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Abstract

This essay will examine the historic links between Zionist Revisionism and the militancy of the Irgun under the command of Menachem Begin in Palestine before Israel won its statehood in 1948. The tactics utilized by the Irgun would be an extension of Zionist ideals coming to grips with the aftermath of the Holocaust and being channeled into a rational exercise of violence against the British occupation and the Palestinian Arabs. They would detonate a bomb at the King David Hotel, execute two British sergeants in what became known as the Sergeants Affair, and actively participate in the massacre at the village of Deir Yassin. These actions achieved mixed results, but saw both the British and Arabs retreat while compromising the ideals of the greater Zionist movement for peace (with their Arab neighbors) in the eyes of the international world and demonstrated in the eyes of the colonials worldwide the potency of terrorism and guerilla warfare.
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Timeline of Events

63 C.E. Conquest of Palestine by Roman Empire

66 -70 C.E. First Roman Jewish War

70 -73 C.E. Roman siege at Masada

115-117 C.E. Kitos War

132-135 C.E. Bar Kokhba Revolt and Jewish Diaspora from Roman Empire

1791 Pale of Settlement in Russian Empire

1880 Pogroms in Russian Empire

1896 Theodore Herzl publishes A Jewish State

1914-1918 First World War

Nov. 2, 1917 Balfour Declaration

June 1920 Haganah defense force established

1931 Irgun formed after split with Haganah.

1933 Dachau concentration camp opens

1941 News of Nazi extermination of Jews leaks out into Soviet Union

1936-1945 Second World War

1944 Menachem Begin becomes commander of Irgun

1946 Bombing of King David Hotel

July 27, 1947 Sergeants Affair

April 9, 1948 Deir Yassin Massacre

May 14, 1948 Jewish Statehood

May 15, 1948 British Mandate Expires

June 1, 1948 Altalena Affair and the absorption of the Irgun into the Israeli Defense Force
Methodology and Historiography

There have been few histories written on the Jewish military organization, the Irgun. The Irgun is often mentioned in the histories leading up to beginning of the modern state of Israel, but few sources have discussed this organization in detail. The two sources that do focus on the Irgun specifically are *The Revolt* and *Terror Out of Zion: The Irgun Zvai Leumi, LEHI, and the Palestinian Underground, 1929-1949*. The other sources can be divided into three categories of history: military history, Israeli history, and colonial history relating to the Middle East. The scholars of these sources are also investigated to understand the strengths and weakness of their narratives and where the gaps may lie.

*The Revolt* was written by the Irgun’s final commander, Menachem Begin who wrote it as memoir on his involvement with the organization and the organization’s influence in the fight for Israeli statehood. It is a primary source in this project and Begin’s claims have been compared to what other scholars have written on the subject of colonial Palestine and the struggle for Israeli independence. J. Bowyer Bell’s *Terror Out of Zion* is a secondary source whose foreword of the book offers an idea as to why the Irgun and the smaller yet more radical LEHI are not written about, “It appears that Irgun-LEHI were considerably more important than common wisdom would allow. Their analysis was often far more accurate than that of the recognized institutions, and their relative present obscurity—not to mention their deserved reputation as a terrorist group—has been a conscious rewrite of history. The orthodox view of Irgun-LEHI has only begun to erode under disinterested scholarshiply attack and the shifting
tides of Israeli political fortunes."¹ He suggests that it is because the role of terrorism was so
influential to Israeli statehood it is looked upon as a stain when the tragic fruits of their actions
are enjoyed by so many Israelis today.

The remainder of the sources in this project can be divided into three categories: The
first are military histories focusing on the Israeli army or a history through a military lens such
as Martin van Creveld’s *The Sword and the Olive* and then there are “new historians” like Benny
Morris who try to maintain a moderate, non-partisan view of Israeli history. The second are
those histories and memoirs focusing on Jewish and Israeli leaders such as the memoirs of
Theodore Herzl, Chaim Weizmann, and Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky or the narratives in Amos
Elon’s *The Israelis: Founders and Sons*; and finally histories written about Palestine (before
1948) and the Middle East’s colonial histories under European imperialism such as Michael J.
Cohen and Martin Kolinsky in *Demise of the British Empire in the Middle East* or William Roger
Louis’s *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945-1951*.

One might have noticed that a majority of the sources mentioned above have Jewish
surnames and indeed many of them are of Jewish or Israeli heritage. The narratives of Israeli
history are typically Jews and Israelis. By contrast there is noticeable silence from non-Israeli
sources. This might be because not many of the outside can read or speak Hebrew. The Hebrew
language itself is a symbol of national pride having been a dead language that was resurrected
after being extinct for over 1800 years. Much of the English language material published has

¹ J. Bowyer Bell, *Terror Out of Zion: The Irgun Zvai Leumi, LEHI, and the Palestinian Underground, 1929-
been written by those who are fluent in the Hebrew or translated from Hebrew language sources like Menachem Begin’s *The Revolt*.

This means they retain certain biases towards Israel, Israeli history and the Israeli Defense Force, which consolidated the majority of the military factions: the Haganah, Irgun, LEHI, Palmach, etc.\(^2\) Often times the historians themselves or their children have served in the Israeli Defense Force as a part of fulfilling mandatory military service as citizens of Israeli. There have not been many historians who have turned their eye to the early beginnings of Israel who do not have an emotional attachment with the state. Many of them have participated or lived through events that have forged the national character of Israel like the War of Independence in 1948, the Six Day War in 1967, and the Yom Kippur War in 1973. One must look at the year these authors published their books. The nearer they are to the events above likely has a correlation to what they discuss about Israel and how its neighboring countries are framed. In the conflicts that took place in the span of 25 years, the Israeli historian writing about this period naturally has a very slanted opinion of this era that is a part of the Israel’s national myth.

