rights of democracy’.[[98]](#footnote-99) Tommy was an ardent communist and anti-fascist, but his emphasis on a ‘popular front’ approach, suggests he was attempting to appeal to a range of people and to present Yorkshire volunteers as a politically broad group. Such an approach seems common amongst the region’s volunteers. Tommy Degnan travelled to Doncaster to speak to local Labour Party members and councillors.[[99]](#footnote-100) International Brigade veterans also visited Shipley, Bradford, speaking to church groups and the cooperative movement fundraising for Basque refugees.[[100]](#footnote-101)

The way in which women were impacted by Spain within these communities has been little researched. Through an analysis of this, we can begin to see the role women played in Communist Party communities in Yorkshire. Rachel Tagg, wife of Herbert Tagg, writing to an unspecified International Brigader she knew, provides a first-hand account of this. Rachel’s letter, written from her home in Intake, Doncaster, is on behalf of the wife of Ralph Nicholson, another Doncaster volunteer who had travelled to Spain with Herbert, but who had not been heard from for almost 3 months.[[101]](#footnote-102) The letter expresses the anxiety volunteering caused, ‘I went through the same for 4 months when I couldn’t get news of comrade Tagg…I might tell you comrade it is getting me down because I am always expecting him coming home and the children is asking for him’.[[102]](#footnote-103) Despite these struggles, Rachel remained politically committed, ‘I only wish my husband had lived to do a bit more out there. The only consolation I got is that he died happily fighting fascism and to save democracy’.[[103]](#footnote-104) The bottom of the letter is inscribed with ‘No Pasaran’, ‘Red Front’, and ‘Unity More and More Unity’. Rachel says that she and her children raised a ‘clenched fist’ in memory of Herbert and other volunteers he knew.

Rachel Tagg’s experience is emblematic of the difficulties that volunteers’ families faced in small communities, but it also shows the networks of support that existed. That Rachel is writing on behalf of the wife of another local volunteer suggests close connections and mutual help between these women. Angela Jackson has published detailed work on British women’s response to the Spanish Civil War and has highlighted that they have been long overlooked, with her book an attempt to contribute to remembrance of this engagement.[[104]](#footnote-105) Additionally, Tom Buchanan has discussed the differing responses of families to the war in Spain, and particularly how these reactions were portrayed in the *Daily Worker* compared to private correspondence.[[105]](#footnote-106) There has been little work done on the regional volunteers’ wives, and how death in Spain impacted them. In large part, this is a product of a lack of sources. Even in the case of high-profile women like nurse Nan Green, her memoirs were not published until many years after Spain. Rachel Tagg’s letters offer a rare insight because they show how Communist women in Yorkshire engaged with a wider understanding of the world, evident with her use of foreign communist phrases, and how they coped in the face of loss. The letters are just a small snapshot. In this tragic case, Herbert was killed in Spain, while Ralph survived and returned to Doncaster. As Rachel Tagg shows, death in Spain did not always correlate with a loss of faith in the cause but often reinforced political identities. However, even within such close communities, there was not always agreement on men joining the International Brigade. Thomas Benson, the brother of Ernie, was married with two children. His wife held a job in a Leeds fish and chip shop, and upon receiving notice to travel to London, Thomas visited his wife ‘I’ve just come to say cheerio, because I’ll be on my way to London and then to Spain’. His wife’s response was typically Yorkshire, ‘You’d better be at home and get the house tidied up, never mind your funny stories…There’ll be a flaming row if you’re not’.[[106]](#footnote-107) This did not dissuade him from going to Spain, where he would be wounded by a sniper.

