Cultural History of Jews in California

Published by Purdue University Press

Cultural History of Jews in California: The Jewish Role in American Life.
Purdue University Press, 2009.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/103252.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/103252

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3255155

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
From Civic Defense to Civil Rights: The Growth of Jewish American Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Los Angeles

Shana Bernstein

INTRODUCTION

Jewish Americans helped develop an interracial form of civil rights activism in Los Angeles during the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s. They were often a central organizing force behind interracial coalitions that appeared in Los Angeles during this period. Jewish Americans’ interracial orientation was rooted in the 1930s, when they increasingly realized that they were not safe, even on the far west coast of the United States and an ocean away from Germany. Their realization sparked a new form of civic defense activism to protect themselves.

Los Angeles Jewish Americans’ activism transformed during World War II, as they increasingly realized that they could protect themselves best by helping to protect others as well. They shifted from monitoring only their own safety to increasingly working in collaboration with other local and national minority groups to ensure the greater safety of all, specifically through the pursuit of greater civil rights. The Cold War only deepened this commitment, as Jews’ quadruple fear of racial violence, ongoing discrimination, becoming red-baiters’ targets, and the spread of communism led them to build alliances for self-protection and to fight communism.

This paper traces the Jewish community’s increasing involvement in interracial civil rights struggles through one group in particular, the Community Relations Council, or CRC. By the mid 1940s, the CRC became known as the organized Jewish community’s primary intergroup relations organization and
played a crucial role in building alliances between the Jewish community and other minority groups.¹

THE 1930s: FORMATIVE YEARS

Jews in Los Angeles had created a community infrastructure in earlier years, but before the 1930s they had few organizations which focused significant energy on defending their community. Nazi activities and other forms of rising domestically-rooted anti-Semitism in Los Angeles during the 1930s, though, sparked new action in a community that had done relatively little in the way of self-protection in previous decades. Local Jews realized the extent to which dangerous racial philosophies abroad and at home made them vulnerable even in the “City of Angels,” far from Germany. This recognition marked the official beginning of the Los Angeles Jewish community’s struggle to fight for its own rights and, later, for other minorities’ rights.

Jewish Americans faced increasing exclusion and anti-Semitism during the 1930s, though conditions for them were more tolerable than they were for other Los Angeles communities, namely, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Japanese Americans, the city’s other three most prevalent minority groups. Jews’ rights were never openly attacked in any “reputable quarter,” according to historians Max Vorspan and Lloyd Gartner, and no significant public figure or major party spoke out against them. But despite this “façade of safety,” a small group of local Nazis, including the numerous fascist organizations that were active in Los Angeles, like the German Bund, made their lives increasingly more difficult (Vorspan and Gartner 205).²

Publicity surrounding one particular incident revealed the anti-Semitic danger lurking in Los Angeles. On September 19 and 30, 1935, fascist sympathizers distributed approximately 50,000 copies of an anti-Semitic pamphlet around Los Angeles. They inserted the pamphlet in home editions of the Los Angeles Times, the largest newspaper in the Southern California region. They also posted them on Southern California telephone poles, slipped them under doors, left them on street corners, and tossed them into automobiles. The propaganda shocked many Jewish and other Los Angeles residents when they opened their morning paper and walked through their neighborhoods. Some Times employees apparently had sneaked it into the paper, allegedly without management’s knowledge. The pamphlet claimed that Jews displayed “unspeakably bestial degeneracy.” They supposedly had a “distinctly racial program” which called for “the seduction of a SHIKSE (any Gentile girl, young or
unprotected)" and performed “lewd and lascivious acts . . . intended to intro-
duce vice and perversions into the lives of small children.” Among many other
attacks, the pamphlet charged that Jews “have promoted a widespread con-
tempt for the ordinary virtues of honor and honesty in business,” and asserted
that Jews owned the movies, radio, and many magazines and newspapers—
which all was part of an attempt to control access to “our people” (American
Nationalist Party, in McWilliams; see Pitt 8–9, 20; and Gardner 86–87).

The main threat to Los Angeles Jews, though, came in more “respect-
able” forms of anti-Semitism, especially from groups like the Ku Klux Klan
that used so-called gentlemen’s agreements to exclude Jews from home owner-
ship and social groups in Los Angeles neighborhoods. Restrictive covenants
completely closed many areas to Jews. Elite social and business clubs and even
the Chamber of Commerce, which in earlier years had Jewish founders and
officers, began to exclude Jews. Certain kinds of employment effectively barred
them; jobs as lawyers, except in Jewish firms, were generally off-limits, as were
public school teacher positions. Myths circulated on Los Angeles radio that
Jews had caused the depression and war (Vorspan and Gartner 205–06).

