

CHAPTER 45

The Palestine problem • Historical background • The British role • Jews versus Arabs • The Zionist position • Origin of Haganah • World War II and the postwar situation • David Raziel: the militant element • Irgun and terrorism • Stern and the FFI • Menachem Begin • Guerrilla war • British countertactics • UN intervention • The British yield



THE PALESTINE PROBLEM was nearly as old as Jerusalem hills. Orthodox Jews had never yielded spiritual claim to the Holy Land, where some brethren remained after Romans destroyed the Judean state. Through vicissitudes of ages, many Jews continued to look eastward: As early as the fourteenth century, Jewish refugees from Europe began trickling into Palestine. Over the centuries, desire for a “national home” continued to grow, especially in European ghettos burdened with poverty and all too frequent pogroms. In the 1870s, a wave of anti-Semitism started new migration from central Europe. Then, in 1898, Theodor Herzl organized a Zionist international movement, aimed at “. . . establishing in Palestine a home for the Jewish People secured by public law.”¹ The trickle of refugees into Palestine increased. At the century’s turn, the Jews there numbered perhaps forty thousand; in 1917, the figure reached eighty-five thousand.

Now came the watershed, the Balfour Declaration, which pledged England’s support of Zionist aims. Its origins are obscure. According to Lloyd George, it was made “. . . for propagandist reasons”—to win support of international, particularly American, Jewry to the allied side at a crucial time in World War I. In his provocative book *Promise and Fulfilment—Palestine 1917–1949*, Arthur Koestler calls it “. . . one of the most improbable political documents of all time. In this document one nation solemnly promised to a second nation the country of a third.”² Whatever the case, the Paris Peace Conference and subsequent conferences converted Palestine into a British mandate (later approved

by the League of Nations), and this encouraged further Jewish immigration during the 1920s.

As might be expected, Palestine Arabs resented intrusion into what they regarded as their land. In 1920, Arabs attacked Jews in Jerusalem, in 1921 in Jaffa. British administration, which tended to favor the Arab population, and economic improvements brought by Jews somewhat mollified Arab grievances, but did not ameliorate the land question. In selling land to Jews, rich Arab and Turkish absentee landowners deprived some Arab tenants of ancestral homesteads; though they received compensation, this fundamental grievance was ignored by British administration. In 1929, an anti-Semitic nationalist, the British-appointed Mufti of Jerusalem, struck out by inciting a series of violent attacks against Jews.

The British Government faced a major dilemma. It could not defend the Jewish cause without irreparably alienating Arab countries. In view of Western need for Middle Eastern oil, this would have created serious economic difficulties. To avoid a split and yet honor their pledge to Zionism, the British chose a compromise policy that often favored Arabs. But political pragmatism can sometimes become self-defeating: Attempting to walk a middle path softly, the British administration soon bogged down in Palestinian sands of intrigue. By attempting to satisfy everyone, the British satisfied no one.

While British policy maintained precarious peace, forces of discontent gathered strength. Hitler's anti-Semitic policy increased the refugee flow and added to Arab resentment. In 1932, the Jewish population numbered two hundred thousand; in 1935, nearly half a million. The Arab rebellion broke out in 1936 and continued to spread until suppressed two years later by a major British military effort (which, considering the European situation, Britain could ill afford).³

Various commissions meanwhile studied the problem, usually to recommend partition—that is, creating a small but separate Jewish state. Arab countries refused this solution, however, and such was their supposed importance to the coming international struggle that the British Government supported them. The famous Chamberlain White Paper of 1939 called for greatly restricted Jewish immigration—fifteen thousand a year at a time when tens of thousands were trying to escape concentration camps and ovens of central Europe—which would end altogether in five years; it also virtually prohibited land purchase by Jews; finally, it called for an Arab state within ten years, a state in which Jews would hold minority status.⁴ A grossly unfair solution, the White Paper only added to smoldering Jewish discontent. When war broke out, however, the international Zionist organization and its executive, the Jewish Agency, chose to support Britain, as did the Jews in Palestine, the Yishuv.

Several factors explain the considerable forbearance shown by Jews in dealing with Arabs and the British administration. The Jewish Agency remained fully aware of basic antagonisms to the notion of a Jewish state: not only those of anti-Semitic gentiles, but of Jews themselves, of non-Zionists and anti-Zionists both in Palestine and the world. The two great Zionist leaders, Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion, were as much concerned with building and preserving as with administering. Money was as short as tempers; splinter movements were forever forming. To Weizmann and Ben-Gurion, only a policy of moderation could hold the movement together while retaining the support of international Jewry and sympathy of British and American governments.

