
Class, Ethnicity and Gender Intertwined: Jewish women and the East London Rent Strikes, 1935-1940

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ABSTRACT Feminist theorists have long debated whether gender or class position is of primary importance in shaping women's political consciousness; the consequences of ethnic or religious distinctions have not been examined as fully. This article hopes to rectify some of these oversights by focusing on the experiences of working-class, east London Jewish women involved in the pre-war rent strikes organized by the Communist-led Stepney Tenants' Defence League. It attempts to explain why so many of them became left-wing militants while their female Irish neighbors, equally marginalized, often gravitated towards the radical right. It concludes that in these close-knit communities ethnic identity proved more politically salient than did class or gender.

Debates regarding the primacy of gender or class in the oppression of women have received an inordinate amount of attention from feminist theorists, but the political consequences of cultural, ethnic or religious distinctions among women have not been examined to nearly the same degree. In the USA, such discussions as do occur revolve primarily around women in 'minority' groups, usually defined by race and colour[1], while in Britain, "the exploration of ethnicity ... is rarely encountered", according to historian Lara Marks.[2] Nira Yuval-Davis, a Jewish feminist, has also complained that "an exclusive focus on 'racism' fails to address the diversity of ethnic experiences" within British society and "leaves non-British non-Black women" unaccounted for politically.[3] Yet both gender and class are often subsumed as social constructs by an overarching ethnicity, especially in situations of group conflict; ethnic stereotyping has often been more damaging to women than gender-based prejudice and has historically been a primary ideological justification for social inequality. As Susan A. Glenn has argued, women's experiences have been mediated not only by sex

HENRY SREBRNIK

and class but also by their ethnic group culture.[4] Women, like men, are multidimensional; identities are constructs, and the relational aspects of race, class and gender within each person will differ in space and time, depending on the situation.[5]

On the other hand, within the framework of ethnic history, gender is often given short shrift. Though they have played a central role in the economy, workplace and political arena, “historically Jewish women have either been taken for granted or regarded as insignificant to the history of the Jewish community in Britain”, their experiences and activities marginalized by historians.[6] “The history of the Jewish immigrant has to a large extent been that of the Jewish male.”[7]

This article hopes to rectify some of these oversights. It will focus on the experiences of working-class, Jewish women in Stepney, a poor borough of London, and describe their politicization during the rent strikes that occurred there in the 1930s and 1940s, a period of economic depression and social strife. It will attempt to explain why many of them became vocal left-wing opponents of the political system – even as their female Irish neighbours, equally marginalized and economically oppressed, often gravitated towards the radical right, thus allowing those with political ambitions to play one group off against the other.

Ronald Lawson & Stephen E. Barton, in their study of tenant activism in New York City during the twentieth century, discovered that although women made up the bulk of participants and organizers, because of their intimate network of social ties and regular communications within tenements, men tended to assume the political leadership in tenants’ organizations once they became more institutionalized. Women were able quickly to mobilize support in a crisis due to their already-existent group solidarity, but men had more political experience (usually in established left-wing parties) and greater access to bureaucrats in government.[8] As Sylvia Walby has explained, “Women, who are subordinated within the productive process, have little access to forms of political representation”.[9] Guida West & Rhoda Lois Blumberg, among others, have referred to this phenomenon as the “iron law of patriarchy”. [10] The experiences of those women involved in the east London rent strikes will, I think, confirm that, despite their successes as political organizers and activists, the “iron law of patriarchy” also resulted in the leadership of the tenants’ movement and other Communist organizations in Stepney remaining largely male.

Jewish women, particularly immigrants, were especially willing to band together in order to champion their rights. Victims not only of sexism, but also of anti-Semitism, nativism and cultural bigotry, they lived in slums and worked mostly in the dangerous and dirty sweatshops then prevalent in the garment industry, suffering from the effects of cultural dislocation, material poverty, sexual harassment and even physical danger. They formed a transitional generation, moving between the cultures of their old and new

worlds. As Gerald Sorin has noted, the radical consciousness of many Jewish women grew out of the same sources as that of Jewish men: “proletarianization and the secularization of the Jewish religious values in which they were steeped”.^[11] These women emerged from a culture “with a well-developed ethic of social justice” that encouraged militancy in both sexes ^[12], and as such often played an important role in the social and political life of their communities; their Jewish neighbours could relate to their class consciousness.^[13] Still, it was, according to Paula Hyman, “the combination of cultural values and gender which produced those characteristics which distinguished Jewish women both from immigrant Jewish men and from immigrant women of other ethnic origins”.^[14] Socialism was for them more than an economic or sociological doctrine; steeped in the Jewish ethical tradition, these women perceived socialism as a system dedicated to building a totally new society, one which would transcend the limitations imposed on them in the capitalist system by gender, ethnicity, and religion, as well as rigid class barriers.

