Civil War: Zionist vs. Zionist

The three terrorist organizations, Haganah, Irgun and the Stern Gang, with their respective! philosophies and tactics, represented a conflict within the Yishuv over the future leader-ship of the Jewish state. Because of the League of Nations' recognition of the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency as the responsible organizations for the implementation of the Jewish national home, the members of the Agency felt that they were the sole representatives of the Jewish people. Although the Jewish Agency did not exist until 1929, the World Zionist Organization had an official role in Palestine as early as 1918. While attempting to form a Jewish Agency as called for in the League of Nations Mandate and incorporate Zionist and non-Zionist philosophies into that agency, the World Zionist Organization administered Jewish goals in Palestine until the Agency's creation in 1929. In 1920, the elected Assembly and National Council were created. In 1920, the Ger'eral Federation of Labor, or Histadrut, also was formed. The largest employer and strongest voice in Palestine, the Histadrut was actually a non-political organization. But political parties, such as Ben-Gurion's Mapai Party, controlled the Histadrut.

As a result, the Histadrut, led by Mapai, held key portfolios in the Jewish Agency and thereby took the role of Zionist leadership. The Mapai and its partners in political thought, Paole Zion and Hapoil Hatzair formed the socialist wing of the Vaad Leumi. The appearance, therefore, of Jabctinsky's Zionist Revisionists on the political right was viewed by Ben-Gurion and his associates as a challenge for leadership of the Jewish Nation.

When viewed from Ben-Gurion's perspective, it would seem almost inevitable that the Jew-versus-British and Jew-versus- Arab controversies would extend to Jew-versus-Jew. From the literature available, it appears that such conflict did occur, but it was a one-sided effort. David Ben-Gurion and his allies emphasize a greater challenge to Jewish Agency authority than that which actually existed. It ir probable that the challenge was real, but less strong than indicated by Ben-Gurion and strong- er than maintained by his opponents, Katz and Begin. Had it not been for the Second World War, challenge for Zionist leadership by the Revisionists might have occurred in the 1939-1942 time frame. The forced cooperation between the British, the Jewish Agency, Haganah and the Irgun to combat Nazi Germany installed the internal Jewish conflict until 1944-1548. Revisionists claim that the Biltmore Program of 1942 was "belated acceptance of Jabotinsky's thinking by Weizmann and Ben-Gurion." How-ever in adopting the Revisionist's dem°and for a Jewish state, Ben-Gurion managed to take all che credit fo the idea away from the Revisionists and even shunted Chaim Weizmann onto the sidelines.

The "Jewish Revolt" which began when the Irgun renounced its truce with England and attacked the British anew in 1944 was "not only without their [Jewish Agency] consent, but in defiance of their prohibition.1 0 The strongest opposition to the Irgun and Stern Gang attacks was from the official Jewish organizations. Jewish Agency propaganda created the image of the Irgun and Lehi as "criminals and fascists ... stabbing Zionism in the back and attempting to overthrow Jewish authority.'

The "dissidents," as the Irgun and Lehi were called, were fed up with attempts at negotiation with the British. Begin wrote:

> "If the Jewish Agency obeyed the British and the Irgun obeyed the Agency, the rule of the High Commissioner might continue forever. '

The Jewish Agency, however, was told by Prime Minister

Churchill that possibilities for a Jewish state were good.

> "I carved up Palestine once, I shall unite it again and carve it up a second time. ''

In autumn 1944, the Haganah commander, Golomb, told Menachem Begin that secret discussions were underway with the

British and that continued Irgun attacks on the British would hinder the discussions. He then threatened that Haganah would "step in and finish you," if the Irgun attacks weren't halted. Moshe Sneh also tried to persuade the Irgun to stop its attacks on the British, but the Irgun said that it didn't want Jewish fate to rest in British hands.