Women in the region were directly involved in International Brigade recruitment and organisational activities to aid the Spanish Republic. This is because of their strong presence in local Communist leadership. By 1942 the CPGB’s West Yorkshire district had a woman district organiser and district membership organiser, a woman as its largest city organiser in Leeds, and as secretary of its engineering branch.[[107]](#footnote-108) Ernie Benson met his wife Louise after she visited Communist Party headquarters in Leeds during her fundraising efforts for Basque children. She was secretary of the Yorkshire Foodships for Spain Committee, which arranged the sending of five ships to Republican Spain.[[108]](#footnote-109) The Leeds’ International Brigade Dependents and Wounded Aid Committee was headed by May Airey, who helped to coordinate the news of volunteer’s deaths with families.[[109]](#footnote-110) Dora Pointer served as secretary to the Aid For Spain committee in Sheffield.[[110]](#footnote-111) Marion Jessop was a leading figure of the West Riding District Communist Party, having studied for two years at the Lenin School in Moscow.[[111]](#footnote-112) She was known to Leeds International Brigade volunteers such as George Stockdale and was responsible for much of the Party’s organisation in the city during the 1930s and 1940s.[[112]](#footnote-113) Bradford was a city in which the Communist Party had struggled to organise during the interwar years, however in Shipley Maggie Jordan became one of the West Riding’s best Communist orators and held Sunday classes on Marxism in the town’s Party room.[[113]](#footnote-114) This is a likely explanation for the recruitment of George Ives from Shipley, and other volunteers from the Bradford area.[[114]](#footnote-115)

Although for many volunteers, Spain would be their first experience abroad, this was not the case for every regional Brigader. There were already connections between the West Riding and wider political developments in interwar Europe that shaped the lives of International Brigaders. As Robert Gildea and Ismee Tames have shown individuals were more likely to engage in ‘transnational resistance’ if they were on the move before the Second World War; these individuals had been exposed to different cultures or national contexts and lived lives that spanned multiple borders.[[115]](#footnote-116) Gildea and Tames also make the important point that individuals were attracted by ideologies that were transnational and not national, particularly communism.[[116]](#footnote-117) While the West Riding volunteers differ from members of Second World War resistance groups, they share similarities in that the majority had deeply held communist and anti-fascist beliefs. Nurse Nan Green worked in Spain alongside Frank Ayres, a Doncaster railwayman who had worked politically in several countries, including visiting the Soviet Union as a representative for Doncaster Trades Council in 1925.[[117]](#footnote-118) Joe Albaya was born in Sheffield to Basque parents, and his language skills meant he served as a translator in the International Brigades.[[118]](#footnote-119) Ronald Liversedge from Bradford was working in the Canadian mining industry prior to going to Spain and had served in the First World War in France. He was present on the SS Ciudad de Barcelona as it sank and mixed with a variety of European migrants in Canada, many of whom he helped recruit to the International Brigades.[[119]](#footnote-120) Communist organisers, including those who recruited for the International Brigades, had experiences in interwar Europe. Tommy James travelled to the Soviet Union to study at the Lenin school in 1934, passing through Germany where he exchanged clenched fists from his train window with workers in a shunting yard.[[120]](#footnote-121) Bas Barker, spent 1935-1937 at the Lenin school, where he heard speeches from Palmiro Togliatti, Maurice Thorez, and Chou En-lai.[[121]](#footnote-122) Both Tommy Degnan and Arthur Newsome visited the Soviet Union, while Leeds organiser Marion Jessop also spent time studying at the Lenin school. In 1930 foreign ‘shock brigades’ were sent to the Bradford area by the Comintern to help with the Communist Party’s campaign regarding the textile lockout.[[122]](#footnote-123) Other volunteers had seen active service abroad or travelled with work. Wakefield’s Peter O’Day had spent time on merchant ships where he may have already visited Spain and served in the First World War.[[123]](#footnote-124) Featherstone International Brigader Fred Spencer had travelled in the Middle East and France with the British Army, A person in uniform standing next to a hat

Description automatically generated with medium confidencephotographs of which his family hold.

Figure 4: Fred Spencer in the Middle East, 1915/16.