Martin van Crevel and Ze’ev Schiff are examples of historians whose work are critical of Israel’s past, yet are still marked by the feelings of nationalism that springs from the forging of a national home for the Jewish people. An example of an Israeli “new historian” would be Benny Morris who belongs and still identifies with the Zionist vision. This new historian is one who steps away from Israel’s early rightwing Zionism and moves toward reconciling Israel’s past with

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its Arab neighbors. In contrast, foreign sources while not necessarily anti-Israeli will see the use of terror tactics used by the Irgun and other military organizations on an emotional level rather than on a rational one. It is the emotional reaction and response to acts of terror that enabled the Irgun to be so effective. All of this must be taken into consideration when discussing the terror exercised by the Irgun under the leadership of Menachem Begin whose campaign of violence against the British and Arabs would attrite them to the breaking point.

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....That out of blood and fire and tears and ashes a new specimen of human being was born, a specimen completely unknown to the world for over eighteen hundred years, “the FIGHTING JEW.” That Jew, whom the world considered dead and buried never to rise again, has risen. For he has learned that “simple truth” of life and death, and he will never again go down to the sides of the pit and vanish from off the earth. –Menachem Begin, The Revolt

Introduction

The Irgun was a military organization that was formed in 1931 after a split with another Jewish defense force, the Haganah, for political and ideological reasons. The Irgun believed that policy of self restraint and defense, havlagah, was encouraging the streak of violence between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. They wanted to “answer terror for terror” in order to discourage attacks on the Jewish settlements. The members of the Irgun were not socialists, but were of a part of a conservative strain within Zionism known as the Revisionists who held to the belief that if there was to be a Jewish state, its people would have to assert themselves. The last leader of the Irgun was Menachem Begin who would stand at the helm and see the birth of Israel in 1948.

The balance between Zionist Revisionism and the Irgun’s campaign of terror under Menachem Begin was not something that just manifested in the night. Their union was brought

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6 Irgun Zvai Leumi is the formal Hebrew name of this organization, but is commonly referred to as the Irgun. It means National Military Organization.
about by a gravity that would inevitably bring them together because it was the best possible way for them to achieve their most precious dream: the birth of a Jewish state. With statehood, the Jews from all over the world could return to their ancestral homeland, the Promise Land.

The price at which the Zionist dream of independence was fulfilled was very steep and many lives were lost in its becoming. Zionism in itself was the secular religion of a new kind of Jew. It is the belief the Jewish soul can be reborn and liberated from the Diaspora and no longer would the Jew be malnourished in a multitude of foreign lands. The Jew who lived in “Zion” would thrive. Jabotinsky, the ardent advocate of the Zionist Revisionism movement professed that the new Jew was “tall, strong and hard, tanned and freckled, dynamic, ill-mannered, patriotic, impudent and good-hearted, arrogant and well-liked.”

The migration to Palestine was a trickle until after the Balfour Declaration that Jews began to drift into Palestine in droves. There were various Jewish organizations that had been purchasing parcels of land from wealthy Palestinian expatriates who lived abroad for several decades. This brought the Jews to live on land that was also inhabited by Palestinians who were suspicious of these new foreigners. The men and women who would unite Zionism and the Irgun’s emerged out of the shtetls of Eastern Europe. They were a motley crew of Jews from the steppes of Russia and the lands of Lithuania, Ukraine, Poland and Galicia and later those of the international Jewry. Zionists were composed largely of secular Jews whose pioneering spirit

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8 Zion is synonymous with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and the Land of Israel; William W. Baker, _Theft of a Nation_ (Las Vegas: Defenders Publications 1982) 22.
11 Shtetl is a Yiddish word meaning a small town or village.
believed they could return to the place of their forefathers and redeem the land through labor. They left behind all those possessions they could not carry on their backs and traveled to Palestine by foot and over sea, all for a land whose soil had not yielded fruit for two millennia and whose swamplands eked out malaria and ravaged many of their number. They would give themselves over to the land and work it from sun up to sundown. They would call it home and do whatever it took to defend it from those who would try to take it from them. It was from this passion that Zionist Revisionism and the bombing at the King David Hotel, the execution of two British sergeants, and the brutal massacre at Deir Yassin would create a political environment that would ultimately conceive the Jewish state of Israel.
Origins of Zionism

Zionism in Eastern Europe has always been rooted in the desire of Jews to return home to the Promise Land or Eretz Israel that was according to the Jewish religion, given to them by God to be their home and they were to be His people. The Jews were expelled from Israel by the Roman Empire in what became known as the Diaspora in the years 132-135 C.E. They were pushed across the empire which spanned from Spain to North Africa to Northern and Eastern Europe to the Black Sea. From there they would settle in foreign countries and be expelled and once more were forced to move to a new area where they were not persecuted. However, persecution was an inescapable reality and they had to choose lands that were not overtly hostile to them. Many Jews would end up settling in cosmopolitan areas of Western Europe, but the majority would come to settle in Eastern Europe in Poland, Lithuania, Russia and the territory that is now called Ukraine. By the reign of Catherine the Great the lot of the Jews had not changed much. Thousands of Jews came under Russian rule through the partitions in Poland that effectively dissolved the country. The visibility of Jews posed a problem for Catherine the Great and so it was decided to gather up as many Jews as possible in Russia and forcibly settle them in an arbitrary region that was known as the “Pale of Settlement” an area that consists of White Russia (Belorussia), Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, and parts of Western Russia in 1791.

In 1882 500,000 Jews living in rural areas of the Pale were forced to leave their homes and live in towns or townslets (ghettos) in the Pale. 200,000 Jews living along the western frontier of Russia were also moved into the Pale. 700,000 Jews living east of the Pale were driven into the Pale by 1891.