In addition to the internal challenge for Zionist leadership, the Agency had another problem. The British were holding

the Jewish Agency responsible for the acts of terror by the Irgun and the Stern Gang. If the Jewish Agency couldn't control Jews in their homeland, the authority of Ben-Gurion's government as a spokesman for world Jewry would be in question. Lord Moyne's assassination gave Ben-Gurion the excuse he needed to reduce the effectiveness of the Stern Gang and theIrgun. "The Season" was initiated. In a speech to the Histadrut Conference, Ben-Gurion outlined a four-point program to liquidate the dissidents.18 They were to be expelled from school or fired from their jobs. They were not to be given refuge by the Yishuv. The population was not to submit to threats by the Irgun. The Yishuv was to cooperate with the British forces in rounding up Irgunists and Sternists. The plan was not well received in the Yishuv. Cooperation with the British was anathema.

The position of the Jewish Agency can be appreciated. To Ben-Gurion the creation of a Jewish state appeared imminent. Jewish unrest would only convince the British of the continued instability of the area.and confirm the continuing need for British presence in Palestine to maintain the peace. If the dissidents could not be controlled by the Jewish leadership, then serious questions would be asked about the legitimacy of that leadership and its ability to govern a new nation.

The other side of the question, the dissidents' view, claims that Ben-Gurion and the rest of the "official" Zionist leadership ignored the Arab problem until the last minute in order to consolidate their political position. They claim that time and energy expended to combat the irgun and the Stern Gang could have been directed toward Britain or toward the Arabs.

The literature also gives the impression that it was the dissidents' feeling that the Jewish Agency deliberately ignored the Arab problem so as not to offend the British, encourage British departure, and make it appear that Zionism was not endangering the Palestinian Arabs.

Menachem Begin states a forceful case in The Revolt. There was indeed a high probability of a Jewish civil war in Begin's opinion. But, Begin claims, the Irgun dissented in order to fight for Israel, not to rule it and that the Irgun's struggle was innocent of any secondary motive. Begin says two factors prevented a civil war: first, the Irgun was never taught to hate its enemies; secon*d, the Irgun fought for Jewish rule, and was not concerned with power--a point he says the Jewish Agency could not understand. Thus, according to Begin, the "civil war" later claimed by Ben-Gurion did not exist--Ben-Gurion had [according to Begin] no rival for control of the state.

Begin states the Irgun was determined not to create a civil war--so determined that Begin's orders forbade retaliatory attacks on Haganah. This was evidently a wise move on his part, because several Haganah attempts to dismember the Irgun physically were aborted by public pressure from the Yishuv.

In retrospect, Chaim Weizmann remarked that the dissident violence had had a positive effect on the Yishuv and garnered popular support. Katz depicts Yishuv reaction to Irgun and Stern violence thusly:

> "Violence paid political dividends to the Arabs while Jewish 'havalaga' was expected to be its own reward. It didn't even win official British recognition. "

Begin supports this contention by this statement regarding the various roles of the Jewish Agency, Haganah, the Irgun and Stern Gang in eliminating British rule in Palestine:

> "Let us remember that this was a revolt by dissidents and throughout almost the whole period official leaders in the Jewish Agency did not want the revolt. Throughout the whole period they certainly did not want the dissidents."

The "almost" referred to is that period from November 1945 to September 1946 when the Jewish Resistance Movement unified Haganah, Stern Gang and Irgun in their opposition to the new Labour Goverrnment's policies concerning Palestine.

During this period of joint operations, Ben-Gurion supported the terrorism. "It is difficult to ask the Yishuv to obey the law when Great Britain is violating the mandate.

The seizure of the Jewish Agency by the British and the demolition of the King David Hotel ended the cooperation between Haganah and the dissidents.

Although Israel Galili told Begin that Haganah would prevent Yishuv and Jewish press criticism of the Irgun attack on the King David Hotel, Haganah didn't follow through. Even

though Haganah had an interest in the attack, politically it felt it could make greater gains in Yishuv support by condemning the Irgun act. Ben-Gurion, in France-Soir, said

> "The Irgun is the enemy of the Jewish people--it has always opposed me."

A rather odd condemnation from the man who possibly benefited most from the attack.

Menachem Begin claims that the June 29 attacks on the Jewish Agency allowed the "defeatists" led by Moshe Sneh to gain control of the official Jewish institutions (Haganah and Palmach) at the expense of Israel Galili's "activist" faction. Begin says this event ended all Haganah resistance against the British and redirected Haganah efforts toward immigration. Begin goes further to state that Galili, under pressure from the Irgun to support anti-British civil disobedience, was unable to do so because of Jewish Agency interference.

