

2. The Gathering Storm

This is the second part of our series, "A Short History of Israel". If you have not read our introduction, it is [here](#). Part 1 is [here](#). See also, the [Table of Contents](#), where you will find links to the other parts when they are posted.

.....

In 1923 the British ceded the Golan Heights from Palestine to the neighbouring French Mandate of Syria, and partitioned the Palestine Mandate [[MAP](#)] into an Arab autonomous region, which they called Transjordan (today's Jordan), and the western part, which they now called Palestine (today's West Bank, Israel, and Gaza Strip) [[MAP](#)]. They barred Jews from settling in Transjordan and announced that the Jewish National Home was to be created only in the western part.

In the Arab riots of 1929, the ancient Jewish community living near the holy places in the Arab town of Hebron were massacred and the survivors fled. Jews were also murdered in Safed, Jerusalem and Jaffa. The Jews of Palestine complained that the British authorities had done nothing to prevent these murders. Jewish self-defence militias, which had existed since Ottoman times, grew, and were unified into a single organisation, the Haganah (which means 'defence').

Arab violence grew worse. The British responded with a combination of force and conciliatory measures – i.e. measures against Jewish immigration and Jewish self-defence. The Jewish population became increasingly fearful for their lives and for those of European Jews, and distrustful and contemptuous of the British.

In 1931 some members of the Revisionist Party formed the Irgun (full name: Irgun Tzeva'i Le'umi, meaning National Military Organization, sometimes known by its Hebrew acronym Etzel), which would fight the British for independence, and also retaliate violently for murders of Jews, sometimes by murdering innocent Arabs. Thus it was a terrorist organisation, and great bitterness developed between it and the Haganah, whose constitution required it to act only in self-defence and which followed the mainstream Zionists' doctrine of restraint and cooperation. The Haganah and the Irgun each believed that the other was betraying the Zionist

project, undermining its chances of succeeding, and hence

endangering all Jews.

The rapid development of the country set in motion by the Jewish National Home project dramatically reversed the demographic and economic decline of the previous century. The flow of Arab emigration was replaced by Arab immigration and return of former emigrants. One immigrant was Yasser Arafat, who was born in Cairo in 1929 of an Egyptian father and a mother whose family came from Palestine. When he was four, she died and he was sent to live with relatives in Jerusalem.

The Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933. The Grand Mufti (al-Husseini) immediately approached the German Consul General in Jerusalem and offered his services. The Nazis were initially lukewarm to this offer because they still hoped to come to an accommodation (or even an alliance) with the British Empire. In Germany, they immediately embarked on anti-Semitic persecution, which soon included widespread murder. German Jewish refugees began to arrive in Palestine. The Arabs of Palestine demanded a ban on all Jewish land purchases and a complete end to Jewish immigration. In 1936, when the British refused the first demand and responded to the second merely by lowering the Jewish immigration quota, the Arabs responded with riots on an unprecedented scale.

In 1937 the Peel Commission proposed that Palestine (i.e. the western part of the original Mandate) would be further partitioned into Jewish and Arab self-governing regions [**MAP**]. The Zionists accepted partition, though they wanted to renegotiate the proposed borders (mainly because they excluded Jerusalem and several areas that had been developed by the Jewish Agency). But a conference of Arab leaders categorically rejected the idea of partition and declared that the British would now have to choose "between our friendship and the Jews".

Britain chose the former. In the White Paper of 1939 (usually referred to as 'the White Paper'), it finally abandoned the idea of a Jewish National Home. Jewish immigration to Palestine was to be limited to a further 100,000 in total, spread over five years. Jewish purchases of land were to be forbidden except within existing Jewish areas. After five years (i.e. in May, 1944), majority rule in the form of an all-Palestine legislature was to be introduced. The Arabs made it clear that at that point, they would use their majority in Palestine as a whole to ban all Jewish immigration.

All other countries (including Britain itself) had already imposed minuscule immigration quotas, so that in total, the world was prepared to give refuge to only a fraction of the hundreds of thousands of Jews trying to escape from Germany. The rest, and the millions of Jews in Nazi-sympathising countries and in countries that were shortly to be invaded by Germany, were trapped there by that universal consensus, several years before the Germans began the Final Solution.

The Nazis, too, sought the friendship of Arab nationalists. They

finally accepted the Mufti's offer.