Jews in east London were active in the Communist Party in higher numbers, relative to their overall distribution in Britain’s population, than were Britons in general ^[15], and this was true for women as well as men.^[16] “In the alternative world of radical Jewish politics, and particularly in the Communist Party, young Jewish women played an important role”.^[17] In Stepney, women trades unionists such as Sarah Wesker combined Communist politics with the tradition of *‘Yiddishkeit’* that the immigrants brought with them from eastern Europe. Wesker was an organizer for, first, the Communist-led United Clothing Workers’ Union, and later for the United Ladies Tailors’ Trade Union (ULTTU). She, too, was involved in major strikes against garment shops, as well as other political activities.^[18]

Most Jewish immigrant women, whether married wives or grown daughters, were an essential component of the family economic unit, their contribution to the family’s income vital for its survival.^[19] Nonetheless, the home, more than the workplace, was seen as a woman’s primary sphere; in traditional Jewish society, women played an important role in maintaining the religious sanctity of private family life and had no accepted public role. Even in households where religion had become irrelevant, these paradigms remained in place: women, whether employed outside the home or not, were still largely responsible, as housewives, for domestic labor and were assumed to be more concerned with household matters than were the male members of the family. Since “the sexism of the larger society reproduces itself within social movements whose aim has been to liberate people from societal oppression”^[20] this traditional division of labour by sex within the social structure extended even into the politics of the Jewish left.

Hence, in London, one area where Jewish women were particularly prominent was the rent strikes which in the late 1930s swept the city’s East

HENRY SREBRNIK

End, especially the borough of Stepney, home of the bulk of London's working-class Jewish community. Organized by the Communist-front Stepney Tenants' Defence League (STDL), this was a gender-integrated, mass movement of social protest, but these strikes nonetheless exemplified the organized political activity of Jewish women at the neighbourhood level. Women chaired most of the tenants' committees formed in specific tenement blocks, organized opposition to eviction attempts, were in the forefront of demonstrations, and even picketed shoppers in the West End of London to draw attention to the plight of east London slum-dwellers at the mercy of 'slumlords'.

Phil Piratin, later elected the Communist Member of Parliament for the Mile End division of Stepney, has mentioned a short-lived group formed by the Communist Party (CP) in Stepney to fight for better housing as early as 1934; Piratin was the leader of this group, while Michael Shapiro, another Jewish Communist, served as its housing expert.[21] In 1935, Shapiro, writing under the pseudonym 'Michael Best', produced *Heartbreak Homes: an indictment of the national Government's housing policy*, in which he challenged the Tory government's claims of progress in slum clearance and in the elimination of overcrowding. Shapiro warned his readers that the problem of adequate working-class housing could never be solved completely "so long as private, speculative, ruthless profit-grabbers have the upper hand", as they did in the capitalist system.[22] The groundwork was being laid for a movement of tenants who had had their fill of paying high rents for bad housing.

There were sporadic rent strikes in 1935-37 at tenements such as Paragon Mansions in Mile End Centre ward. During their strike the tenants, reinforced by 'strongarm' men such as Maurice 'Tubby' Rosen, managed to hold off the bailiff and police and to win a partial victory.[23] The movement grew rapidly, and the STDL, a federation of various tenants' committees such as that at Paragon Mansions, was established, according to Piratin, in the autumn of 1937; Shapiro was its first secretary. In addition to dealing with problems of rent and repairs, the STDL taught tenants how to organize, how to determine their legal rights, and how to fight landlords in a collective, disciplined way.

The formation of the STDL had some bearing on the CP's first electoral success in Stepney. This was Piratin's victory in the November 1937 borough elections in the Spitalfields East ward, an area in the north-west corner of the borough which included Brick Lane, Hanbury Street, and Flower and Dean Street, and which had a large Jewish population.[24] Piratin's electoral manifesto, the *Communist Plan for Life in Stepney*, proposed large-scale slum clearance; the use of every available site for housing; and stronger action against slum landlords. Spitalfields East was one of 20 Stepney wards, each of which elected three councillors

at large. Piratin ran third in the election, behind two Labour candidates, garnering 616 votes; it was enough to win him a seat.[25]

Not until the end of 1938, however, did the STDL come into its own, stimulated by decontrol of much of the area's housing and by the consequent attempts by landlords either to raise rents by as much as 40% or to neglect their responsibilities. Tubby Rosen replaced Shapiro as secretary; he was assisted by two full-time organizers, Harry Conn and Ella Donovan, the wife of an unemployed hall porter. All three were Communists. Piratin has portrayed Donovan as a typical example of those working-class women, only too often overlooked as being shy and lacking in confidence, who become speakers and writers and organizers during times of crisis: "[S]o rapidly did the campaign develop, so many things needed to be done, so many people were required, that Ella soon found herself doing many of the things she had hitherto considered beyond her powers".[26] Donovan herself told *Daily Worker* correspondent Rose Smith that, "For the first time many women have lost their fear of the landlord and learnt their own organised power".[27] The more honorific positions of president and chairman were filled by the Reverend St John B. Groser, Vicar of Christ Church, Stepney [28], and Councillor H. H. Gordon, a left-leaning socialist who had been expelled from the Labour Party caucus in November 1938.[29]

The STDL had a 'grassroots' structure: members would pay a penny a week, and would be organized in local tenants' committees, usually representing a block of flats or a street. Most of these were headed by women. All the committees together comprised the League. Its decision-making structure was a tenants' council which met every 2 weeks and was composed of representatives from all the local committees, plus the STDL executive, several borough councillors (including of course Phil Piratin and H. H. Gordon), and several lawyers.[30]

In the new year, Tubby Rosen announced that the STDL wanted rent control for all working-class houses.[31] Rent strikes took place "in street after street in rapid succession"; many landlords caved in and signed "collective agreements" with their tenants.[32] By the end of January 1939 the STDL had four central officers and 10 local committees, and could count on nearly 5000 affiliated members.[33] Rosen announced that with 2000 tenants already refusing to pay rent, the big landlords were "on the run".[34] By the end of February, the STDL had recovered £10,000 in overcharged rents and had won rent reductions totalling £18,000. It had also forced landlords to carry out numerous repairs: one landlord had to increase his staff of workers from six to 57.[35]

At the end of April, rent strikes were still in progress in nine different parts of Stepney; other disputes were being settled quickly, as landlords decided against tangling with the STDL. To celebrate its victories, the League called a march for April 30, to coincide with May Day activities.