There was an international outlook that shaped the views and opinions of those involved in the Communist Party and other left-wing organisations in the West Riding. Sheffield was a focus of this, with the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council adopting Lenin’s resolution on the working class and war, from the 1907 Stuttgart Congress of the Second International, as early as 1912.[[124]](#footnote-125) The STLC had also created a Council of Action to oppose intervention in the Russian Civil War.[[125]](#footnote-126) Isabel Brown moved between the West Riding and Europe throughout the 1920s and 1930s, living in the Soviet Union between 1922-1926, and again in 1930, where she worked in the Soviet Ministry of Education. Between 1931 and 1933 she frequently visited Germany, being put on a committee that tried to link together the work of European communist parties and speaking at the Berlin Sports Palast for the KPD during the 1933 election.[[126]](#footnote-127) Isabel’s husband Ernie Brown was West Riding regional organiser in 1929, where a young Ernie Benson first met him.[[127]](#footnote-128) Refugees from Germany also arrived in Leeds, helped by relief committees from the Jewish community and groups such as the Quakers, with 700 European Jews assisted by 1939.[[128]](#footnote-129) Across Yorkshire 10 ‘colonies’ were set up for Basque refugees from the Spanish Civil War, with six of these in the West Riding.[[129]](#footnote-130) While the volunteers were the product of local circumstances, it should not be forgotten that the world they lived in was not an isolated one. Organisers for the Communist Party in Sheffield and Leeds had an experience of visiting the Soviet Union and were aware of conditions arising in Germany throughout the 1930s. Walter Ryder, a Sheffield volunteer echoed this, ‘we were all anti-Nazi because we could see what was happening in Germany’.[[130]](#footnote-131) Volunteers had an international understanding which informed their lives and was the product of local involvement in ‘transnational’ organisations, such as the Communist Party, as well as an awareness of international fascism.

**Chapter 3: Afterlives and Memories**

Crucial to this chapter is the question of why the region’s International Brigade volunteers have been forgotten. As has been discussed the West Riding is an area with a strong labour movement tradition, but unlike in South Wales, the story of the International Brigades is little known. This is a history not only of motivations and experience but of memory. In researching the region’s International Brigades, it is striking how little-known the stories of these individuals are. There are memorials in the region, notably in Leeds and Sheffield, Halifax, and Rotherham. However, these were the product of a specific period of interest in the 1980s, which has largely receded. The Rotherham memorial was erected in 1985, the Sheffield memorial in 1986, and the Leeds memorial in 1989.[[131]](#footnote-132) The memorials do not always contain a complete list of volunteers, although there was an attempt in 2020 to update the Leeds memorial to reflect volunteers who come to light since 1989.[[132]](#footnote-133) More details have emerged through collaboration with the family of Leeds volunteer David Buffman, and Featherstone’s Fred Spencer. This has provided an opportunity to understand the impact of the Spanish Civil War from a personal perspective. Photographs, family records, and conversations with relatives have all helped to illuminate the lives of two extraordinary men, while for both families their relative’s death in Spain continues to hold deep meaning.

Two International Brigade veterans would have an impact on Yorkshire’s industrial politics into the late 20th century. Beginning in the 1950s Tommy Degnan and Bert Ramelson held influence within the Yorkshire area of the NUM, and both men acted as mentors to a young Arthur Scargill. Given this connection, wider questions are raised about why the legacy of the International Brigades is not wider known and was not recognised within the union. In discussing the legacy of the Yorkshire miners who fought in Spain it is also important to think about the effect that deindustrialisation has had on history and memory within the West Riding. Volunteers emerged from such specific local places and conditions that when these institutions were closed so with it went a history tied to that place.

Work on British veterans following the end of the Civil War has largely focused on volunteers’ involvement in the Second World War effort or institutions such as the International Brigade Association. Tom Buchanan has traced the success and failures of the IBA up until the mid-1970s and documented how their involvement in politics often did more to hinder than help its campaigns.[[133]](#footnote-134) IBA membership in the West Riding appears to have been low based on subscriptions to the association’s newspaper *Spain Today* with only 15 subscribers in Sheffield, and 6 in Leeds by 1947.[[134]](#footnote-135) Although engagement with the IBA was minor, letters between Doncaster’s Thomas Nottingham and the IBA in London provide insight both into volunteers that were active in veterans’ groups and into the existence of one highly limited form of International Brigade commemoration which lasted into at least the early 1950s.