Jewish community leaders called meetings to discuss this rising anti-
Semitism. Out of one such meeting in 1933 sprang the Community Relations
Committee (hereafter CRC)—called the Community Committee until 1941,
the “civic protective” group which began as a watchdog agency to monitor lo-
cal fascist and anti-Semitic activities. The realization that Hitlerism was not
to be contained in Europe, the CRC’s first executive secretary Leon Lewis
emphasized, led to his organization’s creation. “Profiting by the experience of
our unfortunate co-religionists in Germany,” Lewis explained to other Jewish
community officials two years after the CRC’s formation, “small committees in
several of the larger cities [including Los Angeles] have operated quietly and
efficiently since the early part of 1933 to stem a mounting wave of organized
activity against the Jew [in the United States]” (Lewis, Letter to Hilborn). At
the end of the CRC’s first year, Lewis reflected upon the Los Angeles Jewish
community’s sudden awareness of the danger it faced. While “American Jews
[had] been confronted with no serious problem of this character” in previous
years, Lewis explained, “suddenly the inspiration of Hitlerism resulted in the
mushroom growth of a movement” of anti-Semitism (Lewis, Memorandum).

Jewish community leaders originally formed the CRC to monitor and
report on the activities of local groups perceived to be threats to Jews and to
democracy more generally. Consequently, in its early years the CRC focused
primarily on monitoring fascist and pro-Nazi groups like the Friends of New
Germany, the German American Bund, and the Silver Shirts, as well as other anti-Semitic and racist groups such as the KKK. The CRC strove in the 1930s to be a clearinghouse for anti-Nazi efforts. It gathered and processed information about such groups, and countered their propaganda through public education (Lewis, Letter to Mischel). Because Jewish community members believed that officials and the public were not aware or vigilant enough about the threats posed by these groups, they felt both a strong responsibility and a heavy burden for bringing their activities to the public's attention. The CRC sent spies to infiltrate Nazi and pro-German organizations’ meetings, monitored their publications, followed their public activities, and gauged their influence throughout the city. Spies reported back to the CRC about Bund and Friends of New Germany members’ activities, including what cars they drove, where they drove them, who they talked and associated with, and what they discussed at their meetings. The CRC developed relationships with publishers of local Jewish and other presses in an attempt to persuade them to monitor and expose the groups’ activities in their newspapers. It also published extensive reports in the News Research Service, a publicity organization with close ties to the CRC. The CRC sponsored educational workshops. It also pressed law enforcement officials and politicians to meet with CRC members with the hope of increasing their vigilance. The CRC took credit for certain victories—for instance, for reducing the membership in the Friends of New Germany from 350 to 130 (Lewis, Summary of Operations).³ The CRC became a main organization occupied with the defense, protection and civil rights of the Los Angeles Jewish community in the 1930s.

During the 1930s, and through the first decades of its existence, the CRC spoke for the many constituent organizations in the greater organized Jewish community of Los Angeles, which all represented a relatively small but growing community. Many members of the Jewish community living in East LA neighborhoods like Boyle Heights were working-class and immigrant, while those in central and western LA tended to be more middle-class and American-born. Between 1927 and 1941, greater Los Angeles's Jewish American population doubled from approximately 65,000 to 130,000 (Vorspan and Gartner 287). Many Los Angeles Jews, especially immigrants, had ties to radical organizations and ideologies, socialists as well as communists. These included organizations like the Jewish Peoples’ Fraternal Order, a workers’ group with communist affiliations and about 5,000 Southern California members. Many LA Jews affiliated through the numerous synagogues in LA, while others mainly identified through a growing Jewish secular community structure. Even the
secular organizations were extremely diverse, ranging from the rather left-leaning American Jewish Congress to the more conservative American Jewish Committee.

CRC members were both Republicans and Democrats. It drew participation from a wide array of influential Jewish Los Angeles civic, business, and cultural leaders. Hollywood figures supported the CRC and participated in its activities to varying degrees, though for the most part they provided financial backing rather than day-to-day involvement. Prominent participants included the Warner brothers, Louis B. Mayer—MGM's president until 1951—Adolph Zukor—the founder of Paramount Pictures—and eventually Dore Schary—the screenwriter and producer who succeeded Mayer as MGM's president (Lewis, Letter to Pacht).4 Business community representatives on the CRC included executives of large department stores such as the May Company and Bullocks and Barkers. Leaders of the Jewish legal community became especially active, including judges Harry Hollzer, Isaac Pacht, and Stanley Mosk. Prominent attorneys included representatives of Loeb and Loeb and Mendel Silberberg. Among the most influential members were Silberberg, Pacht, and Mosk. One of his contemporaries described Silberberg as a local “king maker” because of his political influence with people like Mayor Fletcher Bowron and even Republican Governor Earl Warren.5 Pacht and Mosk were well connected, too. After serving as California Governor Culbert Olson's legal secretary until Earl Warren replaced Olson in 1942, Mosk became a Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge. He later became California's Attorney General (1958) and then a California Supreme Court justice (1964). Pacht, who became an important member of the Jewish community, as well as a prominent figure in interracial organizing efforts in the 1940s and 1950s, was appointed to the Los Angeles Superior Court in 1931 and to the State Board of Prison Directors in 1940. Because many of the CRC's members were connected to politicians and were influential judges, lawyers, and Hollywood people themselves, the organization had access to local and state political power.