The Pale Settlement would add even more stress to an already impoverished people. This quickened the transition of the Jews in Russia from a rural society to a more urbanized environment. More than ninety percent of all Jews in Russia lived in the Pale.\textsuperscript{15} The level of poverty found in this area was so appalling that even the Czar Alexander I’s own bureaucracy made note of it somewhat out of shock, but also out of pride.\textsuperscript{16} They were shocked by the effectiveness of the implemented policy of segregation and this sensation was turned to pride for it was a political coup on the czar’s behalf. Czar Alexander I was quick like many of the successive czars to assign the blame for Russia’s backwardness, economic shortcomings, and civil unrest to the Jews of the Pale. He and his constituents would quietly endorse the Russian people who would spontaneously initiate a \textit{pogrom}\textsuperscript{17} upon the Jewish communities, who in their view were exploiting them for their own financial gain. The czar was happy to let his subjects antagonize the Jews so long as they did not blame him for their troubles.\textsuperscript{18} And thus, the Jews were not even citizens but kept in a category all of their own. Catherine the Great did not even bother trying to Russify the Jews. They were never assimilated by any of the next five czars that would rule Russia. By 1880 there were approximately 5.5 million Jews living in Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{19} They were always regarded as outsiders and were never truly allowed to assimilate.

At the heart of Jewish life in Eastern Europe was the \textit{shtetl}, a community housing almost exclusively Jews. Because it was in many ways cut off from the rest of society, the Jews had to

\textsuperscript{15} Vital, \textit{The Origins of Zionism}, 31.  
\textsuperscript{17} Pogrom is a Russian word meaning devastation.  
\textsuperscript{18} Luttwak and Horowitz, \textit{The Israeli Army}, 3.  
\textsuperscript{19} Vital, \textit{The Origins of Zionism}, 30;
rely on one another if they wanted to survive and have a life that consisted of more than poverty. The community was close knit and lived life side by side in the synagogue and the market. Together they observed holidays and participated in festivals clearly related back to the experiences of their ancestors in Palestine. Within the shtetl there was a remarkable amount of leeway given for self government that was made up of unpaid volunteers who served by their own accord. There was universal schooling for children to learn the Torah and the Talmud. This literacy set them apart from the majority of the Eastern European population whose literacy was severely lacking due not only from the rural setting but also from the sheer poverty in Russia. There was social welfare that provided for orphans and children whose families could not afford a doctor to treat their illness or education.  

Modern Jewish nationalism was born after the first wave of pogroms in 1880. The violence spread like wild fire from shtetl to shtetl, from Odessa to Warsaw. The inhabitants of these settlements faced horrific treatment at the hands of their non-Jewish neighbors who killed, beat, raped, looted and destroyed the meager existence they had indiscriminately. The pogroms and utter poverty proved to be a catalyst for a definitive change in thought. The leaders of the communities strove to find a solution that would either alleviate their suffering or cure it all together.

There were unintentional consequences from Jewish persecution in Russia even before the outbreak of the pogroms. Being barred from Russian universities, the Jews took their schooling into their own hands. In addition to the basic education in the Hebrew Bible and

\[\text{Elon, The Israelis: Founders and Sons, 45-47.}\]

\[\text{Elon, The Israelis: Founders and Sons, 34.}\]
Talmud, a number of young Jewish men and women whose families were wealthy enough to send them off to Western European universities in such places as Germany and Switzerland were exposed to the ideals of the Enlightenment that inspired them to immerse themselves in learning all they could about the outside world. Before they had been ignorant and though not content with their socio-economic position, they had been able to endure it. With new found knowledge of the outside world, they became disgusted and resentful of how their people were treated by the government.

Meanwhile in Western Europe, Jewish intellectuals were brooding about their status as citizens. Despite the emancipation that took place after the French Revolution and Enlightenment, Jews were still regarded as second class citizens and were seen as the social “other”. The man who would become known as the founder of Zionism; Theodore Herzl, was living as a journalist in France in the 1890s covering the trial of Alfred Dreyfus, a French captain who was accused and convicted of treason and espionage. Herzl was disgusted with the trial and could sense that there was something more going on. He like so many others felt that the conviction was based upon false accusations. It did eventually come to light that Dreyfus was innocent of the charges against him and that he had been a convenient scapegoat. He began to ponder the idea of Jews creating their own state and establishing a place where the Jews could finally live in peace.

The anti-Semitism in France caused him to become disillusioned with the notions of Jews assimilating into their adopted countries. Herzl wrote down his thoughts that would merge into a whole book that he titled The Jewish State. It would prove to be a gift to the

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22 Elon, The Israelis: Founders and Sons, 57.
Jewish people for it was a manifestation of what they were feeling. Herzl’s book and other writings helped fuel the hunger for a truly Jewish land. What would become the Zionist movement was already taking shape in different forms across Europe and Asia. Herzl’s oeuvre began to be passed around and shared by Jewish intellectual circles of who would come to debate the actual practicalities of the ideas. The concept that the Jews are in need of a place to call their own was maturing and gaining a wider audience as Jews and non-Jews alike discussed the merits of such a plan. In 1898, Herzl was already discussing the purchasing of private land in Palestine from “Arabs, Greeks, the whole ‘mixed multitude’ of the Orient”. 23 This international debate culminates at the close of the First World War with the Balfour Declaration.

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Balfour Declaration and the Migration

During the midst of the First World War the former territorial holding of the newly collapsed Ottoman Empire was under the control of the French, British and Russians. The Sykes Picot Agreement was a secret contract that would cede Syria and Lebanon to the French and Palestine to the British. Such as it was there was already a developed Jewish lobby in Great Britain who were advocating Jewish nationalist claims to the land of Palestine. The British government was also keen on the idea for propaganda purposes. There were officials who were weary of the rise of Communists in the Russia Empire who had deposed the regime of Czar Nicholas II. They felt that if they supported Jewish nationalism they might avoid the possibility of revolutionary actions at home.\textsuperscript{24} The British War Cabinet then gave authorization for the Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur Balfour to draft a declaration supporting Zionist interests in Palestine. Balfour wrote a letter to Lord Rothschild, a prominent banker and financier of Jewish organizations:

\begin{quote}
His Majesty’s Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use its best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by the Jews in any other country.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

This letter was viewed as a sign of good faith that the British government would support a Jewish state in their ancestral homeland in the territory of Palestine. To the Palestinian Arabs this was viewed as a betrayal to the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 which was a plan to divide up the Ottoman Empire between the French and the British. The British had a clause within the

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{24} Ritchie Ovendale, \textit{The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Wars}, (New York: Longman, 1984), 32
\textsuperscript{25} Ovendale, \textit{The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Wars}, 33.
\end{footnotes}
agreement stating that the British would look favorably on the Palestinian Arab’s efforts to create a Palestinian state.