Tom Nottingham’s letters, written in 1950, state that he had recently returned to his hometown of Doncaster and had been reemployed in mining since 1948. In his own words he ‘had been pretty active in the NUM of late and had quite a share of the blacklist. I am now employed at Rossington Main- my fourth pit in just over 12 months.[[135]](#footnote-136) Nan Green had written to Tom on behalf of the IBA informing him of the memorial service due to be held in Halifax in honour of Ralph Fox. In Tom’s reply, he said that he had not heard of the service but that he wanted to attend, and that he wanted to call a meeting of Yorkshire IBA members so a committee could be formed.[[136]](#footnote-137) In 1949 Bert Ramelson, Canadian International Brigade veteran and now a Communist Party organiser in Leeds wrote to Nan Green about the Halifax memorial and expressed an interest in getting Yorkshire veterans involved, later writing to Tommy Degnan to see if he would join a committee for the memorial.[[137]](#footnote-138) For the few regional volunteers involved with the IBA it was clearly a point of pride and an opportunity for veterans to reunite. Tom Nottingham’s desire to form a committee with Yorkshire veterans and IBA members is interesting when juxtaposed with his continued political activism and the blacklisting he faced. It is clear Spain still played an important role in his identity as he wanted to renew a subscription to the Spanish Communist Party Paper ‘*Mundo Obrero’*. His identity appears to be strongly linked to his activities as a political activist on the coalfield and as a former International Brigader. His continued subscription to a communist paper and blacklisting suggests he was politically militant, as were other IBA members Bert Ramelson and Tommy Degnan. Regional membership of the IBA seems to have been restricted to the most politically active Communist Party veterans in the immediate post-Spain years. Concerns about Communist Party involvement in the Halifax memorial would also appear to reflect this, with Ralph Fox’s parents refusing to associate themselves with the memorial due to ‘political differences’.[[138]](#footnote-139)

The Yorkshire NUM was known as a ‘longstanding bastion of right-wing dominance’ and was the largest NUM area in membership terms.[[139]](#footnote-140) By the early 1950s two International Brigade veterans, Bert Ramelson and Tommy Degnan, alongside Communist organiser Jock Kane, began work to move the area to the left. After working at the National Coal Board in Doncaster during the late 1940s, Jock Kane would become the first Communist elected to a full-time position in the Yorkshire area NUM.[[140]](#footnote-141) Tommy Degnan who was elected Barnsley NUM branch secretary in 1945, worked to help Bert Ramelson, and together with Kane, they worked within the regional union, eventually succeeding in moving the Yorkshire area to the left. The ‘fruits of this work’ were manifested in the early 1970s when Arthur Scargill was elected Yorkshire Area Secretary.[[141]](#footnote-142) Jock Kane, a man who was involved in International Brigade recruitment in the 1930s, played a major role in developing the technique of ‘flying pickets’ that would be used by Yorkshire miners in the 1970s and 1980s.[[142]](#footnote-143) Even in retirement, Bert Ramelson continued to be consulted by Scargill during the 1984-85 miner’s strike, and in 1988 Scargill presented him with a miner’s lamp and said Ramelson was ‘a constant inspiration, guide and comrade’[[143]](#footnote-144) Photographs of this event show Ramelson holding the lamp accompanied by Scargill and former British Battalion commander Bill Alexander.[[144]](#footnote-145) As the *Sheffield Telegraph* wrote in 1979, after Tommy Degnan’s death ‘Last night, one of his closest friends, the Yorkshire NUM President Arthur Scargill, in a tribute to Mr Degnan said: ‘He devoted his life, nationally and internationally, towards helping the working class people. He was an inspiration to every socialist and trade unionist’.[[145]](#footnote-146) Given that two International Brigade veterans played such a prominent role in the history of the Yorkshire area NUM from the 1950s onwards, and pioneered the drive to the left which enabled the emergence of Arthur Scargill as its leader, questions are raised about why there was not a more prominent memory of Yorkshire miners in Spain, especially in a period of increased political militancy and unemployment.