The second factor was Jewish weakness in Palestine. In attempting to keep the peace, the British had never encouraged Jewish resistance. In the very old days, Jewish survival depended on assimilation with Arabs. As immigration continued and Jewish settlements developed, a sort of local militia sprang up. Then, in 1905, pogroms in Russia introduced new immigrants: tough, young men, for the most part socialist revolutionaries, who had experience in European arms and who founded “. . . the first country-wide para-military organization,” Hashomer, or the Watchman—“. . . a kind of Hebrew cowboy or Wild West ranger, highly respected among Arabs”—to protect lives and property.⁵

Hashomer slowly evolved into an underground Haganah (Defense Organization), “. . . a voluntary militia, organized in local units primarily for local defense.”⁶ The Haganah expanded during the 1936–39 Arab rebellion—as we have seen (Chapter 33), Orde Wingate organized “Special Night Squads” from its reserve constabulary—but soon reverted to a protective role.⁷ In 1941, the British allowed the Haganah to organize full-time guerrilla shock units, the Palmach, for fighting in Syria, but British policy continued to discourage a separate Jewish military force.

The war nonetheless strengthened the Zionist hand. In 1942, Zionist leaders met in New York’s Hotel Biltmore to censure the unpopular White Paper. The Biltmore Program, as it came to be known, called for unlimited immigration of Jews to Palestine, which, after the war, would become a Jewish commonwealth state. The war also strengthened the Haganah’s military arm: Some thirty-two thousand Palestine Jews served in British forces and, in 1944, the British authorized a separate Jewish Brigade Group. The group dissolved at war’s end, when a large British army occupied the area, but an underground Haganah army continued to exist. Commanded by a professional cadre of some four hundred soldiers, it consisted of Palmach guerrilla units totaling about twenty-one hundred men and women, backed by a small but ready reserve, and of a widespread territorial militia of some thirty thousand with many thousands of covert supporters.

Over-all weakness had caused the Jewish Agency and the Haganah to follow a defensive policy—the Havlagah—during the Arab rebellion, and a co-operative policy with the British during World War II. A good many Jews deeply resented what they deemed timid policies. In 1925, militant Zionists had formed the Revisionist Party, under Vladimir Jabotinsky, who “. . . declared himself against any co-operation with Arabs until the Jews were their effective masters in Palestine, and he was pressing for the formation of a Jewish Legion to conquer the promised land.”⁸ In 1935, the Revisionist Party splintered from the World Zionist Organization. Two years later, younger Revisionists formed a militant force, the Irgun Tsvai Leumi, or Etzel (National Military Organization),⁹ under a dynamic young leader, David Raziel. A brilliant student, Raziel switched from mathematics to military subjects in preparation for his messianic role:

. . . He wrote (together with his colleague, Abraham Stern) textbooks on the revolver and on methods of training. He conducted courses in the use of small arms and in the manufacture of homemade explosives. . . . He was convinced that Jewish statehood could be attained only after an armed struggle with the British and he would have preferred to build the Irgun to meet the inevitable clash, rather than concentrate on retaliation against the Arabs.¹⁰

Under Raziel’s inspired leadership, the Irgun concentrated first on smuggling illegal refugees into Palestine. Arab attacks on Jews in 1939 caused Irgun to open a terrorist campaign against the general Arab population. To protests of Zionist leaders, to the Jewish Agency and the Haganah, who pleaded the Sixth Commandment, “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” the Irgun answered with Exodus xxi, 23–25: “. . . life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning. . . .” The Chamberlain White Paper brought another change, this time to British military targets; when a police inspector tortured some Irgun leaders, Raziel had him murdered. Raziel and his coleader, Abraham Stern, were themselves arrested, soon released and quickly resumed operations, but Stern, also a brilliant student, disagreed with Raziel’s policy of wartime truce with the British. In 1940, Stern broke from Irgun to form the Lokhammei Kherut Israel (Fighters for the Freedom of Israel), or FFI. The Stern Gang, as it was generally known, concentrated on fighting the British by eliminating some Jewish moderates as well as gentiles: Anyone who opposed creation of a Jewish state became fair game. Raziel, in turn, agreed to work for the British

army during the pro-German revolt in Iraq, and was killed in 1941, on his first mission. Stern fell to police bullets in 1942. A year later, another fanatic believer in the Jewish state, a Polish intellectual named Menachem Begin, took command of the Irgun. Stern's successor, a young scientist named David Friedman-Yellin, continued a policy of "unrestricted and indiscriminate terror"—from 1939 to 1943, Sternists killed eight Jewish, six Arab, and eleven British policemen, not to mention other victims.¹¹