HENRY SREBRNIK

Columns from five centres of recent strikes converged on Stepney Green, where about 10,000 people, preceded by bands and singing League songs, settled down to hear a concert under the Clock Tower.[36] On May 16, 70 Stepney women League members lobbied Members of Parliament, demanding a new rent act.[37] By late June, when Ted Bramley, London District CP organizer, announced that 18 rent strikes had been settled peacefully [38], membership in the STDL had grown to 7500.[39]

Not all strikes went smoothly. Some were bitter affairs lasting weeks; such was the case at the Flower and Dean Street tenements, where most of the tenants were Jewish. Their tenants' committee was led by a woman, Clara Garrett, who was profiled in the *Daily Worker* - the Communist press tried to highlight women in the STDL whenever possible.[40] The tenants decided to strike on January 16, and turned their building into a 'fortress'. Demonstrations and picketing went on for weeks, all entrances were guarded, and there were even street marches publicizing the tenants' demands for lower rents and repairs. One weekend, 38 children from this East End slum dwelling demonstrated in front of the landlord's home, in fashionable and far-off Golders Green, a well-to-do London suburb. The owner finally caved in five weeks after the strike began; this struggle served as a prototype for many other actions.[41]

Even more vicious was the joint strike begun on February 13 by the mainly Jewish tenants of the Brady Street Mansions (home to many Jewish Communists such as Harry Cohn, Max Levitas, and Sarah Wesker) and Langdale Mansions against their common landlords, two clothing manufacturers named Craps and Gold. Hetty Donnelly became chair of the tenants' committee: she told the *Daily Worker* at the time that, "we are an all-women's committee and are proud of the fact".[42] Years later she still recalled the all-women's committee as "a brilliant idea", since "we women did most of it".[43] In this strike too, barricades and even barbed wire were set up around the buildings to prevent bailiffs from entering; guards patrolled the entrance. There was a virtual state of siege - even the milkman had to secure a permit before he could deliver milk.[44] The tenants' committee decided to embarrass the owners by demonstrating outside their West End business premises in February and March; Hetty Donnelly remembers collecting about 40-50 women, making posters, and parading outside, until police arrived and forced them to circulate. They also marched outside Mr Gold's fashionable Hampstead residence.[45] The tenants even held dances - one popular song was 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-yay, we pay no rent today' - and children's parties to raise money for their defence fund.[46] Nonetheless, on June 27, 84 police officers broke through the barricades at Langdale Mansions; a fierce struggle ensued with the tenants, who had armed themselves with sticks, shovels and saucepans, and there were several injuries. Tubby Rosen immediately accused the police of brutality and announced that all STDL members would begin withholding rents unless the

landlords began negotiations.[47] A mass demonstration of 15,000 people, including rabbis, church dignitaries and even the mayor of Stepney, took place the same evening, resulting in further confrontation with the police.[48] Councillors Gordon and Piratin took up the tenants' cause in the Stepney Borough Council a day later and the matter was even discussed in the House of Commons on June 29.[49] Under tremendous pressure, Craps and Gold resumed bargaining and an agreement, which was a clear victory for the tenants, was reached on June 29.[50]

So prominent had the STDL become in its fight for tenants' rights in east London that it drew national attention. On July 6, Sir Percy Harris, Liberal MP for Bethnal Green South-west, and J. H. Hall, Labour MP for Whitechapel-St George's, asked the Minister of Health, Walter Elliot, whether he proposed to do anything concerning the serious unrest in east London, which, they stated, was due to increased rents and unsanitary conditions.[51]

By midsummer many East End residents would have been ready to agree with Father Groser that "we have beaten back the landlords who have for years sucked the lifeblood of the people of Stepney".[52] To celebrate its achievements, the League held a large victory parade from Brady Street to Philpot Street on July 9; 6000 participants heard Tubby Rosen declare that £25,000 had been refunded to tenants in lump sum settlements for rent overcharges, and that landlords had been forced to make another £60,000 worth of repairs.[53]

Groser later recalled his amazement at "the speed with which people came together, organised, and threw up their own leaders ... They ran great risks". He also commented on their sense of solidarity; even families who were not directly affected by rent increases "came out to defend [those] at the mercy of the landlords".[54] Clearly, this could not have occurred without the already-existent networks Jewish women had in place.