Though the CRC claimed to speak for the Jewish community as a whole, it most directly represented certain elements of this community—especially its more middle-class and upper-middle-class segments. Arguably, it is difficult, if not impossible, for any one organization to represent a community as diverse as LA's Jewish community during the 1930s. But because the CRC spoke with the voice of the organized Jewish community and was often taken as such by the larger mainstream political and lay community, it held a certain authority.
Its actions mattered a great deal in Jewish Los Angeles, and eventually to a larger political and social world in the city, state, and even the nation.

**WORLD WAR II: INTERRACIAL COLLABORATION BEGINS**

Pearl Harbor and the United States’ entry into World War II in 1941 marked a turning point for LA’s Jewish American community as a whole, and for this important Jewish community organization in particular. The federal and local government’s more active involvement in Nazi groups’ activities, which officially became subversive once the United States entered the war against Germany, enabled the CRC to shift to other issues important to the Jewish community. Officials began arresting numerous Angelenos and charging them, as Nazis, with subversive activities. A federal grand jury indicted the former West Coast chairman of the German-American Bund and Silver Shirt member Herman Schwinn on charges of conspiracy and sedition. It also indicted Frank K. Ferenz, who had been distributing Nazi films, and Hans Diebel, the Aryan Book Store’s operator (“6 Southland Folk Indicted as Seditious”; “More Sedition Cases Seen”). CRC members found themselves relieved of enough of this monitoring work to shift their focus from civic defense.

At the same time, CRC members increasingly realized that they could pursue their interests best by collaborating with other minority groups, who like themselves became increasingly visible in the city during and especially after the war. Los Angeles was transforming from a largely white Protestant city early in the century to one whose population by 1950 was approximately twenty percent minority, including mostly African Americans, Mexican Americans, Japanese Americans, and Jews. Many of these diverse recent migrants came because of stories they heard about the sunny weather and the “good life” in this spacious city, as well as to take advantage of growing job opportunities, which the war brought to western cities like Los Angeles. Jewish Americans in the CRC now focused on building civil rights bridges with these other minorities and liberal “Anglos,” which became their organization’s main focus after 1941. By mid-1943, they increasingly discussed ways to strengthen relations with other minority groups, especially African and Mexican Americans. They offered assistance to groups like the Fellowship Center, which sought to establish a community center in eastern Los Angeles that would provide “some effective help . . . to the Negroes” (CRC, Minutes of Public Relations Subcommittee Meeting, April 29, 1943). Lewis and the CRC initiated a campaign with the County Committee for Interracial Progress to persuade local
department stores to depict others than Anglo-Saxon, blue-eyed children in their Christmas displays (Lewis, Letter to Gleason). The Jewish Community Council (JCC), the umbrella organization for the organized Jewish community, encouraged its members to join the local Urban League to show support for its work and the black community (LA Jewish Community Council, Letter to members, February 7, 1944).

Jewish Americans often played key roles in interracial anti-discrimination efforts, which incorporated religious, labor, and industry leaders as well as representatives from communities like Mexican Americans and African Americans (LeBerthon). The CRC, in particular, became one of the most active catalysts for civil rights coalition building. It used its members’ powerful political and community connections to convince Mayor Bowron and other leaders to initiate race relations projects. Silberberg, Pacht, and other CRC members persuaded Mayor Bowron in 1945 to propose a Mayor’s Community Relations Board to permanently counsel LA minority groups, help ease racial tensions in the Mexican and “Negro” communities, and deal with local anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism. The ordinance ultimately failed in spite of Bowron’s support, but it nevertheless marks an increase in Jewish interests in multiracial anti-discrimination efforts (Silberberg, Letter to Cooke).

The CRC’s decision to team up with other minorities was neither easy nor unanimous. Community members wrangled with each other over the desirability of aligning with other, “worse off” minority groups. Their interracial involvement by the middle—and especially by the end—of the war represented a clear shift. In 1941, CRC members were reluctant to ally with African Americans. They debated joining African Americans also working to fight state employment discrimination by establishing a California race relations commission. Though many meeting attendees in principle supported legislation proposed by Augustus Hawkins, the African American Assemblyman, the dominant perspective that “we should not get behind so-called racial bills as Jews and classify ourselves with the colored group” triumphed. CRC members “unanimously opposed . . . the sponsorship of any legislation at this time.” While an aversion to publicly associating with such a clearly downtrodden group, given their own precarious status, explains some of Jews’ resistance, prejudice against African Americans helps explain this resistance to cooperative efforts as well.

But by the end of World War II, the CRC and other Jewish organizations expressed a markedly different attitude towards building coalitions with other, more obviously marginalized minorities. The CRC’s postwar stance on
cooperating with African Americans to fight employment discrimination illustrates this shift. By the late 1940s the CRC listed establishing a statewide Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) as a top priority. Isaac Pacht, the past president of the Los Angeles Jewish Federation Council and past chairman of the CRC, joined C. L. Dellums, a prominent leader of the African American labor and civil rights organization, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, to co-chair a multiracial statewide organization formed to fight employment discrimination. The two secretaries of this committee, the California Fair Practices Committee, were Max Mont of the Southern California Jewish Labor Committee and Bill Becker of San Francisco's Jewish Labor Committee (Pitt 53). Observers credited both the African American and Jewish communities for initiating the effort, which others (Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and whites) joined (Sherman).