Inquiries with the NUM archives revealed they had no information on the connection between Yorkshire miners and Spain. This is far from the case in South Wales, where there continues to be an active memory of the International Brigades. Hywel Francis provides an example of this when he details how miners on the picket line during the 1984-1985 strike were reading about the International Brigade volunteers from their own communities.[[146]](#footnote-147) Tom Buchanan wrote to the Derbyshire Area NUM in 1986, where the reply he received from the union stated ‘As a matter of interest I believe the main involvement in relation to the miners’ union and the Spanish Civil War was concentrated in South Wales’.[[147]](#footnote-148) The Labour Party held sway over the working-class vote on the Yorkshire coalfield, and until the 1970s the NUM in Yorkshire maintained a separation between the ‘industrial’ and ‘political’ wings of the labour movement.[[148]](#footnote-149) The more left-wing identity, as South Wales held from the turn of the 20th century, never really emerged in the West Riding until the 1970s. Even when the left gained power within the Yorkshire NUM their control was brief, and the defeat of the 1984-85 miner’s strike led to the beginning of large-scale pit closures which eroded the strength of the Yorkshire Area NUM. The relatively late, and short, left-wing leadership of the NUM in Yorkshire may explain why there was never a ‘popular memory’ cultivated of the Yorkshire miners who went to Spain. The reply to Tom Buchanan’s letter also seems to suggest that even though there was a history of International Brigade volunteering from the Yorkshire coalfield, and militant pits and villages in the region, perhaps the focus on South Wales and its high number of volunteers had obscured research and interest into other coalfields. The union officials who replied to him were only aware of the Spanish Civil War in relation to South Wales, despite there being a history of volunteers from the Derbyshire coalfield too. In recent years this gap has begun to be rectified by the work of Fraser Raeburn and Lewis Mates into the International Brigade volunteers from the Scottish and Durham coalfields.

Although at the political level, there are reasons which explain the lack of a ‘popular memory’ surrounding the International Brigades in the West Riding of Yorkshire, there are still questions to be asked about grassroots memorialisation. Hywel Francis describes how Spain has ‘special legacy’ for subsequent generations of political activists in South Wales. He singles out the case of Tower Colliery, the last deep mine in Wales, which ‘continues (in 2004) to take such a pride in Tom Howell Jones, its lodge chairman, who was killed on the Ebro in 1938’.[[149]](#footnote-150) In the case of Tower Colliery, Francis alludes to a connection between the activism of those who fought in the International Brigade, and the process of deindustrialisation, with Tower Colliery a remaining bastion of coal mining and also of a regional memory and history intrinsically tied to the industry. The local branch of the YMA at Wharncliffe Woodhouse colliery near Barnsley, sent Tommy Degnan a letter in 1937 as he lay recuperating, thanking him for his bravery and service. [[150]](#footnote-151)Ackton Hall Colliery, where Featherstone volunteer Fred Spencer had worked, held a long tradition of activism and was one of the first pits to close following the 1984-1985 miner’s strike.[[151]](#footnote-152) The shooting that occurred there in 1893 was long remembered and stories concerning the shooting were still recalled in some mining communities over half a century later.[[152]](#footnote-153) Lee Waddington has noted the strong memorial culture on the Yorkshire coalfield with ex-miners holding on to physical mementos while one individual he encountered even created a coalmining shrine in his home.[[153]](#footnote-154)

Discussions with the families of two regional volunteers raise the issue of memorialisation and how this history can be taught and understood in the communities from which volunteers left. Within her study of schools in a post-industrial Yorkshire community Kat Simpson has discussed the idea that the closure of coal mines and the demise of associated spaces, such as working men’s clubs and local businesses, haunts the present, although she argues that these ‘ghosts’ of the past are not always negative and that through more particularised education children can locate ‘histories, identities…and their futures within what is being taught’.[[154]](#footnote-155)