The coming war brought immediate rent controls which froze rents as of August 31, 1939, thus incorporating into law the lower rents won through political action by the tenants. The work of the STDL was not at an end, however; the League shifted its attention to wartime problems such as air raid precautions, food profiteering, and sudden increases in the cost of living. Soon "a new wave of rent strikes" was "sweeping the East End", according to Tubby Rosen.[55] In June 1940, as the rent strikes continued [56], STDL lawyer Stephen Murray stated that the League's membership was up to 11,000.[57]

In all of these east London struggles, "it was the women who did the picketing, women who often dominated the committees making up the Stepney Tenants' Defence League, women who came out on demonstrations. It was, of course, partly because the men were at work, and the women were at home where the action was taking place".[58] Phil Piratin recalled that the women were outstanding:

HENRY SREBRNIK

Every feminist claim was proved. There was nothing that the men could do that could not be equalled by the women, and, in fact, they were mostly more enthusiastic and hence more reliable. For example, during the rent strike at Brunswick Buildings [in Aldgate in February 1939] it was the women who did most of the picketing. The strike lasted for eleven weeks during a severely cold winter, and braziers were lit in the streets to keep the women warm.[59]

In this strike, too, a successful tactic used by the women was to shame the landlord by picketing, with their children, in front of his north London home.[60] (Children were included in many of these STDL activities; indeed, when the tenants of Lydia Street and Duckett Street buildings won a three-week strike, the women involved organized a children's block party in celebration.)[61]

The Communists were able to take advantage of the struggle over housing and rents to mobilize women, and Michael Shapiro contended that the rent strikes were for many their first understanding of the political link between their personal problems and "the whole system that is responsible". Problems in the home, he wrote in a party journal in 1940, were often as important in political education as those in the factory, and this was doubly so when it came to recruiting women.[62] Many women who had been involved in the STDL strikes retained high-level leadership positions within the Stepney Communist Party: Bertha Sokoloff, for instance, herself a longtime resident of Brady Street, was secretary of the CP twice during World War II, in 1940 and again after 1944. She was one of the people entrusted with the task of preparing for the 1945 general and municipal election – campaigns in which Stepney Communists would acquit themselves well.[63]

While the coming of war brought immediate rent controls, it also resulted in massive bomb damage to Stepney's housing stock during the blitz in 1940. Although the STDL had been allowed to expire following the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, the CP was eager to take up once again the campaign for good working-class housing as the war drew to a conclusion and an election loomed. Bertha Sokoloff called for the immediate creation of a single government department to supervise the repair of bomb-damaged houses[64]; and Michael Shapiro discussed war damage and the general chaos in east London in his booklet *How to Speed Up the Repairs*. [65] In a pamphlet published in the winter of 1944-45, the Stepney CP asserted that "we must get the Tories out at the very first chance – at the next election – and put in a united Labour and progressive majority strengthened by as many Communists as possible".[66]

In the general election of July 1945, the Communists nominated Phil Piratin as their candidate in the Mile End division of Stepney and poured massive amounts of energy and resources into the Mile End campaign. At an East London Area Conference held at Holborn Hall on April 15, 1945,

Bertha Sokoloff explained to the assembled delegates that “our aim by the end of June is to have 7,500 listed supporters, because if we mean business and are going to win the election, this is the minimum of what we can do”.^[67] Piratin’s campaign propaganda called him “the tenants’ champion” and promised affordable housing and control of rents in post-war Stepney.^[68] Piratin won a narrow victory in a three-way race, thanks partly to the “rent strikers that got him in”.^[69] Even the non-Communist press referred to him as “one of the soundest housing experts in London”.^[70] He was one of two Communists elected in Britain that year.

A few months later, voters would again troop to the polls to elect borough councillors. In Stepney, which had a borough council of 60 members (three councillors elected at large per ward), the CP nominated only two candidates each in the five wards they chose to contest, intentionally leaving one seat open for Labour: Phil Piratin and Tom Rampling were selected in Spitalfields East; Edward Kirby and Michael Shapiro in St George’s North-west; Max Levitas and Queenie Weinberg in Whitechapel East; Bill Carver and Fannie Goldberg in Mile End North; and Bertha Sokoloff and Tubby Rosen in Mile End West.^[71] All had been active in the struggles for better housing.

Michael Shapiro, recalling the pre-war struggle for lower rents and better repairs, told voters that he felt like starting the fight all over again: “We want to build a Stepney that people can be proud of, not one to run away from”. Accompanied by Tubby Rosen, Shapiro met with slumlords who were admonished to remember “the fighting spirit of the Stepney people”^[72]; at an election meeting held in St George’s North-west on October 21, Shapiro warned landlords against speculating in property in Stepney.^[73] Bertha Sokoloff asked the Stepney Council to take steps against such illegal practices as requiring ‘key money’ or charging higher rents than were allowed under the law; in a letter to the *East London Advertiser* she explained that in a seller’s market such as that which Stepney was experiencing, it was important to prevent the growth of a ‘black market’ in housing.^[74]

In November 1945, all 10 Communist candidates won their seats; three women were elected to the Stepney Borough Council along with four Jewish male Communists and three non-Jewish male Communists. All of them, including the non-Jews, won their seats in predominantly Jewish neighbourhoods. Many observers at the time asserted that the Communists could easily have taken 10-15 more seats than this. (Labour elected 49 candidates, and one independent Labourite also won a seat.) Certainly they could have picked up additional seats in the five wards where they did choose to run: for although in 1937, Piratin – the single Communist candidate – had run third when winning his seat in Spitalfields East, he and all the other Communist candidates ran well ahead of Labour in 1945. Writing in the Communist periodical *Jewish Clarion*, Sarah Wesker

HENRY SREBRNIK

attributed the victory of women such as Sokoloff and Goldberg to “the tremendous work” they had done during the rent strikes years earlier.[75]