Continued British refusal to accept the Biltmore Program caused the Irgun, in 1944, to renounce its truce with the British and to form a loose, sometimes uneasy alliance with the Stern Gang in a new war for a Jewish state. By early autumn, the Stern Gang had murdered fifteen men, mostly moderate Jews, and destroyed several important government installations including four police stations.¹²

Irgun strategy hinged on three considerations, as later clarified by Menachem Begin in his tormented book *The Revolt*. From a study of "... the methods used by oppressor administrations in foreign countries," the terrorists concluded that to destroy British prestige in Palestine would destroy British rule:

... The very existence of an underground, which oppression, hangings, tortures and deportations, fail to crush or to weaken must, in the end, undermine the prestige of a colonial regime that lives by the legend of its omnipotence. Every attack which it fails to prevent is a blow at its standing.

Two other considerations strengthened this belief: the international situation and Britain's position therein, as well as Britain's internal strength. The terrorists concluded:

... As a result of World War II the Power which was oppressing us was confronted with a hostile Power in the east and a not very friendly power in the west. And as time went on her difficulties increased.

Begin and his fellows naturally counted on international sympathy and aid, particularly from the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation, in the United States.¹³

A great many Jews, in and out of Palestine, disagreed with Irgun-Stern terrorism both on grounds of humanity and because they felt that evil acts would bring wholesale reprisals. Contrarily, terrorists shrewdly reasoned that a civilized power would find its retaliatory hands increasingly tied so long as the problem area claimed world attention. The Irgun drew a limit to terror, the Stern Gang did not. In November 1944,

two Stern Gang terrorists assassinated Lord Moyne, the Minister of State in Cairo. Public indignation, Jewish and gentile, ran high. The terrorist campaign already had alarmed the Jewish Agency and the Haganah, which believed that peaceful settlement could be made with England. Lord Moyne's death brought an open breach, with Agency and Haganah officials working with British authorities in rounding up and deporting nearly three hundred Stern and Irgun activists.¹⁴ Since a good many Palestine Jews who deplored terrorist activities would still not turn in their fellows, the terrorists survived, though with greatly restricted means. Samuel Katz later wrote bitterly:

... The whole machinery of the Jewish Agency's security forces were now organized to wage war against the Irgun. . . . Expulsions from schools, dismissals from places of work, kidnappings, beatings, torture, direct denunciations to the British, became the sole occupation of the action-hungry soldiers of the Haganah and the Palmach.¹⁵

Zionist co-operation with the British did not reduce Zionist goals. In May 1945, after the German surrender, Dr. Weizmann wrote Prime Minister Churchill,

... demanding on behalf of the Jewish Agency the full and immediate implementation of the Biltmore resolution: the cancellation of the White Paper, the establishment of Palestine as a Jewish State, Jewish immigration to be an Agency responsibility, and reparation to be made by Germany in kind beginning with all German property in Palestine.¹⁶

Immigration headed the list. The Jewish Agency wanted unrestricted immigration for a hundred thousand Jewish, mostly Polish survivors of German bestiality who languished in displaced-persons camps.¹⁷ British delay, first by the Churchill government, then by Clement Attlee's Labour government, in treating this demand led to an extensive smuggling operation by the Haganah and, far more ominous, to an operational rapprochement between the Haganah, which claimed a country-wide membership of some forty thousand, and the Irgun-Stern groups, themselves steadily growing in strength and claiming thousands of passive sympathizers. Refugee smuggling increased, and, in October, the Haganah's clandestine radio station, Kol Israel, proclaimed the beginning of "The Jewish Resistance Movement":

... On the night of the 31st of October the "single serious incident" took place. Palmach troops sank three small naval craft and wrecked railway lines in fifty different places; Irgun attacked the

railway station at Lydda, and the Sternists attacked the Haifa oil refinery. The attacks were accomplished with great skill and little loss of life, probably none intentionally. The operation had the desired effect of making the British Government think seriously about Palestine, but it also had the effect of solidifying yet further [Ernest] Bevin's resistance.¹⁸