The Haganah, in addition to its self-defence activities, organised peaceful demonstrations against the White Paper, and secretly began to support illegal Jewish immigration.

The Irgun had been organising such immigration for some time. With its help, and now also that of the Haganah, perhaps 25,000 European Jews succeeded in entering Palestine illegally. The number was so low because there were enormous difficulties: the refugees had to run the gauntlet of both officially- and unofficially-organised violence and expropriation in their home countries; they faced weeks of travel involving extortion, hardship and danger. The authorities in all the countries along their route were trying to stop them (both spontaneously and under pressure from Britain). Then, since they had to come by sea, they had to contend with scarce and unsafe boats (they could not use ordinary shipping lines, of course) and with the Royal Navy. Finally they had to enter and live undetected in Palestine.

Meanwhile Arab immigration continued. The number of Arab immigrants to Palestine during the Mandate period is **unknown and highly controversial**, but the net increase in the Arab Palestinian population was about twice the net increase in the Jewish Palestinian population.

When the Second World War began in September 1939, the British outlawed the Haganah. Illegal possession of a weapon was made a capital offence. Heavy diplomatic pressure was placed on all the countries on the main Jewish escape routes to Palestine to close those routes down, and on Mediterranean countries to ensure that no transportation was available. As a Foreign Office minute put it in December 1939 "The only hope is that all the German Jews will be stuck at the mouth of the Danube for lack of ships to take them". The Royal Navy's patrols to intercept illegal immigrants were increased. Those who were caught were imprisoned on the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, where the regime was designed to be (in the words of a Colonial Office minute of January 1941) "sufficiently punitive to continue to act as a deterrent to other Jews in Eastern Europe". Internees were also forbidden to join the Allied armed forces. Legal immigration was restricted to levels below even those of the White Paper. For almost a year during 1941, no legal immigration certificates were issued at all.

As the war continued, these measures were gradually relaxed. Many Haganah and Irgun members volunteered for the British armed forces: 30,000 of the half-million Jews of Palestine enlisted (as compared with 9,000 of the 1.5 million Arabs). Many volunteered for hazardous operations behind enemy lines. The Irgun promised not to attack British forces for the duration of the war. A small splinter group, Lehi (disparagingly known as the 'Stern Gang', after their leader Avraham Stern), refused to cease operations because they deemed that the White Paper had made the British legitimate targets.

The British relaxed the immigration restrictions for Palestine in 1943

– Jews fleeing from the Holocaust could now enter Palestine at will if they got as far as Turkey, but by now only a handful were arriving. Conditions at the Mauritius prison were not improved until 1944.

When France surrendered in 1940, the Nazis set up an intelligence and propaganda base in Syria (nominally under the control of the puppet Vichy French government), from where, in April 1941, they helped to instigate a pro-Nazi coup in Iraq, headed by Rashid Ali al-Gailani, a former Prime Minister and associate of the Mufti. In support of the coup, the Mufti, who had been deposed by the British for inciting the 1936 riots, declared jihad (holy war) against the British. The coup was soon suppressed by British soldiers (though not before about 150 Iraqi Jews had been murdered). Al-Gailani fled to Germany to join the Mufti who was trying to negotiate a formal Arab-Nazi alliance with Hitler against the Jews and British. They both remained with the Nazis for the rest of the war.

The Mufti made Nazi propaganda broadcasts, organised parachute attacks against the British, and helped to recruit an army of over 20,000 Muslim SS volunteers in Yugoslavia, for which purpose he was formally admitted to the SS with the rank of Gruppenführer (Major General). Captured by the French after the war, he escaped (thus avoiding prosecution as a war criminal by the Yugoslav government), and found refuge in Egypt, where he continued to incite violence and demand the total expulsion of Jews from Palestine until his death in 1974.

In May 1941, the Haganah began secretly training an elite fighting force (the Palmach).

In the late 1930s, some congressmen in the United States argued that Alaska (which was at that time being prepared for Statehood and was in dire need of immigrants) should be exempted from the United States' immigration quotas so that some victims of Nazi persecution could find refuge there. In November 1938, Representative Charles Buckley of New York wrote an open letter to President Roosevelt asking him to support legislation to that effect. Roosevelt refused. The idea also encountered **considerable opposition** in Alaska itself. It continued to be discussed for several more years but never found enough support. In 1939 the Wagner-Rogers bill, which would have admitted 20,000 refugee children to the United States, failed in the Senate.