THE COLD WAR: INTERRacial ACTIVISM CONTINUES
The Los Angeles Jewish community’s heightened commitment to interracial coalition building continued during the early Cold War era. In one major example, the organized Jewish community, through the CRC, helped support the establishment of the first enduring civil rights organization for the largest urban Mexican-origin population in the United States, which still exists today. The Community Service Organization (CSO), a civil rights organization which served mostly Mexican-origin Angelenos but also all of the Eastside’s diverse residents, emerged in 1947. It began as a Los Angeles organization but by 1963 had established thirty-four chapters across the Southwest, primarily in California, with over 10,000 paid members. The CSO was the first organization to broker relationships effectively between Los Angeles’ Mexican American people and the city and county of Los Angeles, and it became the most successful Cold War-era organization for Los Angeles Mexican Americans. The bulk of the activism that created the impetus for the CSO emerged out of the Mexican American community, with the assistance of the Anglo activist Fred Ross.

But Jewish American community support was crucial to the CSO’s survival in its early years. From 1947 to 1950 the bulk of its funding came primarily from the Los Angeles Jewish community. The CSO’s executive director recognized the importance of the Jewish support, explaining that without the CRC’s funding, the CSO could not operate the next year (CSO memo, April 18, 1951; CRC Meeting Minutes, August 30, 1948; CRC Meeting Minutes, July
14, 1949). The Jewish Community, through the CRC, did more than provide financial assistance to the CSO. It consulted with the Mexican American community, through the CSO, on legal, political, and financial matters. The CRC shared its expertise in the field of community relations and organizations with Mexican Americans, as it also did from time to time with Japanese Americans and African Americans (Guzman; CRC Minutes, August 31, 1950). It helped the CSO achieve tax-exempt status, provided assistance for legal problems and court cases, helped find employment for Mexican American community members, and consulted with the CSO on starting children’s camps and dealing with “youth problems” and “educational problems.” It also worked with the CSO on police brutality issues, participating in activities to educate the LA police department on minority issues in the interests of preventing overuse of force. When the CSO pressured the police department to initiate a police training program on minority issues and treatment in 1949, the director of the CRC gave such a successful lecture that the academy asked him to return to conduct more (CRC Meeting Minutes of Committee on Agencies, October 21, 1949; CRC Meeting Minutes Subcommittee on CSO, August 31, 1950).

The CRC made cooperation with and support for the CSO a central project. Its members believed that the CSO’s work was crucial to both the Mexican American and the Jewish American communities. As a memo explained, “The Staff Committee felt that this project carried the greatest impact . . . of any project submitted to the CRC” (CRC, Memo August 13, 1948). The CRC’s executive director Fred Herzberg similarly emphasized to CRC members the importance of their support for the CSO, which exemplified “grass roots democracy at its best” (Herzberg, Letter to CRC members). The CRC further urged Jewish community members to value this “extremely important operation [the CSO] . . . which receives almost its sole support through the CRC” in no small part because it promoted democracy by “furnishing the means whereby Mexican Americans’ civic consciousness may be expressed” (CRC, Memo, September 6, 1949). CRC members strongly supported the CSO in part because they believed it would, by helping break down the Mexican American community’s “suspicion of outsiders,” allow the two communities to work more closely together (CRC, Memo, September 6, 1949). Such naïve comments reveal that Jewish community members did not understand the Mexican-origin community very well. Other reasons more likely explained why Mexican Americans remained more isolated than others, including language barriers, constant immigration, and shock remaining from the government-assisted deportations
of Mexicans and Mexican Americans during the 1930s, not to mention power imbalances between the Jewish and Mexican communities.

But whatever the reasons, until the CSO the two communities had not had a significant vehicle for political collaboration. Now when members of the Jewish American community like Isaac Pacht, who also chaired the Los Angeles branch of the Council for Equality in Employment—a multiracial organization that fought employment discrimination—wanted to forge alliances with Mexican Americans, he could contact CSO leaders. Pacht did so in 1949 to request their participation on the Council’s steering committee (Pacht, Letter to Nava). 9

At first glance, it seems surprising that members of these two ethno-racial groups would collaborate in the late 1940s and early 1950s. First, the geographic, social, and economic distance between the two was growing, which intuitively makes finding common ground less likely. It seems strange that Jews, who were increasingly integrated and successful, would be interested in joining forces with more marginalized groups like African Americans, Mexican Americans, and others. Second, 1947 was the same year that marked the beginning of the conservative Cold War era, which supposedly stifled meaningful social reform activism. The federal government passed the Taft-Hartley anti-labor act, and states, cities, and counties like California and Los Angeles implemented loyalty oaths, all of which made civil rights activism more difficult. Interracial collaboration, which also was a part of the Communist Party platform, especially appeared dangerous, since even resembling communist programs jeopardized civil rights efforts. 10

However, the increasing distance between the Mexican American and Jewish American communities and the Cold War are exactly some of the conditions that help explain the CRC’s interest in collaborating with the CSO. First, the increasing socio-economic disparity between the two groups in the postwar period ironically impelled Jewish Americans to work to improve conditions for poor Eastside communities like the Mexican-origin population. Because escalating tensions threatened their own safety and security, Jewish Americans hoped to minimize such tensions by helping poorer communities improve their conditions.