The British enlisted American aid in form of an Anglo-American committee of inquiry, but domestic politics in both countries slowed formation of this body. Illegal immigration activities continued to increase, as did ugly incidents between Palestinian Jews and British troops (which would soon number eighty thousand). In early 1946, the new high commissioner, Sir Alan Cunningham, “. . . promulgated severe emergency laws which among other provisions ordained death as the maximum penalty not only for taking part in a terrorist raid but for belonging to a terrorist society.”¹⁹

The Anglo-American Committee's report merely exacerbated the situation by recommending immediate admission of a hundred thousand Jewish DPs. In refusing this and other proposals at a time when “. . . the situation was particularly propitious for carrying out Partition in a bloodless operation,” Bevin and the Labour government were imprisoned by the old Arab complex that had restricted British policy for so long. The picture of the “Middle East going up in flames” seemed to paralyze realistic thinking, and in so doing, brought a near crisis in British relations with the Truman administration, itself acting far too cautiously as a result of domestic political pressures to solve a problem that the United States had helped create.²⁰

Bevin and the Labour government were now on a collision course with disaster. In June, a new wave of sabotage swept over Palestine. In addition to usual attacks, terrorists destroyed twenty-two RAF planes at one airfield. The harassed British “. . . ordered the arrest not only of members of Palmach but of the Agency leaders. Ben Gurion was in Paris, or he would have been taken with the rest.”²¹ During what Arthur Koestler has termed “Mr. Bevin's 18th Brumaire,” the British also occupied the offices of the Jewish Agency, where they found documents that proved the Haganah's complicity in earlier terrorist operations.

Partly to destroy these documents and partly in keeping with its policy of reprisal, the Haganah agreed to an Irgun attack on British headquarters in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. Although Irgun terrorists later claimed that ample warnings were given, the hotel was not evacuated, and the bombings claimed ninety-one British, Arab, and Jewish dead and forty-five wounded. The deed shocked most of the civilized world, but what should have been a propaganda victory for the British turned sour when the British commander, General Barker,

sent his officers a non-fraternization order at once intercepted and published by the Irgun. It reminded some observers of Gauleiter orders only too familiar from World War II:

... I am determined that they (the Jews) should be punished and made aware of our feelings of contempt and disgust at their behavior ... if the Jewish community really wanted to put an end to the crimes it could do so by co-operating with us. I have accordingly decided that ... all Jewish places of entertainment, cafes, restaurants, shops and private houses are out of bounds. ... I understand that these measures will create difficulties for the troops, but I am certain that if my reasons are explained to them, they will understand their duty and will punish the Jews in the manner this race dislikes most: by hitting them in the pocket, which will demonstrate our disgust for them.

Uproar over this ill-advised order more than neutralized adverse publicity reaped by the ghastly hotel attack. Each incident, however, served the Irgun goal of focusing world attention on this torn and bleeding country.²²

In August, the British replied further with a massive raid on Irgun "headquarters" in Tel Aviv, which they sealed off with some twenty thousand troops supported by tanks. Katz later wrote that the British captured only two terrorists. Menachem Begin spent the emergency in a tiny cupboard and was not discovered.²³

The worsening situation caused the Jewish Agency to lower its sights by requesting a reasonable partition arrangement. Fearful of Arab reaction, the British responded with a trusteeship plan, but the Attlee government also appointed a new Colonial Secretary, who was more sympathetic to Jewish aspirations and who initiated an appeasement policy by freeing Jewish Agency leaders. In return,

... Haganah dissociated itself from the terrorists and signaled the end of the alliance by issuing propaganda against them. The Central Executive of the Zionist organization condemned terrorism and called on the Yishuv to take action against the criminals.²⁴

Something might have come of these moves but for the intransigence of the Arabs, who refused to countenance any partition plan; for the sympathy of the American Government to the Jewish plan, which infuriated the British; and for continued Irgun-Sternist activity.