Both these contradictory proposals seem to have been a case of the British attempting to defeat the Ottoman Empire and bring it to collapse by the quickest means available. They had simply promised one thing to the Jewish minority who were becoming prosperous on the land they did possess and another to the Palestinian Arab majority. The British used both of these ethnic groups’ nationalist aspirations to meet the needs of the British Empire.  

Out of this cluster of private correspondence, false betrothals of friendship and sovereignty between the Englishmen, Jews, and Arabs would spring a bitter struggle reaching over three decades.

In this spring of violence, too, would come more waves of Jews seeking to return from the Diaspora to live in the land of their forefathers. The Jewish population would double twice in Palestine beginning with approximately 84,000 in 1922 to 175,000 in 1931 and then to over 400,000 by 1936. The rate at which the Jewish immigrants were coming into the territory was not lost on either the British or the Arabs. The British were keen on keeping the peace between the Palestinian Arabs and the Jews so they could maintain their importation of goods from every corner of their empire for ranging from oil in the Persian Gulf to their colonies and trading ports in India and greater Asia. The British Foreign Minister Ernst Bevin was giving a speech to the 1945 Labour Party Conference where he discussed the importance of the Middle

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East to British foreign policy. He specifically stated control of the Suez Canal as being a vital artery of the British Empire. While the Irgun was fighting to survive and tensions were boiling in Palestine, Bevin said something to the effect of ‘Revolutions do not change geography.’ He was fully intent on projecting British hegemony in the region at the expense of the Jewish and Arab nationalists.\textsuperscript{29}

Revisionism of Jabotinsky

While intellectual and politicized Zionism were on the rise there did emerge several strains of thought. The one that is relevant to the militancy of Zionism is the Revisionist movement founded by a Ze’ev Jabotinsky who came from Odessa, a city within the Pale Settlement in the Russian Empire. Jabotinsky would find his way to the Zionist movement after he lived through a pogrom in 1907. That experience marked him for life because it served as an example of Jews not being able to defend themselves. They were a people who perhaps blindly believed in submission to authority and their meekness in the face of a violent aggressor.

As Jabotinsky matured so did his political views, he transitioned from the idealism that allured so many Zionists to one of realism. When he was 17 years old, he moved from Odessa to Switzerland and finally to Rome where he would attend school with the hopes of becoming a journalist. It was there he was exposed to socialism and he considered it for a time but cast it aside when he had to return home to complete his national military service for the Russian Empire. During his time back in Odessa he worked for a magazine as a journalist and contented himself to writing reviews on literature, theater, and the arts. He did however manage to venture beyond his comfort zone and wrote several articles discussing politics. As it happened he would be arrested for his political views in the very region he had grown up in. This region around Odessa was very anti-Semitic and this stirred in him great alarm. He saw the vulnerability of the Jews in Russia with no one to protect them.

Jabotinsky was vehemently focused on the creation of self defense organizations and his politics centered on these views. His implementation of these programs would spread across the Pale Settlement in the Russian Empire. His move into Zionist politics was advanced by his skill in writing and passionate public speaking. This won him a position as a delegate in the sixth Zionist Congress in 1903.\(^{31}\) His reactionary attitude caused him to clash with its other leaders. At the same time Jabotinsky’s early views were often perceived as ambiguous. For example, Chaim Weizmann said that Jabotinsky’s opinions on the debate of the possibility of Uganda becoming a Jewish state were unknown to Zionist Congress. He was also said by his peers to have a dual personality: “passionate Zionist” and “un-Jewish”, the later for his love of culture and fluency in many languages.\(^{32}\)

It was over the course of Jabotinsky’s trouble with the World Zionist Organization and Zionist Congress that caused him to form the Revisionist party.\(^{33}\) The Revisionists would strive to assert the political and physical power of the Jewish population living in Palestine. This meant keeping the integrity of the land owned and inhabited by the Jewish. They were advocates of the Jews and for the creation of a military that could protect them. From his Revisionist party platform he told the Sixteenth Zionist Congress in 1929 that the majority needed to definitively make a decision to create a “National Home” and act decisively so that the Jewish community could participate in its creation. He had been organizing defense leagues since the First World War and even managed to establish a youth paramilitary organization.


\(^{32}\) Weizmann, *Trial and Error*, 63.

\(^{33}\) Weizmann, *Trial and Error*, 63.
known as the Betar. He and like minded Revisionists active behind the scenes of the Haganah would eventually split into two separate military forces on the basis of irreconcilable differences in how to respond to the oppression of the British Mandate and the stream of violent Arab nationalism. Thus, the Irgun was created in 1931. This organization was devoted to the protection of Jew lives, arming themselves with weapons to fight the soldiers of the British Empire and Arab violence wherever they met it.

The Second World War would prove to be one of the most trying periods for Jabotinsky. He ordered that Betar and Irgun cease the fight against the British and fight with them against the forces of Nazi Germany who were dedicated ideologically to the destruction of the Jewish people. He would pass away in 1940 leaving the Irgun in the hands of David Raziel.

In 1941-42, the two events that would break the Irgun’s unity was when a passenger ship carrying Jewish refugees was refused visas to Palestine by the British authorities and was turned back after two months of waiting and sank off the coast. Nearly one thousand Jewish refugees drowned when their ships, the *Patria* and the *Struma*, sank off the coast of Palestine. The Irgun’s hatred of the British and the death of Jabotinsky caused them to divide into two groups. One was commanded by Daniel Raziel who already had command of the Irgun, and the separatist Abraham Stern who assumed himself at the head of the LEHI. Both men would perish during this chaotic period of transition. Raziel perished while on a commando raid

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37 LEHI is a Hebrew acronym translating to Israeli’s Freedom Fighters, common referred to as the Stern Gang. They were known to be more radical and violent than the Irgun.
in Baghdad fighting along with the British and Stern died in a shootout with British soldiers.\(^{39}\)

Both the Irgun and LEHI would survive the deaths of these leaders. Daniel Raziel’s successor was Menachem Begin; a former disciple of Vladimir Jabotinsky would take over the Irgun and lead it in battle against the British and Arabs before the Second World War’s conclusion.