During the war, most of the Jews of Europe were murdered by the Germans and their allies and collaborators.

Part 3: The War of Independence

Sat, 05/10/2003 - 14:31 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

The Irgun

Did the Irgun begin as a terrorist organization or did it turn into one later? I read somewhere it started out more like the Haganah. Is it

fair to call it terrorist?

by **Rob Klein** on Sat, 05/10/2003 - 16:48 | [reply](#)

The Irgun

We have responded to the above comment [here](#).

by **Editor** on Mon, 05/12/2003 - 20:35 | [reply](#)

The Irgun

On the question of whether or not Irgun was a terrorist organization: at the risk of splitting hairs, I would argue that, if we accept terrorism to be the deliberate (and random) targeting of civilians for the political purpose of undermining society, then Irgun's status is ambiguous. Yes, Irgun did carry out assassinations and bombings (in addition to its status as a paramilitary organization). But Irgun's targets were **military** targets, with no exceptions that I'm aware of. Even the King David hotel bombing (a subject of great controversy all by itself), which is often cited as a deliberate attack on civilians, was not -- the King David was targeted because it was the headquarters of the British military administration in Jerusalem. (The personnel of the hotel were also warned *before* the attack, something I heartily wish modern terrorist organizations would emulate.)

Lehi, on the other hand (Lohamei Herut Israel, the "Freedom Fighters of Israel"), did indeed target civilians and diplomatic targets.

Daniel Schwartz
Medford, MA

by a reader on Tue, 05/13/2003 - 21:04 | [reply](#)

The Irgun

We'd omit the provisos "random" and "undermining society" from your definition of terrorism. But in any case, for the other reasons you give, the blowing up of the King David Hotel was not a terrorist act. But things like this were:

Etzel rejected the 'restraint' policy of the Haganah and carried out armed reprisals against Arabs, which were condemned by the Jewish Agency. Many of its members were arrested by the British authorities; one of them, Shlomo Ben Yosef, was hanged for shooting an Arab bus.

(See <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/History/irgun.html>.)

by **Editor** on Tue, 05/13/2003 - 21:31 | [reply](#)

Arab Immigration

Meanwhile Arab immigration continued. The number of Arab immigrants to Palestine during the Mandate period is unknown and highly controversial, but the net increase in the Arab Palestinian population was about twice the net increase in the Jewish Palestinian population.

If one compares the rise in birthrates across the region during this period, coupled with the lack of any serious documentation about immigration in the area, it is not honest to ascribe the rise in Arab population to immigration alone. Birthrates were multiplying in Syria, and the Lebanon, and presumably Palestine (where data is scarce). Anecdotal evidence suggests that immigration was limited. But, as you say, there is no solid evidence one way or the other, but the balance of mediocre evidence would suggest that immigration did not play a large role in the population rise, and that better accounting and higher birthrates were the primary causes.

by a reader on Wed, 07/02/2003 - 19:05 | [reply](#)

They didn't

They didn't "ascribe the rise in Arab population to immigration alone". But if the hugely increased economic activity and infrastructure building in the Jewish-settled areas did not cause a huge influx of labor from the surrounding run-down region, how would you explain that? It wouldn't make sense.

by a reader on Sun, 10/24/2004 - 00:08 | [reply](#)

Standards of living were incr

Standards of living were increasing throughout this time period, which would naturally increase birth rates. I personally don't believe that immigration was the *chief* cause for the increased Palestinian population.

by a reader on Thu, 11/11/2004 - 05:11 | [reply](#)

i just wanted to knoe, if it

i just wanted to knoe, if it was in the year 1939 and i lived in germany. What route do i take to get out of germany so i can get to america? can ise the picture?
-thanks

by a reader on Wed, 01/19/2005 - 14:49 | [reply](#)

There was no route

There would have been no route to America, because the US quotas were filled and the US Government did not permit any more Jewish refugees to enter. See the story of the **St Louis**.

by **Editor** on Thu, 01/27/2005 - 19:32 | [reply](#)

[home](#) | [archives](#) | [polls](#) | [search](#)

Copyright © 2008 Setting The World To Rights