In early 1947, the Palmach engaged in anti-terrorist, beatings and kidnappings. With Haganah assistance seventy-eight Irgunists and Sternists were caught and imprisoned by the British.3 4 The Palestine Government attempted to persuade the Palestine newspapers to publish pictures and descriptions of the terrorists to aid in their identification and capture. Under threats from the Irgun and the Stern Gang, the papers elected not to do so.

In a speech to the Vaad Leumi on April 1, 1947, Ben-Gurion

said:

> "The terrorists have guns, so have we. We have more men than they, and when that time comes our force will have to act because they only understand the language of force. '"

The London Times analyzed the Haganah attacks on the terrorists as pro-Zionist but not pro-Bcitish, "These attacks by moderates should not be taken as an indication of growing Jewish support for the Government, as actually anti-British feeling among the Jews is stronger now than ever. The Times perceived the Haganah would rather punish the dissidents themselves than turn them over to the British.

After the announcement of the British withdrawal from Palestine, the Irgun

> "resolved to give immediate and unequivocal support to a provisional government established by the Jewish Agency on or before May 15. If, however, the Jewish Agency fails to set up a government by May 15, the Irgun would establish a provisional government by itself or in concern with others."

In the face of competition for control of the Israeli Government, official Jewish Agency attacks on the dissidents were stepped up. Katz says:

> "Begin and his comrades were not to be allowed to reap the political rewards of the Irgun war on British rule. Ben-Gurion was to be acclaimed as the man who forced the British to leave."

As the day of independence approached, Ben-Gurion was determined to eliminate the "independent" armies, and create one Jewish force. He felt he could control Haganah. The leftest Palmach had to be handled with kid gloves. Ben-Gurion said the right wing dissidents couldn't be handled at all. But, even Haganah wasn't homogeneous and totally under Jewish Agency control. Ben-Gurion felt it needed corrections to create the core of the IDF. He and Galili reorganized Haganah to allow closer control by the Jewish Agency and tightened Haganah discipline.

Several agreements were then made with the Irgun to assimilate them into the Israeli Defence Force. On March 8, 1948, the Irgun and the Stern Gang agreed to be incorporated into the IDF. At the last moment, however, the Irgun pulled out because its fighters would have been dispersed within the IDF. The Irgun wanted to join and fight as a unit. A second agreement was made on June 3, but an incident occurred which according to Begin almost kindled a civil war. According to Ben-Gurion it was a civil war.

The Hebrew Committee (the Irguns' counterpart to the Jewish Agency) had purchased a surplus U.S. landing ship/tank (LST). It had been renamed the Altalena. It was purchased before the U.N. partition and British evacuation of Palestine and had been loading Irgun recruits and arms in France for Shipment to Palestine. On June 11, 1948, while a U.N. cease-fire was in force, the Altalena sailed with 1000 Irgunists, trucks, 5000 Lee-Enfield rifles, 250 Bren guns and 5 million rounds of ammunition. Attem.pts by the Provisional Israeli Government to prevent its sailing under the U.N. cease-fire were too late to prevent the Altalena's departure. Kurzman alleges that the French supplied the arms to the Irgun because they were bitter over Britain's handling of French interests in Syria and Lebanon and because the Irgunists had convinced Foreign Minister Georges Bidault that a strong Irgunist political power in Israel would support France in her North Africa disputes.

Begin, Avraham, Meridor and Katz were all present on May 15, a month before the Altalena sailed, when Begin told Haganah leaders Israel Galili, David Cohen and Levi Shkolnik (now Eshkol) of the arms and men ou the Altalena. Ben-Gurion protested the sailing. He saw the arms shipment as a violation of the ceasefire. Katz and Begin say that in an agreement June 1, Begin agreed to give 80% of the arms to the IDF, but he reserved 20% for the Irgunists in the Old City of Jerusalem. At this time. Jerusalem was under seige and the defense of the Jewish sector was undertaken by the Irgun and Stern Gang. Jerusalem was not part of Israel at the time because it had not been conquered by the IDF. Begin felt that Ben-Gurion had no control over Irgun actions in Jerusalem because Ben-Gurion didn't control Jerusalem.