While the literature on social protest movements has tended to neglect the involvement of women, according to West & Blumberg, women have been very active in grass roots struggles at the local and community level, especially over issues such as social welfare, housing and tenants’ rights – matters that directly affect them and their families.[76] Ardis Cameron has attributed the militancy of women workers to pre-existing female community networks. “Mutual dependence and reciprocity strengthened women’s ties with each other”, she stated. “Such women were often vocal advocates for local interests and they supplied the working class with effective agitators”.[77] This should come as no surprise, for, as Martha Ackelsberg has noted, “networks and community associations develop from women’s responses to issues that confront them not as isolated individuals but as members of households, and, more important, as members of the communities in which those households are embedded”.[78] Such networks could serve as “resources of resistance”.[79]

Yet despite their impressive political credentials as activists, the women prominent in the Stepney rent strikes did not manage to reach the same pinnacles of political office as did the men. The STDL leadership remained predominantly male at the top echelons; the first Communist candidate chosen to run for a borough council seat, in 1937, was Phil Piratin; and Piratin was again selected as the Communist nominee for the Mile End parliamentary seat in 1945. (Communist women in other organizations met the same fate: Sarah Wesker, for instance, despite her decades of service to the ULTTU, and later to the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers, never became its secretary.) Given the relatively small number of STDL Jewish Communist leaders, our conclusions are admittedly statistically inconclusive, but this study does suggest that the gender-based political phenomenon referred to as the “iron law of patriarchy” may have applied in Stepney.

Though those on the left emphasized the politics of class during this period, the rent strikes were largely confined to the Jewish community, with most of the tenants and landlords involved being Jewish. When attempts were made to mobilize Irish tenants, an ethnic and religious dimension was added. The STDL was the object of hostility on the part of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy in the East End, at that time fiercely anti-Communist, and Catholics who got involved with it were frequently criticized, even from the pulpit.[80] As well, anti-landlord feelings could easily spill over into anti-Semitism – to the benefit of fascists.

Despite strenuous recruiting efforts on the part of the STDL, the number of Irish women involved in left-wing political activities in Stepney remained low. Indeed, many more of them, like their male relatives, were attracted to Sir Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists (BUF), which in

the 1930s built a base among London's East End Irish Catholics through anti-Semitic agitation, including the denunciation of Jewish landlords.[81] According to Robert Skidelsky, "the Irish run like a bright thread through Mosley's chequered career".[82] The BUF made a practice of "playing the Irish off against the Jews"[83], and in his attempt to woo the Irish, Mosley aimed much of his electoral propaganda at them.[84] Many Catholic intellectuals championed the cause of the right-wing nationalists against the Spanish Republic during this period, and the pro-Franco BUF was able to increase its prestige among Catholics, claiming that fascism supported Christianity whereas communism was committed to its destruction.[85] The STDL tried to counter the BUF, but in the Irish areas of Stepney - Shadwell and Wapping - their organization remained pitifully weak.[86] The BUP was later discredited due to the war, but the Stepney Irish community gave its support to Labour, rather than the CP, in the 1945 general and municipal elections.

For many of today's feminists, gender is the engine of social change, while classical Marxists still dream of overarching class unity. But Stepney was more than just a district inhabited largely by working-class men and women; it was also a plural society whose Irish and Jewish segments lived in uneasy proximity. The Jewish working-class community contained both ethnic and class solidarities, as did the Irish.[87] Each group was an ethnic subsociety or, in the words of Milton Gordon, an "ethclass" [88], and each fought for its share of scarce economic and political resources, leading to periodic outbreaks of communal strife.

Hence, even for those Jewish and Irish women in Stepney who were of the same social class, and perhaps shared behavioural similarities, these attributes did not create a sense of shared peoplehood (or, for that matter, sisterhood) - although one Mass Observation Survey taken in 1939 did find a lower percentage of anti-Semites among East End women than among men.[89] Ethnic divisions and spatial segregation impacted negatively on attempts to unify Jewish and Irish women within the framework of the Labour Party's consociational politics of accommodation and brokerage. By the mid-1930s, those desiring a radical transformation of the *status quo* were mobilized by 'flanking' parties which came largely to represent the two competing ethnicities.[90] While politically militant Jewish women were attracted to left-wing movements and parties, Irish women with grievances against the 'establishment' often were recruited by the BUF.

Sandra Morgen has stated that "gender consciousness" does not flow from some abstract position in the social structure: "Race, class and culture dramatically influence the resources and constraints that condition women's lives".[91] So even though "the relation of gender to power figures at the core of women's history", Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham cautions us to remember that "factors of class and race make any generalization of womanhood's common oppression impossible".[92] As Nira Yuval-Davis has

observed, "Gender divisions interrelate and are enmeshed in concrete social situations with other social divisions such as ethnic, racial, class, age, sexuality, etc".[93] In the politically-charged atmosphere of east London in the 1930s, ethnic differences – even between two white minority groups – proved to be a more significant cultural marker and indicator of personal identity than did class or gender, and group loyalty more compelling than gender solidarity.