My own interest in the International Brigades, Spain, and social history, was spurred on by coming across brief details of the life of Fred Spencer while finishing high school in the former pit village of Featherstone. In the summer of 2022, more research led to meeting Fred’s great-granddaughter Rachael whose family holds photographs and a variety of other items relating to the life of Fred and his wife Mary. This collaboration was expanded in early 2023 after correspondence with Yvonne and Audrey, sisters of Leeds volunteer David Buffman, who also hold detailed family records. These conversations have helped to shed light on the legacy of Spain for individual families and help to answer questions about why the stories of both men are not better known in Leeds and Featherstone, and how this may change in the future.

David Buffman was born into a large Jewish family in Leeds in 1915, his father Solomon grew up in London raised by parents from Vilnius in what is now Lithuania. Solomon served in the First World War and had two sisters who moved to New York in the 1910s. David’s mother Hilda Adelman was from Leeds and married Solomon in 1910. The marriage produced six children, although only four survived, and Hilda herself passed away in 1924. Solomon would remarry in 1941, and had two more daughters, Yvonne, and Audrey, before his death in early 1945, having served as an ARP warden during the Second World War.[[155]](#footnote-156) Audrey and Yvonne were raised by family in Peterborough and London, and their own journey to discover more about their brother and his time in Spain has taken years. Like many working-class Jewish families in Leeds hardship and poverty affected the family. David’s own writing shows that he was living with a foster mother in the Crossgates area of the city, in a house that bears no memorial to the journey the 22-year-old anti-fascist took 80 years prior.[[156]](#footnote-157) The story of how David’s father and siblings found out about his death in Spain is one which has been passed on through the family and was told to Yvonne by her elder half-sister Rosa, who was at Leeds Station in December 1938 anticipating her brother’s return from Spain. ‘They stood on the platform while man after man exited the train, finally a young man came up to them and told them David had been killed next to him at the battle of the Ebro. They stood at the platform for what seemed ages as they did not know what to do’.[[157]](#footnote-158) David’s death at the Ebro came very late in the battle, late enough that his repatriation had been anticipated and he had already filled in his form. Alongside this, a large contingent of Yorkshire volunteers, chiefly from Leeds, Wakefield, and Huddersfield, arrived home together at Leeds station in December 1938. Both these facts add additional context to the story of how the family found out the news of his death.

Although the story of David’s death in Spain had been recounted to both sisters, Yvonne noted ‘we never knew any details about David really until I started delving and finding out about the International Brigade…about 8 years ago’. The search for information was hard prior to the expansion of the internet and digital resources. Both sisters contacted the IBMT, who provided a photograph which was the first time the sisters had seen an image of their brother. Broaching the topic of why David may have been motivated to go to Spain, and his involvement in the YCL, Yvonne said ‘I’m not surprised. I think our father was very much an idealistic person’. Both sisters believed that their brother’s politics were influenced by their father, and the circumstances and community David grew up in. Discussing Solomon, Audrey, and Yvonne mentioned that he was a communist and ‘had a map on the wall.… Every time the Russians moved forward, he moved the pin on the map’. Although unclear if this was during the Russian Revolution or Second World War, they did know that Solomon had spent time in Russia with the British Army during his First World War service.

A picture containing human face, clothing, person, glasses

Description automatically generated

Figure 5: David Buffman in Spain, 1938, RGASPI 545/6/112.

Fred Spencer’s early life was based around one street. Both Fred and his wife Mary were born and raised in Carlton Street, Featherstone, and would go on to live in a house together there before Mary passed away in 1920 after the birth of their daughter. The couple’s grandchildren and great-grandchildren are still piecing together what happened to Fred and his daughter in the years between 1920 and his leaving for Spain in January 1937. It is believed that Fred’s daughter was raised by extended family in Sheffield and that Fred lived in London for at least a brief period. Father and daughter remained in contact and met in London, perhaps after the 1936 hunger march. The family had searched for details of Fred’s life and service in Spain and contacted the former Sheffield Communist organiser and historian Bill Moore to find out information. He said, ‘We would not have dealt with Fred Spencer at the Sheffield office’ due to the Sheffield district only having control south of a line that ran Barnsley-Doncaster-Hull. Moore told the family that Fred would have joined the International Brigade through Leeds not Sheffield because of this.[[158]](#footnote-159) Family photographs suggest this was not the case, as Fred is pictured with Sheffield Communists, although they believe that Fred went to Spain from London, perhaps staying in the city after the November 1936 hunger march.[[159]](#footnote-160)