Relations between the Jewish and Mexican American communities in East Los Angeles were particularly strained. Mexican Americans saw that while their conditions were not improving, and even perhaps were getting worse, their Jewish neighbors on the Eastside were moving to nicer neighborhoods; even those who stayed benefited from support from the growing—in both size
and resources—Jewish community elsewhere in Los Angeles. Increasing social and economic success accompanied the LA Jewish American community’s wartime and postwar growth. From 1941 to 1951 the city’s Jewish population surged from 130,000 to 315,000 (Vorspan and Gartner 287). This represented a 262% increase in only ten years. Many Jews came to take advantage of wartime opportunities. Many others moved soon after the war to the city of sun, which they first had seen while stationed there in the military. While a greater proportion of earlier migrants settled in the city’s poorer and more immigrant eastside, these increasingly middle-class migrants more likely settled in the more affluent—and whiter—West Side. Mexican Americans, on the other hand, were largely confined to ever more isolated Mexican American neighborhoods on the city’s eastside.¹¹

Increasingly differing class status distanced the two groups from each other. In the schools, for instance, a report observed, “The great barrier to the acceptance of Mexican children by Jewish children is the middle-class bias of the Jewish parents expressed in excessive concern over dirt and disease.” This same report by the Chicago-based interracial organization the American Council on Race Relations explained that police action towards the two groups differed and “contribute[d] to the increase of community tension between middle-class Jews and lower-class Mexicans” (American Council on Race Relations 14). Though the report expressed the differences in terms of class, this “class” bias was undoubtedly intertwined with a racial bias, as Jewish Americans were becoming increasingly integrated into American society, and accepted as white, while their fellow Americans increasingly categorized Mexican Americans as brown “others.”¹²

Another report by the CSO, surveying the Eastside scene, highlighted this racial and class tension: “The obvious contrast between their neighborhoods and those of other parts of the city bred frustration and bitterness [among Mexican Americans],” the report explained. “These, in turn, found expression in intergroup hostility and scape-goating with particular reference on the Eastside to the adjacent Jewish Community” (CSO/Industrial Areas Foundation).

Additionally, Jewish retailers and landlords were sometimes accused of exploitation by their former Eastside Mexican American neighbors. As Jews across the United States moved up and out socio-economically and geographically in this period, they sometimes retained businesses and rental properties in their former neighborhoods, causing resentment and tensions with
the minority communities who remained behind (Conference re the Watts Community Situation).

CRC leaders hoped their support for the CSO would be a key to soothing tensions between Mexicans and Jews on LA’s Eastside. They justified Jewish participation by explaining that it “deflects the hostility which exists in that community against the Jews, to constructive social issues of benefit to the Mexican-American and the Jew alike.” The CSO could “by its very existence . . . prevent race riots such as have happened before in this city.” CRC leaders claimed it already had “no doubt prevented serious repercussions which might have otherwise happened on the East Side” (CRC, Memo, September 6, 1949). In this view, the CSO helped not only Mexican Americans but also helped “develop a tremendous amount of understanding among all the groups on the east side” (CRC, Meeting Minutes, February 3, 1950). CRC executive director Herzberg countered a CRC member’s protest that the CRC should stop funding the CSO, whose work the member believed to be valuable but not “closely related enough to the activities of the Jewish community,” by explaining that its “prophylactic value” was “a relatively cheap investment” for the Jewish community. Preventing “gang fights and similar anti-social acts,” Herzberg argued, “was more important than trying to quell such fights after they have begun” (CRC, Meeting Minutes, July 14, 1949). Herzberg’s comment about Mexican Americans’ supposed proclivity to violence reveals prejudiced assumptions. But it also shows that Jews viewed bridge-building projects as critical for their survival.

Jewish Americans further valued building support from other less successful communities like Mexican Americans (and African Americans) because their own overall increasing wealth and social acceptance did not shield them from discrimination. The persistent discrimination they faced also helps explain Jews’ continued interest in collaborative initiatives to fight ongoing inequality. In less than one year—from August 1946 to June 1947—the Bureau of Jewish Economic Problems received 103 complaints from Los Angeles Jews upset with employment discrimination (Jager). Jews faced difficulty securing certain kinds of jobs in the late 1940s and early 1950s, including positions at insurance agencies and banks, and in the finance, mining, petroleum refining, and heavy manufacturing industries. Many private employment agencies refused their applications, arguing they could not place them (Vorspan and Gartner 238–47). Jews also found it hard to break into local politics; early 1950s disputes about the Board of Education were framed in anti-Semitic terms, and many postwar Angelenos willingly received the well-known anti-Semitic
Gerald L. K. Smith. The Congregationalist Reverend James W. Fifield and other local anti-Semites’ radio sermons reached receptive audiences (Vorspan and Gartner 238–47). The American Automobile Association listed certain hotels as “restricted” from Jews (Kingman). Vandals marked anti-Semitic symbols on Jewish establishments, including painting two swastikas on a Los Angeles temple and six swastikas on stores and walls in one East Los Angeles area, painting crosses on two families’ apartment doors, vandalizing a Jewish cemetery in Bell Gardens, and shattering the windows and destroying the Torah of a Jewish community center. Teachers at one eastside junior high school were both “outspokenly anti-Semitic as well as anti-Mexican,” according to the American Council on Race Relations, which reported that “the Jewish adolescent discovers that his middle-class status gives him no immunity” (American Council on Race Relations 13). Clearly, Jews’ increasing mobility did not mean they were safe, and many sought strategic alliances as a measure of protection.