Notes

- [1] A well-known example is Angela Davis (1981). See *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House). However, even in the USA, the analysis of race and racism still lags far behind feminist theoretical work on gender or class. See Sandra Morgen (1990) Conceptualizing and changing consciousness: socialist-feminist perspectives, in Karen V. Hansen & Ilene J. Philipson (Eds) *Women, Class, and the Feminist Imagination*, p. 289, note 17 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).
- [2] Lara Marks (1992) Carers and servers of the Jewish community: the marginalized heritage of Jewish women in Britain, in Tony Kushner (Ed.) *The Jewish Heritage in British History: Englishness and Jewishness*, p. 109 (London: Frank Cass) See also her book *Model Mothers: Jewish mothers and maternity provision in East London, 1878-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).
- [3] Quoted in Jenny Bourne (1987) Homelands of the mind: Jewish feminism and identity politics, *Race & Class*, 29, p. 13.
- [4] Susan A. Glenn (1990) *Daughters of the Shtetl: life and labor in the immigrant generation*, p. 3 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).
- [5] See the symposium entitled, Intersections and collision courses: women, blacks, and workers confront gender, race, and class, in *Feminist Studies*, 18 (Summer 1992), pp. 283-326, in which historians Iris Berger, Elsa Barkley Brown and Nancy A. Hewitt grapple with these issues of feminist scholarship.
- [6] Marks, 'Carers and servers of the Jewish community', pp. 107, 110.
- [7] Rickie Burman (1990) Jewish women and the household economy in Manchester, c. 1890-1920, in David Cesarani (Ed.) *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry*, p. 57 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).
- [8] Ronald Lawson & Stephen E. Barton (1980) Sex roles in social movements: a case study of the tenant movement in New York City, *Signs*, 6, pp. 231, 238, 240, 247.
- [9] Sylvia Walby (1986) *Patriarchy at Work: patriarchal and capitalist relations in employment*, p. 59 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- [10] See Guida West & Rhoda Lois Blumberg (1990) Women in grass-roots protests for economic survival, in Guida West & Rhoda Lois Blumberg (Eds) *Women and Social Protest*, pp. 39-40. (New York: Oxford University Press). See also Adrian F. Aveni (1978) Organization linkages and resource mobilization: the

- significance of linkage strength and breadth, *Sociological Quarterly*, 19, pp. 185-202.
- [11] Gerald Sorin (1985) *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish immigrant radicals, 1880-1920*, p. 124 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). See also Naomi Shepherd (1993) *A Price below Rubies: Jewish women as rebels and radicals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- [12] Alice Kessler-Harris (1976) Organizing the unorganizable: three Jewish women and their Union, *Labor History*, 17, p. 8.
- [13] Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority*, pp. 139-140, 163-164. Even those Jews who argued bitterly with Marxists did not disown them. As Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism*, p. 29 (New York: Basic Books), writes, "They were there, they were recognizable, they were us".
- [14] See Paula E. Hyman (1983) Culture and gender: women in the immigrant Jewish community, in David Berger (Ed.) *The Legacy of Jewish Migration: 1881 and its impact*, pp. 157-168 (New York: Brooklyn College Press).
- [15] For Jewish involvement in the Communist Party of Great Britain, see my *London Jews and British Communism, 1935-1945* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1995).
- [16] Women comprised about 15% of the overall membership of the British Communist Party, though this reached a level of 26% in 1944. Kenneth Newton (1969) *The Sociology of British Communism*, pp. 7, 48 (London: Allen Lane/Penguin Press). According to Ted Bramley, the party's London District organizer, there were 2500 women in the CPGB in 1938 - some one-sixth of the total. See Sue Bruley (1985) Women against war and fascism, in Jim Fyrth (Ed.) *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front*, p. 152 (London: Lawrence & Wishart).
- [17] Tony Kushner (1993) Sex and Semitism: Jewish women in Britain in war and peace, in Panikos Panayi, *Minorities in Wartime: national and racial groupings in Europe, North America and Australia during the two World Wars*, p. 129 (Oxford: Berg).
- [18] R. A. Leeson (1973) *Strike: a live history 1887-1971*, pp. 119-121 (London: George Allen & Unwin); Jerry White (1980) *Rothschild Buildings: life in an East End tenement block 1887-1920*, pp. 213, 215, 260 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- [19] See Rickie Burman (1982) The Jewish woman as breadwinner: the changing value of women's work in a Manchester immigrant community, *Oral History*, 10, pp. 27-39, and 'Jewish women and the household economy in Manchester, c. 1890-1920', pp. 55-75.
- [20] Lawson & Barton, 'Sex roles in social movements', p. 231.
- [21] Phil Piratin (1948) *Our Flag Stays Red*, p. 33 (London: Thames Publications).
- [22] Michael Shapiro ['Michael Best'] (1935) *Heartbreak Homes: an indictment of the national Government's housing policy*, pp. 6, 8-13 (London: Communist Party of Great Britain [hereafter CPGB]).