Fred Spencer’s wider family have been dogged in their efforts to find out more information about his life and have an active interest in social history and heritage. The letter to Bill Moore was just one early attempt, and in recent years Rachael’s father and brother both visited the battlefield at Jarama, including the location it is believed his body lies. Rachael’s own work and prior university study have aided the family’s research. Although there are fewer written records on Fred Spencer’s life, the images left behind by him and Mary, as well as trench art he had made for his parents during the First World War, provide snapshots and a window into his short life. The images themselves have been held for decades, ‘My grandma had them, so they were definitely given, or passed, to her’. The family believes these are particularly resonant ‘I think the photographs are important, it’s the piecing together the facts and the photographs’, but as Rachael discussed ‘you can’t make assumptions about photographs’. [[160]](#footnote-161) While the images themselves show International Brigade connections across the region, and evidence Fred’s political beliefs, with men wearing Communist Party armbands, they offer just a snapshot and have provided an impetus to investigate the context and provenance further.

A person in a suit

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Discussing the topic of Fred’s political involvement Rachael mentioned that the family is very proud of his decision to fight with the International Brigades. There were initial beliefs that what had motivated individuals to Spain was to serve as mercenaries, although learning about Fred’s involvement in the NUWM and Communist Party has disproved any notion of this. For Rachael ‘He stood for something, and he stood up for it when others hadn’t. It’s one thing standing up for something when things are officially sanctioned, but it’s another when they are not- and they were right’.[[161]](#footnote-162) Both families would play a role in the wider war against fascism which emerged with the start of the Second World War. David Buffman’s brother Reuben, and sister Rosa, would both serve with the British Army, while Fred Spencer’s daughter married a senior British Army officer.

Figure 6: Portrait of Fred Spencer.

A picture containing human face, person, clothing, art

Description automatically generated

Figure 7: Buffman family photographs, Reuben Buffman in British Army uniform during the Second World War.

For both the Buffman and Spencer families, the Spanish Civil War still reverberates, and there is a concern and frustration with the lack of recognition and memorialisation of the volunteers in Leeds and Featherstone. For Yvonne and Audrey learning more about their brother has been intensely personal, ‘I feel in my bones that David has come back to us’. The sisters picked up on the lack of commemoration within Leeds, ‘I don’t think Leeds has acknowledged them enough’, family and friends had struggled to gain access to view the memorial due to its location and the availability of a guide, and on Audrey’s own visit she was told there was no one available to show her the memorial.[[162]](#footnote-163) The sisters have worked with the IBMT, as well as ALBA in the USA, and sent a DNA sample to Spain with the Catalan government’s recent ‘Alvah Bessie’ program providing hope that David’s remains may be finally identified.

Gaining a memorial and promoting greater awareness of Fred’s story was deeply meaningful for Rachael. The family are active in pushing for the creation of a monument ‘In terms of a memorial, for me it’s essential…for my dad, my dad needs to see that’. Discussion of the reasons why there was not already a Featherstone memorial led to a reflection on the possible reasons his story has gone overlooked. In Rotherham and Sheffield, both of their International Brigade memorials were products of the 1980s, when the region was colloquially referred to as ‘the People’s Republic of South Yorkshire’.[[163]](#footnote-164) Featherstone’s geographical location away from the militancy of Sheffield and its surrounding environment, although still a town with strong Labour politics was suggested as one possible reason for a lack of commemoration.[[164]](#footnote-165) In the case of the Buffman and Spencer families, the opening up of the internet and access to additional information through the IBMT has played a large role in them being able to learn more about their relatives. For the Buffman family, the digitisation of the International Brigade records held in Russia has meant that they were able to see a picture of their brother for the first time, one which had previously been hidden from public view for decades.