\(^{39}\) Begin, \textit{The Revolt}, 24; Creveld, \textit{The Sword and the Olive}, 55.
Menachem Begin

Menachem Begin is a paradox and an anomaly that emerges out of the backdrop of Israeli statehood. He is a survivor of the Soviet gulag who steeled his nerves against a great sea of human suffering. Simultaneously, under the Nazi regime there is the horrific and living nightmare of the Holocaust that systematically exterminates 6 million Jewish men, women, and children. Begin learned the value of a single life amidst the calamity of these two totalitarian monoliths. He values the lives of the Jewish people over the lives and ideals of those who get in the way of their right to exist in the world. He has seen enough war and death to truly love and work for peace. He sought only peace and livelihood for the Jewish people and their right to exist. This is the turning point in his life that allows him to become a rational and calculating individual capable of ordering indiscriminate attacks on the British who occupy Palestine and turn away thousands of Jews emigrating into Palestine and the Palestinian Arabs who feel threatened by this massive influx of foreigners and pushed back.

Begin was arrested in Poland for his work with the Betar youth organization. He states in *White Nights*; his memoir of his time as a prisoner in Russia, that he was the Commandant of the Betar in Poland. The Russian judge-interrogator at his trial understood that he was the leader of the Betar, but in Russian the word commandant is a caretaker and so he believed Begin was lying about his role in that organization thereby sealing his fate. When the Soviet Union made an agreement with Poland on July 30, 1941 to resume diplomatic relations after it was attacked by Nazi Germany, there was a clause that granted the Polish territory within the

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Soviet Union permission to form an army to fight against Nazi Germany.\footnote{Polish-Soviet Union Agreements : July 30, 1941", The Avalon Project, date accessed December 16, 2012.\url{http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/polsov.asp}} Thus, Menachem Begin was released from his prison sentence and set free. He took an oath to fight for the army of the Polish government in exile. Despite his previous failed attempts to join the army on account of his weakened heart and poor vision, a commander in the Polish army vouched for him and he was allowed in. Begin’s military service for Poland was to be his ticket into Palestine\footnote{Eric Silver, \textit{Begin: The Haunted Prophet} (New York: Random House, 1984)37-39.}

Begin worked his way into the Irgun by means of his Revisionist and Betar connections in 1942 after taking an indefinite leave from the Polish refugee army that was operating in Palestine.\footnote{Bickerton and Klausner, \textit{A Concise History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict}, 46; Silver, \textit{Begin}, 39.} By 1943, he had established himself as the commander of the Irgun. Military historian Martin van Creveld calls Begin a “fire-eating orator from Poland” who developed his leadership and speaking skills during his time in the one of Jabotinsky’s Revisionist Betar youth organization chapters in Poland. Begin was attracted to the idea of military strength since his youth.\footnote{Creveld, \textit{The Sword and the Olive}, 55.} At the time Begin took command of the Irgun it was anything but strong, in fact, it was weak both politically and militarily after its previous commander David Raziel was killed on a joint mission with the British in Baghdad. The Irgun’s split with the Haganah and the subsequent internal fracturing with the Lehi under Abraham Stern left them with few men who had chosen not to leave the Irgun and even fewer weapons.\footnote{Silver, \textit{Begin}, 39.} When Begin declared his revolt publicly, it was distributed in the medium of a pamphlet. The pamphlet illustrated three things:
that the Irgun now had a new commander who was fervently dedicated to the establishment of an independent Israeli state; that Begin believed he and the Irgun were fighting on the behalf of Jews all across the world to live in peace; and that the Begin’s mission to see the British retreat from Palestine for he regarded their indifference to the Holocaust and anti-Semitism equal to that of the Nazis. He went on to define the cause of the Irgun and why fighting was the only solution. With a clear mission the fighters of the Irgun knew what had to be done and the dwellers of Palestine: the Jews, the Arabs and the British had received the message. The declaration of revolt might have sounded presumptuous coming from what had been a military organization on the decline, but the action of the Irgun in the following months and years would echo Begin’s charge.

In his memoirs, *The Revolt*, Begin states he became incredibly motivated to fight for his people who were being exterminated by the Nazis and turned away by the British authorities from the promise of a life in Palestine. He said their blood cried out for help and it was out of love that the Irgun would fight. Even though he had motivation to fight, it took him a while to learn the political environment and to familiarize himself with the operational planning and commanding men in the field of action. According to the Irgun’s official historian; David Niv, Begin’s ties to the Polish Betar gave him many dedicated friends and contacts that would prove vital to his command of the Irgun. He had other gifts such as his knowledge in being a shrewd political leader who was fully capable of inflicting deliberate, measured blows against the

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48 Haber, *Begin*, 154-56; Silver, *Begin*, 43-44.
British and those Arabs who stood in the way of a national homeland to protect his fellow Jew.\textsuperscript{50}

The British had stomped out much of the Jewish military underground between 1940-43. Until Begin announced on February 1\textsuperscript{st} 1944 that the Irgun would resume its campaign against the British Army now that the war in Europe seemed to be coming to an end.\textsuperscript{51} They were not especially concerned about waging war against the Palestinian Arabs, but they were resolved to hold them off while they concentrated on action against the British government and their army.