By end of 1946, the Irgun-Sternist groups had killed 373 persons. Although the police and army had imprisoned and deported some members, the organization continued to operate with at least tacit support of a large number of ordinary citizens. Considering the size of its full-

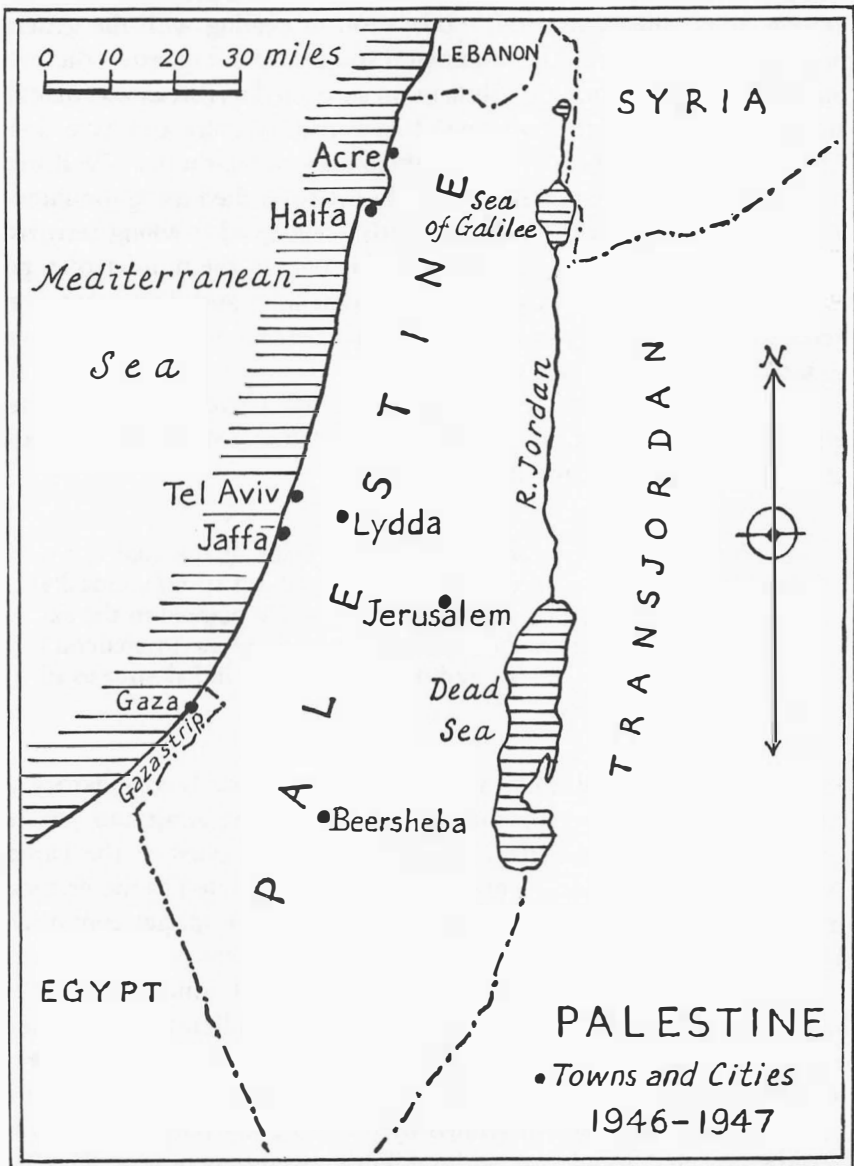
time staff, never more than fifty persons, the task of running the Irgun to the ground was immense. British security forces could disrupt various groups and even cause operations to be suspended, but they could not eliminate the hard-core top command—at least without receiving far better intelligence. Instead of improving intelligence procedures, which, among other things, required moderation in dealing with the general population, the British high command frequently antagonized the people.²⁵ Its use of corporal punishment on suspected terrorists was quickly stopped when the Irgun kidnaped two British soldiers and gave them each eighteen lashes before sending them back to their units. The British next organized a counterterror unit, but it soon died an ignominious, if gory, death. In early 1947, the British sentenced a young terrorist, Dov Grüner, to death by hanging, for his part in the murder of a policeman. His execution made him a popular hero and won many converts to the Irgun-Sternist cause both in Palestine and abroad. It was Ireland all over again (see Chapter 17).²⁶

Against this sordid background, the British Government continued efforts to effect a political compromise. But time was running out and criticism mounting on the British home front:

. . . In the House of Commons, at the height of the coal crisis, Winston Churchill warned that Britain could not sustain, morally or materially, a long campaign in Palestine. He pointed to the expenditure of eighty million pounds in two years to maintain 100,000 soldiers there. She had no such interests in Palestine as to justify such an effort. . . .²⁷

Ernest Bevin disagreed. Misreading the Jewish Agency's conciliatory attitude as weakness, he still thought he could bring Arab and Jew together under the British flag. To gain time, he turned to the United Nations in mid-February, a move that some interpreted as the first step in abandoning the mandate. The UN appointed a special committee, UNSCOP, to investigate the problem and recommend a new solution.