A physical memorial is important not only as a reminder of the presence of the volunteers, but also that they act as a place of learning and challenge people to investigate the history which is present within their communities. As Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell have noted ‘there are progressive forms and uses of nostalgia that frame the way industrial heritage is remembered by those people, their families and the communities who worked in and around such sites…the process of remembering contains not simply an understanding that the past was not perfect, but rather an explicit understanding that it was hard, difficult and inequitable.’[[165]](#footnote-166) There is a poignancy in the foreword to a recent book written by the families of three Scottish International Brigaders who had served together in Spain. ‘Not so many streets from mine is one such square plaque. J Russel it reads and it belonged to an International Brigader…My possession of a list that contained the addresses of Scots at the time they volunteered to join the war in Spain domesticated them. They were still heroes brimming with courage alien to our times, and yet now I could picture them whistling ‘The Internationale’ while walking to the grocer’s shop’.[[166]](#footnote-167)

For the family members of volunteers, especially those killed in Spain, a memorial is a testament to the sacrifice and principles that they stood for and provides dignity in the absence of a marked grave. In places such as Featherstone and Leeds, the absence of memorials and neglect of this history is symptomatic of a wider struggle to adequately commemorate social history and heritage in the wake of deindustrialisation. Fred Spencer’s life was intrinsically linked to Featherstone’s past, one street, one coal mine. Yet that street bears no sign of his journey to Spain. David Buffman’s former home in Crossgates has no blue plaque, while other symbols of Leeds’ past, such as the Jewish trade union building, lay in disrepair.

**Conclusion**

Volunteers from the West Riding of Yorkshire were a diverse group of individuals, and the roots of their decision to go to Spain lay in highly localised and personal experiences of political action, whether through the workplace, family, or groups such as the unemployed movement. There were prior connections between individuals who would go to Spain fostered by involvement in actions such as the 1936 strike at Harworth pit, or through Communist organisers, such as Ernie Benson. The research for this dissertation suggests that there were more volunteers from the region than previously thought, and it is hoped that with continued research more will come to the surface. By studying the West Riding of Yorkshire, the impact of coalfield migration between regions such as South Wales, Scotland, and Durham has also become apparent. This suggests that blacklisting and migration led to networks of Communist militants who operated across the United Kingdom and in some cases would fight in Spain. The high number of women involved within the West Riding district of the Communist Party, and in the Sheffield district, has allowed for an insight into the role they played in recruitment and organising, one which is often overlooked in discussions of the International Brigade.

Analysis and investigation into the experiences of Yorkshire International Brigade volunteers in Spain, as well as that of women show how these local worlds slotted into a larger European framework of anti-fascism and transnational politics. Although the product of very local circumstances, volunteers’ lives were not lived in isolation, and international travel and connections existed prior to the Civil War in Spain. The use of sources such as postcards and photographs provide a voice to working-class volunteers whose own writing and experience have often been neglected in the numerous memoirs by British International Brigaders, a majority of which were written by more formally educated middle-class volunteers.

The legacy of the International Brigades is complex, and it is impossible to account for the impact the war had on every single individual. What is demonstrated here is the wide range of ways in which the Spanish Civil War left a mark on volunteers’ lives, and the way some of these experiences intersected with Yorkshire’s industrial politics well into the 20th century. For most volunteers, their stories remained personal and were little spoken of until years later. In the case of the family of both David Buffman and Fred Spencer, their deaths in Spain would shape the lives of their families. Through the hard work of both David and Fred’s relatives their stories are finally being shared after decades, and because of the collaboration for this project it is hoped their stories will gain the public awareness they deserve. These stories are important pieces of social history, and it is hoped that by telling them others will take interest in the heritage that surrounds them, and the legacy of two remarkable men.

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