When it arrived in Israel, the Altalena attempted to land its cargo at Kvar Vitkin, a kibutz in northern israel. The Ben-Gurion government demanded that the Irgun yield all of the arms to the

IDF. The Irgun refused. A violent clash took place between the Irgun and IDF forces at Kfar Vitkin. The Altalena put to sea once again. As it headed south toward Tel Aviv, the Altalena was shadowed by two Israeli corvettes which would not let the Altalena make for open water. The Altalena's captain finally beac:hed the shi) in Tel Aviv off Fishman S'reet. The Irgun again refused to give up the arms to the IDF. Ben-Gurion cried civil war. In a call to Yigal Allon of the Palmach be said, "We are being faced with an open revolt. Not only is Tel Aviv in danger of falling to the rebel forces, but the future of the state is at stake. In an artillery and small arms battle, the Altalena was sunk by IDF artillery. Casualties were 16 Irgunists killed, 40 wounded, anL 2 Haganah killed, 6 wounded.

Katz analyzes the Altalena affair and comes tc the conclusion that Begin was at fault for his naivete in believing that Ben-Gurion as the head of the government of Israel could allow Begin's private army, the Irgun, to exist, let alone receive weapons. However, Katz goes further, saying that Ben-Gurion's explanation, designed to calm the pro-Irgunists in the Yishuv was full of holes.

"First, Mr. Ben-Gurion's declared concern for the truce was sheer nonsense. Second, the Irgun had brought the ship to, of all places, Kfar Vitkin, a Ptronghold of anti-Irgun forces. Trird, the fighting men on board [the Altalena] had been landed at Kfar Vitkin and sent away. Fourth, at Tel Aviv, the ship had been fired on after raising the white flag. Finally, men who had abandoned the ship were fired on as they swam to shore."

Begin claims that when the Altalena landed, the Irgun had ceased to exist. It had been integrated into fe IDF everywhere except Jerusalem. He claims that the attack on the Altalena was necessary to strengthen Ben-Gurion's position in the Government of Israel. 54 Begin says.

"Official propaganda, hiding behind the smoke screen, pretended that the Irgun had brought over the Altalena in order to prepare an armed revolt against the Government of Israel.

"I must therefore repeat: the Provisional Government knew about the arms ship sailing towards our shores against the instructions which had arrived too late. And it was that Government that decided to bring the Altalena in during the truce period."

Katz summarized that Ben-Gurion manufactured a civil war with Begin cver the Altalena to reduce Begin's political power base, his Yishuv popularity, and to destroy the Irgun, thereby eliminating the major threat to Ben-Gurion's rule.

On September 20, 1948, the Irgun was presented with an ultimatum by the Israeli Government. Disband, period. On September 21, after eleven years of underground and four months of public existence, the Irgun Zvai Leumi disbanded and integrated into the Israeli Defense Forces. The Stern Gang had become part of the I.D.F. on creation of the Jewish state.

The subsequent assassination of Count Bernadotte by the

"Fatherland Front" cast doubts on the ability of the new Israeli government to control internal terrorism. U.S. special representative, J. G. MacDonald, told Moshe Sbaret, I want the provisional government to realize how important it now is for it to demonstrate its own authority.' The Israeli government moved against the Stern Gang with the intent of liquidating it. The Lehi numbers were so small they didn't really pose a threat to the State of Israel. Katz claims the government had

plans to attack the Irgan as well as the Stern Gang in the confusion following Bernadotte's assassination. Many Lehi members were given Irgun identification cards by Begin to hide their true affiliation from the Israeli movernment.

After this incident, the war against the Arabs took precedence over the internal conflicts and the wee.kened dissidents took their programs aid policies to the oniy forum left to them by Ben-Gurion--the Knesset.

Revision #17
Created 2026-09-10 05:15:55 UTC by Dara
Updated 2026-09-10 15:08:01 UTC by Dara