\textsuperscript{50} Silver, \textit{Begin}, 40-42.
\textsuperscript{51} Benny Morris, \textit{1948}, 29.
The Irgun and Their Methods

The Irgun have been accused of being terrorists, but this is a misconception and the word terrorism in itself is no rigid definition. It would be more correct to state that the Irgun utilized terror tactics to wage their campaign of violence against British imperialism and the Palestinian-Arab population who at the time outnumbered the Jews in the territory of the British Mandate approximately 6:1 by the time of the War of Independence in 1948. The Irgun liken themselves to an army and retained a military structure. Their name National Military Organization evokes this feeling. By analysis on their name and who they specifically targeted in their attacks one can define them contextually. They would be dually classified as both an anti-colonialists and nationalist organization. They can be called freedom fighters or even revolutionaries depending on one’s perspective.52

It should be noted that the actions of the Irgun and terror tactics were quite controversial. The former president of the Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency and future first President of Israel, Chaim Weizmann condemns violence for the sake of violence and the attempt to achieve short term goals. He said that Irgun “bartered away the purity of its [Zionism's] basic principles”. He elaborates later in his memoir on the significance of the Irgun’s terror saying that perhaps they did indeed draw publicity to the Jewish cause in Palestine, but that he did “not think that it is desirable to attract attention in that form.”53 David Ben Gurion the future prime minister stated after the bombing of the King David Hotel that “the Irgun is the

53 Weizmann, Trial and Error, 453-4.
enemy of the Jewish people.” There is a severe fracture in political thought between the Begin and his Zionist contemporaries Weizmann and Ben-Gurion on the rightful use of military action when independence and statehood were the desired outcome.

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54 Begin, *The Revolt*, 223.
The Bombing of the King David Hotel

During the Second World War, the British civil Government, the Secretariat, and the Military general headquarters were set up in the King David Hotel. By 1946, the Irgun had been facing enemies not only from the British and Arab forces, but also from the Haganah who had been given permission to go about rounding up, turning, or killing the members of the Irgun for the British who had tried bribe the Jewish Agency into working for them in return for political and bureaucratic favors.\(^{55}\)

The Irgun was determined to strike a blow at the heart of the British authorities in Palestine at their headquarters in Jerusalem where they were grouped together and could be hit with a single blow. Begin saw to it that the Irgun performed the necessary scouting of the King David Hotel before the mission to bomb it was initiated. Begin states that when he alerted the Haganah to the possibility of the attack they were reluctant as they still were torn between the policy of self restraint and the act of reprisal. Begin decided to continue with the plan and the Haganah eventually came around to the idea in late June.\(^{56}\)

According to scholar J. Bowyer Bell, who interviewed the Irgun leader responsible for finding the security breach, the plan was quite easy to execute because there were many sorts of civilians that would wander in and out of the hotel. The Irgun leader then decided that they would enter the King David Hotel through the kitchen and deliver several large milk cans filled

\(^{55}\) Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive*, 56.

\(^{56}\) Begin, *The Revolt*, 212-213.
with large quantities of low grade explosives in the basement of the hotel that would detonate with a large enough explosion to destroy the British at their HQ.\textsuperscript{57}

The British on that fateful day were running a drill where they set off an explosion on the other side of the building. This made it possible for the Irgun team to move into the King David Hotel without notice as they were disguised as Arabs delivering milk to the hotel kitchen. The men pulled guns on the staff and caused a small commotion that would lead to the death of a British officer.\textsuperscript{58} At a quarter past noon the Irgun men had placed the milk cans and ran out of the building with their released hostages.

Within a half an hour the King David Hotel would explode leveling the west wing. 93 people were killed in the bombing. Some of them were British officials, but the majority of them were Jews and Arabs.\textsuperscript{59} Begin claims that the Irgun had called the hotel warning them to evacuate its resident quests, but says that the British ignored the threat.\textsuperscript{60}

According to historian Eric Silver, three warnings were issued by the Irgun. A sixteen year old Jerusalem school girl and Irgun courier; Adima Hai, was charged with the task of making the warning phone calls. She fulfilled her duty calling the King David Hotel, the French consulate, and the Palestine Post of the bombs. It seems that by the messages were caught in the bureaucratic chains of command. The hotel staff at the front desk did not have the power to ask the residents to evacuate and the British command chose to believe the threat was a false alarm. When the British command heard another warning, this time from the police, they

\textsuperscript{57} Haber, \textit{Menachem Begin}, 243-45.
\textsuperscript{58} Silver, \textit{Begin}, 73.
\textsuperscript{59} Bell, \textit{Terror Out of Zion}, 169-173
\textsuperscript{60} Begin, \textit{The Revolt}, 219-220.
did not decide on a plan of action quickly enough to evacuate their staff or the guests at the hotel.\textsuperscript{61}

Initially, the Irgun did not claim responsibility for the attack on the King David Hotel. The bombing according to Begin received mixed reviews. The Haganah sent a representative to the Irgun asking them to claim responsibility. Begin would accept their request and claims to leave out but one fact: that the Haganah had asked them to perform the bombing. Additionally, the Irgun were denounced as harmful to the Jewish people by Ben-Gurion “The Irgun is the enemy of the Jewish people—it has always opposed me.”\textsuperscript{62} Ben-Gurion did not want the Irgun to sully the image of Jews he and his allies were attempting to sell to those powers in the United Nations that could approve or deny the resolution for a Jewish state. Violence that came from Jewish origin in Palestine made it that more difficult for Ben-Gurion to lobby on the behalf of Jews.