Civil rights-minded Jewish Americans also hoped that anti-discrimination alliances would help protect them against another postwar danger: red-baiting. The Cold War was a seemingly strange time to begin new collaborative civil rights initiatives, and continue others, because red-baiting made pursuing civil rights activism more dangerous. Extreme red-baiters frequently falsely targeted all civil rights activities as communistic, which threatened to undermine all equality efforts. This was especially true in Los Angeles, a city rumored to have the second largest U.S. Communist Party presence after New York City, as well as Hollywood, long-suspected of harboring communists and other radicals. Los Angeles became the focus of many House Un-American Activities investigations, while California developed the first and one of the strongest state Un-American Activities Committee in the nation, also known as the Tenney Committee after legislator Jack B. Tenney. This committee was particularly active in Los Angeles because of the city’s known communist and radical presence. Tenney labeled many Jewish Americans, as well as other minority civil rights activists, communists or fellow travelers, including many groups and individuals with no communist links such as the CRC’s Judge Isaac Pacht and the American Jewish Congress.

Reformers like those in the CRC who hoped to maintain their efficacy in the face of mounting anti-communist suspicions responded to such dangers by making their equality initiatives legitimate and all-American. They did so by positioning themselves as anti-communist activists, articulating a middle ground anti-communism which created a space for civil rights. They reclaimed civil rights from the red baiters, carving a space for their approach which they
defined as the most American Cold War path because it was an antidote to communism. Their civil rights goals became all-American Cold War imperatives which could help democratically-minded Americans counter both un-American conservatism and radicalism and fight communism most effectively.

Cold War activists labeled as unjust indiscriminate anti-communism which jeopardized “legitimate” civil rights efforts, using language of un-Americanism to shore up their accusations. They charged that indiscriminate anti-communists used the radical label to suppress legitimate struggles to build a more egalitarian society, and thus a better democracy. CRC activists protested that extreme anti-communism targeted civil rights organizations en masse and threatened to entrap all organizations working to extend democracy in the United States by eliminating discrimination, protecting civil rights, and promoting equality of opportunity. The CRC expressed growing opposition to Tenney, for instance, by accusing his committee of undemocratic conduct. The Tenney Committee’s false accusation against the American Jewish Congress (he declared it a communist front organization in 1947) was, CRC members explained, “in keeping with [its] unsavory record . . . since its inception—a record replete with instances of the Committee’s use of its power to smear liberal American organizations and individuals” (CRC Declaration, 1948). They argued that Tenney’s 1949 accusation that Judge Pacht was in the Stalin orbit “aid[ed] and encourage[ed] Communism in our State” (Herzberg, Letter to Pacht). Jewish community activists also claimed that Tenney’s downfall would bring a “nation-wide victory for democracy and decency,” and joined forces first to defeat his 1952 bid for the 22nd US Congressional District (the San Fernando Valley) and later (1954) his State Senate re-election campaign (Jewish Information Service, Facts for Action Report, June 1954).

Their fight against red-baiters who targeted racial equality advocates epitomized Americanism, Cold War CRC activists and their allies in the Jewish community argued. While the efforts of extreme red-baiters to stifle civil rights progress endangered the country, their own efforts to oppose racism helped ensure domestic security by preventing communists from stealing the hearts and minds of minorities. Legislation which unfairly targeted civil rights activists, particularly minorities, was dangerous to democracy, they emphasized. Such legislation would both fail to curb the communist danger and pose new dangers, which would destroy democracy even more surely than communism itself. It threatened to repress legitimate, democratic, civil rights activists whose anti-racist platforms resembled communist agendas. Instead, explicitly anti-racist legislation would most effectively defeat communism. All
“loyal Americans” who hoped to “combat Communism,” CRC allies explained, must help extend civil rights for all Americans, including employment, education, housing, and public accommodation, since communism flourished when minority groups faced discrimination. In these terms, not addressing racial, religious and national origin groups’ “just grievances” endangered democracy (Slawson).