HENRY SREBRNIK

- [23] Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red*, pp. 28-32.
- [24] 'By 1900, large parts of Spitalfields were 95-100 per cent Jewish', according to K[enneth] Leech, 'The Decay of Spitalfields', *East London Papers*, 7 (December 1964), pp. 60-61. Spitalfields East was the more Jewish section.
- [25] *East London Advertiser*, 6 November 1937, p. 1.
- [26] Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red*, pp. 38, 48; 'Enough of all this', *Picture Post*, 2 (1 April 1939), p. 54.
- [27] *Daily Worker*, 4 March 1939, p. 7.
- [28] 'Enough of all this', *Picture Post*, 2 (1 April 1939), p. 48. Groser first became involved in the tenants' movement in 1939, when he made room in his vicarage for young solicitors and law students to interview and advise tenants in difficulties. "The scheme caught on and soon the tenants sought his help in establishing the organisation of which he became President", according to Kenneth Brill (1971) *The world his parish*, in Kenneth Brill (Ed.) *John Groser, East London Priest*, p. 101 (London: Mowbrays).
- [29] *East London Advertiser*, 22 July 1939, p. 10.
- [30] Interview with Phil Piratin, London, 3 August 1976 and 30 November 1978.
- [31] *Daily Worker*, 12 January 1939, p. 8.
- [32] Noreen Branson & Margot Heinemann (1971) *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties*, p. 219 (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, reprint edn. St Albans, Panther, 1973).
- [33] *Daily Worker*, 25 January 1939, p. 5.
- [34] *Daily Worker*, 4 February 1939, p. 6.
- [35] *Reynolds News*, 26 February 1939, p. 3; *Daily Worker*, 28 February 1939, p. 5.
- [36] *Daily Worker*, 29 April 1939, p. 4; *Voice of East London*, 1 May 1939, p. 1.
- [37] *Daily Worker*, 18 May 1939, p. 8.
- [38] *Daily Worker*, 28 June 1939, p. 1.
- [39] Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red*, p. 44.
- [40] *Daily Worker*, 9 January 1939, p. 1.
- [41] The *Daily Worker* provided almost daily progress reports on this strike: see the issues of 9 January 1939, pp. 1, 8; 12 January, p. 8; 14 January, p. 4; 16 January, p. 1; 17 January, p. 8; 19 January, p. 8; 20 January, p. 8; 21 January, p. 4; 23 January, p. 8; 25 January, pp. 1, 5; 30 January, p. 8; 4 February, p. 6; 13 February, p. 1; 14 February, p. 8; 20 February, p. 8. See also the *Reynolds News* of 5 February, p. 3.
- [42] *Daily Worker*, 15 March 1939, p. 5.
- [43] Interview, Hetty Donnelly, Hove, Sussex, 11 June 1978.
- [44] *Reynolds News*, 5 February 1939, p. 3; *Daily Worker*, 14 February 1939, p. 8 and 25 February, p. 1; *Daily Herald*, 20 February 1939, p. 9; Ted Bramley (1945) *The Battle for Homes*, p. 61 (Watford: Farleigh Press).

- [45] *Reynolds News*, 26 February 1939, p. 3; *Daily Worker*, 4 March 1939, p. 4; *East London Observer*, 13 May 1939, p. 1; Interview, Hetty Donnelly, Hove, Sussex, 11 June 1978.
- [46] *Daily Worker*, 15 March 1939, p. 5; *Voice of East London*, 1 May 1939, p. 1; Interview, Hetty Donnelly, Hove, Sussex, 11 June 1978.
- [47] *Evening Standard*, 27 June 1939, p. 14; *Daily Worker*, 28 June 1939, p. 1; *News Chronicle*, 28 June 1939, p. 3.
- [48] *Daily Worker*, 28 June 1939, p. 1; 29 June, p. 8; *Daily Herald*, 28 June 1939, p. 9; *News Chronicle*, 28 June 1939, p. 1.
- [49] *Daily Worker*, 29 June 1939, p. 8; 30 June, p. 8; *News Chronicle*, 29 June 1939, p. 11; *East London Advertiser*, 1 July 1939, p. 5.
- [50] *News Chronicle*, 19 June 1939, p. 1; *Daily Worker*, 29 June 1939, p. 8; 30 June, p. 8; *Daily Herald*, 30 June 1939, p. 11; *Daily Express*, 1 July 1939, p. 8.
- [51] *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard) House of Commons*, Fifth Series, Vol. 349, 6 July 1939, cols. 1492-1494.
- [52] Brill, 'The world his parish', p. 101.
- [53] *East London Observer*, 8 July 1939, p. 1; *Daily Worker*, 10 July 1939, p. 1.
- [54] St John B. Groser (1949) *Politics and Persons*, pp. 73-74 (London: SCM Press).
- [55] *Daily Worker*, 2 December 1939, p. 2.
- [56] *Daily Worker*, 27 June 1940, p. 8. The STDL rent strike play, 'Tenants in Revolt', was playing at the Workers' Circle Theatre in Great Alie Street in 1940; see the *Daily Worker*, 27 January 1940, p. 5.
- [57] *East London Advertiser*, 19 June 1940, p. 1.
- [58] Noreen Branson (1985) *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1927-1941*, p. 200 (London: Lawrence & Wishart).
- [59] Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red*, p. 46.
- [60] This strike, too, was extensively covered by the Communist and left-wing press. See the *Daily Worker* of 4 February 1939, p. 6; 14 February, p. 8; 20 February, p. 8; 28 February, p. 8; 6 March, p. 8; 14 March, p. 8; 27 March, p. 5; 3 April, p. 8; 17 April, p. 3; 29 April, p. 4. See also *Reynolds News* of 5 February, p. 3; 26 February, p. 3; 12 March, p. 3; 19 March, p. 7, as well as the *Daily Herald* of 20 February, p. 9 and 7 March, p. 11.
- [61] See the *Daily Worker*, 4 March 1939, p. 4; *Star*, 6 March 1939, p. 7; *Daily Herald*, 7 March 1939, p. 11.
- [62] Michael Shapiro (1940) A mass movement among the tenants, *Party Organiser*, 2, pp. 4-6.
- [63] Interview, Bertha Sokoloff, London, 11 September 1979; letter to the author, 29 January 1979.
- [64] Letter to the editor from Bertha Sokoloff, *East London Advertiser*, 17 November 1944, p. 4.
- [65] Michael Shapiro (1944) *How to Speed Up the Repairs* (London: CPGB).