\textsuperscript{61} Silver, Begin, 70-73. 
\textsuperscript{62} Begin, The Revolt, 223
Two Sergeants

The incident of the execution of two British sergeants Clifford Martin and Mervyn Paice occurred on July 27th, 1947 near Natanya, Palestine. The reason for their kidnapping was because earlier that summer the British had captured and executed three Irgun agents and sentenced the other two to 15 years prison sentences. The Irgun was seeking revenge when it took the two sergeants and kidnapped them at gunpoint almost two weeks earlier and they had attempted to escape. They were beaten and ushered forcibly into a car and moved to a secure location. They were told that if the three Irgun men hanged they too would be hanged.63

The British Foreign Minister Bevin in an attempt to force the Irgun to give up the sergeants had the Exodus, a ship of Jewish refugees stopped and it was eventually rammed by British destroyers under it sank. Luckily, for the hungry and impoverished crew, most were able to make it off the ship without harm. However, this reaction to the missing sergeants was very bad publicity for the British in Palestine.64 This incident received particularly bad press in the United States and historian Richard Allen suggested that it was seen by the American public as though the British had sent the Exodus back to the Nazi death camps.65

The British Army was searching the area for the sergeants, but was unable to locate them. Menachem Begin inquired through Irgun channels if the sergeants could be executed. The leader of the Irgun’s squad responded in the affirmative, but that they would have to stage their execution in the village’s diamond factory, which was the only available area to stage the

63 Bell, Terror Out of Zion, 221-228.
64 Bell, Terror Out of Zion, 229-235
execution under the circumstances. The squad was surrounded but managed to fulfill the directive. The bodies of sergeants Marvin and Paice were then taken from the factory and moved into a grove of trees after the British search party had passed through the area. The bodies were hung in the trees and were booby trapped with explosives and the squad of Irgun left the town and slipped away.66

In July of 1947, there were many sentiments on Palestine floating around with Jewish “terrorism” and British “oppression”. Menachem Begin and the Irgun paid little attention to protest against their mission. Begin would say it was a compliment later in his life, he said he did not care if people called him a terrorist and hanged two British sergeants hid booby traps on their corpses.67 One London reporter wrote of the atrocity saying:

In the long history of violence in Palestine there has scarcely been a more dastardly act that the cold-blooded and calculated murder of these innocent young men after holding them hostage for more than a fortnight. I can only express the deep feeling of horror and revulsion shared by all of us here at his barbarous crime. This shows that the British public was sickened by the perpetual violence in Palestine and that the occupation no longer had any faith of the British people that anything good could possibly come from staying engaged in the region.68 During the summer of 1947 there was an increase in joint Irgun and Lehi terrorist acts. The British had no clear policy on how they should react in the mandate so they stood by and the British parliament knew the British Empire’s 30 year deluge in Palestine had ended. This event is arguably the straw that would break the back of

66 Bell, Terror Out of Zion, 237-238.
68 Bell, Bell, Terror Out of Zion, 229-235
the British government to invest further resources in Palestine and would stay until the British Mandate expired on May 15th, 1948.
Massacre at Deir Yassin

It was April 9th, 1948 when a combined cadre of Irgun and Lehi members killed at least 200 men, women, and children at the Arab Village of Deir Yassin to the west of Jerusalem. The outcome of this massacre caused an immense migration of Arab Palestinians estimated to be over 726,000 by the beginning of 1949. The British High Commissioner, General Sir Alan Cunningham was furious and wanted to use what forces the British Army had left in Palestine to attack the Jewish fighters who perpetrated the massacre. As it was during the last few weeks of what had been over a 30 year stay in Palestine, there was little the British could do militarily to protect the vulnerable Palestinian inhabitants.

When the Irgun and Lehi attacked at dawn, the Arabs did not begin to mount a resistance until they had been fired upon. An armored vehicle with a loud speaker drove towards the village telling them that they could retreat to the village of Ein Karim which was still left open. However, the vehicle carrying the message fell into a tank trap and the message was unable to be fully dispersed. The Arab village did manage to hold off the Jewish assault which caught the Irgun commanders off guard. They were able to call upon the Palmach who supplied them with ammunition. This helped turn the tide of the battle to the Irgun and Lehi fighters. In the course of the battle they began shooting women and children. Three survivors were found by the Red Cross and would live to tell them of the massacre. The Irgun and Lehi alleged that some of the Arab fighters were dressed as women. Among the Arab survivors some of the women and children spoke of nightmarish details of the Irgun and Lehi fighters raping, stabbing and ripping out the earrings of the women. A Swiss man, Jacques de Reynier working

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69 William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East*, 575.
for the Red Cross witnessed the aftermath of the battle and interviewed some of the survivors was asked to leave by the Irgun and Lehi commanders who he said were embarrassed at an outsider viewing the immense carnage.  

The massacre at Deir Yassin was meant to cause fear and chaos amongst the Palestinian inhabitants. The goal of the Irgun and the LEHI was to frighten that population on that strategic hill to abandon their homes so that it could be utilized for the advantageous high ground. One historian; Richard Allen, likened this massacre to Joshua’s destruction of the Canaanites at Jericho, an example surely pointing out that once again a Jewish military force has slaughtered a people to pave the way for the future children of Israel.

Begin cites the effectiveness of the Deir Yassin massacre as a political victory writing in his memoir The Revolt:

Panic overwhelmed the Arabs of Eretz Israel. Kolonia villages, which had previous repulsed every attack of the Haganah, was evacuated overnight and fell without further fighting. Beit-Iksa was also evacuated. These two overlooked the road and their fall, together with the capture of Kastel by the Haganah, made it possible to keep open the road to Jerusalem. In the rest of the country, too, the Arabs began to flee in terror, even before they clashed with Jewish forces...The legend of Deir Yassin helped us in particular in the saving of Tiberias and the conquest of Haifa... All the Jewish forces proceeded to advance through Haifa like a knife through butter. The Arabs began fleeing in panic, shouting “Deir Yassin.”

Historian Ze’ev Schiff’s narrative of the history is in agreement to Begin’s. He suggests that what was actually more powerful than an actual war was the rumor of one. The truth of

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71 Allen, Imperialism and Nationalism in the Fertile Crescent, 392.
the massacre caused the Palestinian population much terror. Terror as a tactic proved to be a force multiplier and allowed for the Jewish paramilitary organizations to take more land and strategic positions. It also provoked the Palestinian forces to make an emotional decision stemming from how much their propagandists steepened the tragedy at Deir Yassin. Their most competent military commander Abdul Kader el-Husseini was killed when they attacked at a major roadway to Jerusalem attempting to interrupt Jewish movement of people and supplies between the city and surrounding settlements.\textsuperscript{74} El-Husseini’s death severely affected the morale of his men and the Arab population. The Arab population’s collective perception of the environment in Palestine left them psychologically vulnerable to all threats apparent and imagined.