Making their own civil rights agenda into tools to fight communism and “increase democracy” meant countering communists as well as extreme anti-communists. Anti-communist activists like those in the CRC marginalized former allies now deemed “unacceptable.” Many communities—including labor, African Americans, Jewish Americans, and others—split from within in this way during the early Cold War. In some cases, the anti-communism of the CRC and the organized Jewish community in general was ideological, while in others such agencies asserted that they must protect themselves against being identified with radicalism in order to maintain their effectiveness. The CRC took on “the position as sentinel organization to keep our Jewish community alert to any and all organizations that pose as one thing and are in fact something else,” it declared. “Our Jewish community in common with the majority of the American people declares that it is not Communist or Fascistic and that it is devoted to the American democratic ideals, Constitution and Bill of Rights” (CRC, Press release [undated], 1947).

In one important instance, after much struggle and turmoil from late 1948 until early 1951, the organized Los Angeles Jewish Community expelled one leftist Jewish workers group with about 5,000 Southern California members, the Jewish People’s Fraternal Order (JPFO), from its communal structure. The CRC played a key role in this investigation and decision. The CRC explained the danger the JPFO posed and the underlying rationale for this extreme measure. The JPFO’s ties to communists and other radical organizations, it emphasized, have “the seeds of great injury to the Jewish Community . . . [in terms of] the state of mind of the general public [‘s fear concerning] the recent tenseness between the United States and Russia” (CRC, Meeting minutes, April 2, 1950). Such reasoning led to the JPFO’s expulsion.

At the same time, such “all-American” anti-communist activists who recognized the dangers posed by what they viewed as extremes—both red-baiters and communists—looked to other well-reputed groups to shore up their strength and reinforce their anti-communist, civil rights agenda. They decided to build their legitimacy through strategic alliances with acceptable (anti-communist) segments of society and came to believe that they could
advantage shared goals better together than individually, despite their differences. In this way, the Cold War climate facilitated CRC members’ interest in cooperating with Mexican Americans through the CSO.

An urgency to protect themselves from accusations of communism inspired and reinforced the Jewish community’s interest in collaborating with the CSO, whose implicit anti-communism it found reassuring. A CSO publicity pamphlet explained the organization’s stated anti-communist motivations: “To drive out Communism we must strike at conditions which foster its growth” (CSO, “Across the River”). Bert Corona, a prominent Mexican American reformer at the time, later recalled that limiting communist influence, particularly from the Mexican American “red” members of other Los Angeles organizations, was one of the CSO’s reasons for organizing (Garcia 164). Leonard Bloom spoke for many in the Jewish community when he lauded the CSO’s efforts to “protect itself from being captured or exploited by Stalinist and Trotskyite elements,” and urged the CRC’s executive director to support an even “larger and more expensive [CSO] enterprise” in the future (Bloom).

Jews did not always explicitly connect their interest in assisting other minority groups’ civil rights struggles to the anti-communist climate, but their organizations’ archival records expose this connection even when Jewish activists did not. For example, the CRC filed a Jewish newsletter discussing Jews’ interest in Mexican and African American struggles in its “Committee on Communism” folder. The newsletter, published by an agency affiliated with the CRC, explained to Jews why they should be concerned by the condition of Mexican Americans, who were forced into low-paying jobs, subjected to police brutality, “roundup for deportation without due process of law,” housing discrimination, and “virtually without representation in government.” In short, the newsletter urged, “It is in the interest of Jewish people to support the various Negro and Mexican-American candidates in the Los Angeles area” (Jewish Information Service, Facts for Action Newsletter, October 1954). The newsletter’s stated reasons that Jews should support civil rights cooperation had nothing to do with communism. But the CRC’s choice to file the newsletter with “communism” issues reveals the connection. In this way, Cold War conservatism and the dangers it posed to civil rights activism also facilitated collaborative impulses among activists like those in the CRC who framed their work in moderate, anti-communist terms.
SIGNIFICANCE
The activism of these Los Angeles Jewish Americans groups is significant for several reasons. First, this study reveals the importance of integrating the history of Jewish Americans with that of other minority groups; for they clearly played a role in civil rights struggles in tandem with the other groups. Most literature on racial and ethnic groups in America reinforces contemporary understandings of racial and ethnic categories by considering “racial” groups like Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans separately from Jewish Americans, who today are considered as an ethnic or religious minority. The fluidity and complexity of Jewish Americans’ status over this earlier time period and the changing nature of their racial categorizations make clear the shortcomings of inflexible understandings of race.

Second, while civil rights stories are often told as stories of East Coast conflicts between whites and African Americans, and sometimes of the Jewish role in the struggle, West Coast civil rights stories expose the role of other groups like Mexican Americans, and the connections between Jewish Americans and these other groups. These western civil rights stories reveal the limitations of focusing exclusively on black/white relations, which cannot fully explain such diverse historical experiences. Moreover, activists in Los Angeles did not merely follow a trickle-down model for civil rights activism established by Southern struggles, but rather simultaneously established their own variety of involvement, which emerged out of the specific multiracial context of Southern California.