Meanwhile, terror and counterterror ruled Palestine, a ghastly period that kept the torn country in international headlines. Dov Grüner's execution brought widespread Irgun reprisals. In early March, terrorists attacked British installations and, in one day, killed or wounded some eighty soldiers. The British replied by declaring martial law, which infuriated the civil population without halting Irgun operations. The British also sentenced three captured terrorists to death. In May, Irgun units attacked Acre jail and released forty-one terrorists (and two hundred common criminals). In July, the refugee ship *Exodus 1947* arrived with forty-five hundred Jews aboard, only to be sent back to Europe to disembark its human, generally penniless, cargo on a Hamburg dock—a



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tragic event resulting from Bevin's intransigence, and giving militant Jews an enormous propaganda victory further exploited by Leon Uris' best-selling novel *Exodus*. Also in July, the British hanged the three sentenced terrorists. The Irgun kidnaped two British sergeants and hanged them on a tree outside Tel Aviv.

Undeterred by reciprocal savagery, the UN committee worked throughout summer and autumn, finally to recommend an end of the British mandate in favor of still another partition plan, one reluctantly adopted by the Jewish Agency when the British made it clear that they intended to yield the mandate and withdraw troops in near future. In late November 1947, the UN accepted the plan. The Arab League responded by ordering attacks against Jewish settlements not only in Palestine but throughout the Middle East. In December, the Colonial Secretary announced that Great Britain would terminate its mandate on May 15, 1948.

By then the Haganah had secretly mobilized and Jew was fighting Arab as the beleaguered British garrison stood increasingly to one side. The British would remain for another few months, but their war was over. The Arab-Israeli war had started.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

1. Lorch, 2.
2. Koestler, 4. See also, Sykes, *Cross Roads to Israel*; Marlowe.
3. Sykes, *Cross Roads to Israel*, 130 ff. See also, Sykes, *Orde Wingate*.
4. Marlowe, 165–189.
5. Koestler, 69.
6. Lorch, 27.
7. Koestler, 73–5.
8. Sykes, *Cross Roads to Israel*, 96.
9. *Ibid.*, 216. See also, Katz, 4 ff. Katz places the origin of the Irgun, also called Haganah B, at an earlier year; Koestler, 90–1, offers a particularly interesting account:

. . . Its rank and file were recruited from the Revisionist Youth Organization *Betar*, and from the "colored Jews"—Yemenites and Sephardis—for whom its flowery, chauvinistic phraseology had a particular appeal. These oriental Jews were eventually to constitute about one-half of Irgun's total strength, while the leaders were almost exclusively young intellectuals who had grown up in the Polish revolutionary tradition. This created the peculiar ideological climate of Irgun—a mixture of that quixotic patriotism and romantic chivalry which characterized the Polish student revolutionaries, with the archaic ferocity of the Bible and the book of the Maccabees.

10. Katz, 17.
11. Koestler, 91–3.
12. Sykes, *Cross Roads to Israel*, 248–9.
13. Begin, 52.
14. Sykes, *Cross Roads to Israel*, 257. See also, Costigan: Eliahu Bet Zouri, one of the assassins of Lord Moyne in 1944, had been taught in Tel Aviv by

Esther Raziel, sister of David Raziel, commander of the Irgun. She had a plentiful supply of IRA literature about the Irgun conflict, and held up as heroes to her youthful Zionist pupils Robert Emmet and Michael Collins, as well as Garibaldi, Mazzini, and Washington.

15. Katz, 85.
16. Sykes, *Cross Roads to Israel*, 270.
17. Koestler, 101: About a million Jews escaped death in German concentration camps. Of these, some 300,000 were living in Western Europe with a “fair chance of rebuilding normal life”; 100,000 of the remaining 700,000 “driftwood” lived in DP camps in the Western occupation zones. The record of the Western countries in absorbing these Jewish remnants is, at best, modest.
18. Sykes, *Cross Roads to Israel*, 283.
19. Ibid. See also, Katz, 75–7, who lists the regulations in detail.
20. Koestler, 114–17. See also, Sykes, *Cross Roads to Israel*; Truman, *Year of Decisions*, 1945; Acheson.
21. Sykes, *Cross Roads to Israel*, 300.
22. Begin, 221–2.
23. Ibid., 228.
24. Sykes, *Cross Roads to Israel*, 305.
25. Ibid., 307–8.
26. Begin, 251–68 for the sordid details.
27. Katz, 122.