HENRY SREBRNIK

- [66] *A Stepney to be Proud Of: plan and proposals*, pp. 8-9 (London: Stepney Communist Party, [Winter 1944-1945]).
- [67] *East London Advertiser*, 20 April 1945, p. 4.
- [68] The Lazar Zaidman collection at the University of Sheffield contains much of Piratin's 1945 election literature, including *General Election – July 5th, 1945 Parliamentary Division of Mile End Election Address: A Personal letter from the Communist Candidate Phil Piratin; Mile End Election Special! Vote Piratin; Mile End Has a Memory*; and *Piratin, Communist Candidate for Mile End. Popular Stepney Fighter and Leader*.
- [69] Interview, Hetty Donnelly, Hove, Sussex, 11 June 1978.
- [70] *News Chronicle*, 27 July 1945, p. 2.
- [71] *East London Advertiser*, 12 October 1945, p. 1.
- [72] *Daily Worker*, 12 October 1945, p. 2.
- [73] *East London Advertiser*, 26 October 1945, p. 4.
- [74] Letter to the editor from Bertha Sokoloff, *East London Advertiser*, 26 October 1945, p. 2.
- [75] Sarah Wesker (1946) Our women have fought and worked: now they demand equal pay, *Jewish Clarion*, December, p. 4.
- [76] Guida West & Rhoda Lois Blumberg (1990) Reconstructing social protest from a feminist perspective, in West & Blumberg (Eds.) *Women and Social Protest*, pp. 3-35.
- [77] Ardis Cameron (1985) Bread and roses revisited: women's culture and working-class activism in the Lawrence Strike of 1912, in Ruth Milkman (Ed.) *Women, Work and Protest: a century of U.S. women's labor history*, pp. 42-61 (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- [78] Martha A. Ackelsberg (1988) Communities, resistance, and women's activism: some implications for a democratic polity, in Ann Bookman & Sandra Morgen (Eds) *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*, p. 303 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).
- [79] Karen Sachs (1988) Out of the frying pan, into the fire: macroeconomic trends and women's life chances, in Martha A. Ackelsberg, Randall Barlett & Robert Buchele (Eds) *Women, Welfare and Higher Education: towards comprehensive policies*, p. 21 (Northampton: Smith College).
- [80] Tom Rampling, an Irish Catholic from Wapping who joined both the STDL and the Stepney Communist Party, recalled one such incident, when he was denounced as an "enemy of God and the Church". Interview, Tom Rampling, Banbury, Oxfordshire, 20 January 1979.
- [81] See Stuart Rawnsley (1980) The membership of the British Union of Fascists, in Kenneth Lunn & Richard C. Thurlow, *British Fascism: essays on the radical right in inter-war Britain*, pp. 161-163 (London: Croom Helm). The BUF's main organizers in the East End, Owen Burke and E. G. 'Mick' Clarke, were Irish. Colin Cross (1963) *The Fascists in Britain*, p. 151 (New York: St Martin's Press).

- [82] Robert Skidelsky (1975) *Oswald Mosley*, p. 513 (London: Macmillan).
- [83] Robert Benewick (1972) *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, p. 280 (London: Allen Lane).
- [84] Colin Holmes (1979) suggests that “there were deliberate attempts to capture the Catholic vote”; see his *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939*, p. 194 (London: Edward Arnold). Even Communists admitted that the ‘overwhelming’ majority of these people were working class, according to a report in the *Jewish Chronicle*, 16 April 1937, p. 17.
- [85] D.S. Lewis (1987) *Illusions of Grandeur: Moseley, fascism and British society, 1931-81*, pp. 191-193 (Manchester: Manchester University Press).
- [86] See Bertha Sokoloff (1987) *Edith and Stepney: the life of Edith Ramsay*, p. 81 (London: Stepney Books); Piratin, *Our Flag Stays Red*, pp. 27-28; *Jewish Chronicle*, 6 November 1936, p. 29; 30 July 1937, p. 13; 2 June 1939, p. 20; *East London Observer*, 8 July 1939, p. 1.
- [87] David Feldman (1983) There was an Englishman, an Irishman and a Jew ...: immigrants and minorities in Britain, *The Historical Journal*, 26, p. 193.
- [88] See Milton Gordon (1964) *Assimilation in American Life: the role of race, religion and national origins* pp. 51-54 (New York: Oxford University Press).
- [89] Tony Kushner (1989) *The Persistence of Prejudice: antisemitism in British society during the Second World War*, p. 49 (Manchester: Manchester University Press).
- [90] This term, coined by Donald L. Horowitz, refers to political parties formed or appropriated by ethnic groups alienated from mainstream brokerage politics. See *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, pp. 410-416 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
- [91] Morgen, ‘Conceptualizing and changing consciousness’, p. 285.
- [92] Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham (1989) The problem of race in women’s history, in Elizabeth Weed (Ed.) *Coming to Terms: feminism, theory, politics*, p. 133 (New York: Routledge).
- [93] Nira Yuval-Davis (1993) Gender and nation, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 16, p. 630.

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