Third, these western Jewish activists’ ongoing involvement in civil rights efforts exposes important links between the activism of the World War II and early Cold War eras. The bulk of civil rights literature on the late 1940s and early 1950s assumes the Cold War stifled civil rights and laments the ways it limited the earlier more radical possibilities. But this on-the-ground research in Los Angeles reveals that arguing for discontinuity between these periods is far too simplistic. The Cold War shifted the focus of the activism as certain reformers developed an anti-communist approach, but they continued to build upon collaborative efforts from an earlier era as they looked to each other for support and worked to reinforce the legitimacy of their social justice agendas.\textsuperscript{18}
Notes

1. For a more detailed discussion of the points discussed in this essay, see my forthcoming book on collaborative civil rights activism in Los Angeles, *Forgotten Coalition: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in World War II and Cold War Los Angeles*.

2. For a discussion of Nazi and Bund activities in Los Angeles, see Scobie 10; and Stephan.

3. For more on the News Research Service, see Eisenberg.

4. For discussions of Hollywood’s ties to the CRC and other Jewish organizations in the 1930s, see Gabler; Herman, “Hollywood, Nazism and the Jews, 1933-41”; and Herman, “Jewish Leaders and the Motion Picture Industry.” For a broader discussion of Warner Bros.’s involvement in anti-Nazi activity in the 1930s, specifically through several of the films it made in that decade, see Birdwell; and Ross.

5. On Silberberg as a “king maker,” see Pitt 10.

6. Some locals estimated that minorities composed forty percent of the city’s population by 1950 (Senn). But twenty to thirty percent is probably a more accurate estimate, cf. Vorspan and Gartner 242, and the following information from the census. From 1940 to 1950 the city of L.A.’s population grew from 1,504,277 to 1,970,358 people (United States Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census* 132; United States Bureau of the Census, *Seventeenth Decennial Census* 5–51). The black population increased by over two hundred sixty-eight percent (from 63,774 to 171,209) between 1940 and 1950 (United States Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census* 629 and United States Bureau of the Census, *Seventeenth Decennial Census* 5–100). The Mexican-descent population grew forty-six percent (from 107,680 to 157,067) between 1940 and 1950. The figures for the Mexican-origin population in 1940 and 1950 are estimates, as the census in these periods did not categorize this population separately. The only information we have is from the 1940 census which counted the “Spanish-mother tongue population” in Los Angeles and the 1950 census which counted the “Spanish-surnamed population” in the city. The census numbers are almost certainly undercounts. See United States Bureau of the Census, *Mother Tongue* 34 and United States Bureau of the Census, *Persons of Spanish Surname* 3C-43. The city’s Jewish-American population increased by a stunning ninety-two percent from the prewar period to 1948. In 1941 only about 130,000 Jews lived in the city of Los Angeles, and by 1948 there were 250,000 (Vorspan and Gartner 225).

7. Scholarship on other cities and regions suggests that Jews elsewhere also often were in the forefront of cooperative efforts. On events in San Francisco, see Issel. On New York, see Svonkin.

8. The various proposed pieces of state house and senate legislation concerned questions of race in state employment, discrimination in state work, and establishing a California commission on race relations (CRC, Memo of meeting, February 18, 1941).
9. For more on Mexican Americans’ perspective, and for more on the CSO, see Bernstein.
10. For more on the Cold War context, see Bernstein.
11. In 1940, Jews lived in both the poor and wealthy areas of LA (twenty-five percent in the poorest areas and twenty-two percent in the wealthiest), but by 1960 they were more prosperous than ever before (Moore 58). For more on Mexican Americans, see Bernstein.
12. For a sample of literature on Jews and whiteness see Goldstein; and Jacobson. On Mexican Americans and “brownness,” see, e.g., Foley.
13. On this phenomenon nationwide, for which the literature focuses on relations between African Americans and Jews, see Diner; and Kaufman.
14. For a further discussion of anti-Semitism in postwar Los Angeles see Moore.
15. For more on Fifield and on Smith’s visits to Los Angeles, see Sitton 82–92. Also see Leonard.
16. The East Los Angeles area was City Terrace Drive (“Swastika Emblems Like Nazis’ Painted on Walls”; “Vandalism Spurs Call for Unity”; and “Vandals Desecrate Synagogue in L.A.; Torah Destroyed”).
17. The CSO’s anti-communism was less ideological, and less vehement, than the CRC’s. For more on this, see Bernstein.
18. For a much more developed discussion of this, see Bernstein.
Works Cited

“6 Southland Folk Indicted as Seditious.” Los Angeles Examiner Jan. 4, 1944. Schwinn, Herman—Nazi Leader Folder, Los Angeles Examiner clippings files. Los Angeles: Regional History Center, Univ. of Southern California.


Committee Collection. Northridge: Urban Archives Center, Oviatt Library, California State Univ., Northridge.


Northridge: Urban Archives Center, Oviatt Library, California State Univ., Northridge.


———. Summary of Operations from June, 1933 to March, 1934. Folder 15—Lewis,


Sherman, G. W. “United They Stand: Another Minority’s Fight against Discrimination.” Article in Frontier, Folder 9—Race: Anti-Mexican Americans, Box 27. American Civil Liberties Union, Southern California. Los Angeles: Department of Special Collections, Charles Young Research Library, Univ. of California, Los Angeles.


From Civic Defense to Civil Rights