When the British Army left their some of their posts in mid-April before the British Mandate officially expired on May 15\textsuperscript{th}, thousands of Palestinian Arabs fled their villages taking refuge in Transjordan and Syria. Many of these refugees would never return to the land of their ancestors, but instead lived in crude tent cities. Their crossing into these other territories caused many Arabs to become angry at the Israeli’s for the flood of refugees entering their borders. These surrounding Arab states felt compelled to launch military operations into Israel.\textsuperscript{75} This attack would even bring many of the competing factions in Israel together to combat the invasion from all sides.

Deir Yassin is regarded as a tragedy and remains one of the largest stains on Jew and Arab relations. David Ben Gurion again found himself denouncing the atrocities of the Irgun and

\textsuperscript{74} Haber, \textit{Menachem Begin}, 317-18.
\textsuperscript{75} Kimmens, \textit{The Palestinian Problem}, 56-58.
attempted to distance the Jews of Palestine from this event by appealing to King Abdullah of Jordan. Eitan Haber; a biographer of Begin, says that the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem issued a boycott against those who participated in the massacre. Jews on the political left and moderates including the Haganah and the Jewish agency unanimously issued protests against the Irgun and Lehi for their massacre at Deir Yassin.\footnote{Haber, \textit{Menachem Begin}, 316-17.}
Conclusion

The political and ideological foundations of Zionist Revisionism had an immense affect on the fortunes of the Irgun and in the forging of the state of Israel on May 14th, 1948. The leadership of Menachem Begin and the organization he commanded was firmly rooted in the philosophy of Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky. Jabotinsky’s inherent belief in the necessity of the Jewish people to have a military organization with the capability of protect them from those that would do them harm. Jabotinsky and other Revisionists would establish the Betar across Eastern Europe where Begin would find his niche in life; to usher in a possibility Jewish state and overcome forces that had better weaponry, technology, and numerical superiority. Begin was able to hone the Irgun into a tool that could outmaneuver the British Army and police. He proved more than capable of planning the bombing of the King David Hotel in 1946, removing those leaders who could do the Jewish people harm and discouraging those British successors from testing the strength and cunning of the Irgun.

Begin also measured the British response to the brutal execution of two British sergeants. He believed that neither the British leaders nor their people could stay in Palestine so long as there were those individuals like himself, willing to kill as many British lads as it took to force the hand of the British government into yielding to the burning desire of the Jews to have their own national home.

Begin would partake in arguably one of the most controversial atrocities before the War of Independence broke out. He followed the directives of the Haganah along with the remnants
of the LEH1.\textsuperscript{77} Over 200 men, women, and children were killed at the village of Deir Yassin. This was done to achieve a propaganda blow against the Palestinian Arabs so that thousands would flee their homes across Palestine thereby allowing the forces of the Haganah, Palmach, and Irgun to take over once Palestinian controlled land without firing a shot making way for the future Israeli Defense Force to have key defensive positions in what they rightly predicted would be a war for a Jewish state.

Throughout the month of May, 1948, the Arab nations surrounding Israeli were facing pressure from their populace to attack the Jews in Palestine. One by one, they committed to go to war with Israel and on May 12, Egypt decided that it too would attack. In Israel, there was a flourish of activity as the Jews prepared for the Arab mounted attack from all sides. On May 13\textsuperscript{th}, Chaim Weizmann the head of the Zionist Organization asked United States President Truman to recognize the state of Israel. Truman would declare the U.S. support of a Jewish state, though he was said to have warmed to the idea of an Israeli state when Weizmann met him two months previous to discuss the possibility of U.S. for the Zionist state\textsuperscript{78}. On May 14\textsuperscript{th}, 1948, the state of Israel was born.\textsuperscript{79} The moment it was brought forth into existence, it was fighting for its survival. The walls of differences between the Irgun and the Haganah were slowly beginning to loosen, but communication was cold between the two rival military organizations.

\textsuperscript{77} Schiff, \textit{A History of the Israeli Army}, 33.
\textsuperscript{78} Lawrence Davidson, \textit{America’s Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood}, (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2001) 192.
\textsuperscript{79} Kimmens, \textit{The Palestinian Problem}, 58.
Begin knew the war was not over for the Jews and according to his memoir, *White Nights*, he would have still been in the Soviet gulag had he not been released before his sentence was up. The day after the Israel’s independence and the day the British Mandate over the territory of Palestine had expired; Begin would go on radio and tell his fellow countrymen:

> After long years of underground warfare, of persecution and suffering, mental and physical suffering, those who rose against the oppressor stand before you now, with thanksgiving on their lips and a prayer in their hearts. In blood battle, in a war of liberation, State of Israel has arisen.\(^{80}\)

He was a true idealist like his predecessors before him, a Revisionist to the soul of his being. He was able to see what Jews for nearly two millennia had dreamed and prayed for, the ability for the descendants of Diaspora to return to the land of their forefathers.

The Irgun would be consolidated into the Israeli Defense after the Altalena Affair which was a dispute over a military arms shipment from one of the Irgun’s bases in Paris, France. The ship containing the weapons was named after the *nom de plume* of Jabotinsky during his days as a reporter.\(^{81}\) The Irgun and the Haganah would have a standoff over who should have the weapons when the Altalena was discovered to have arms aboard. This conflict ended when David Ben Gurion ordered that the ship be fired upon. It was after this showdown that Begin would relinquish his control over the Irgun voluntarily, allow for its members be absorbed into the new national military, the Israeli Defense Force.

Menachem Begin’s leadership did not end with the Irgun or his new homeland’s independence. He went on into politics and would eventually become the Prime Minister of the


Likud Party; the fully developed version of the Revisionist party, in 1977 in the Knesset or Israeli legislature. Begin would later work with Egyptian President Anwar El Sadat to come to an agreement and sign the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty in 1979. Despite his reputation as the final commander of the controversial Irgun, Begin would prove his capacity for seeking and securing peace for his people and the state of Israel.

82 Silver, Begin, 179-181.
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