



**AN UNHOLY HOLY LAND  
BRITISH OFFICIALS' REACTIONS  
TO THE END OF THE MANDATE IN PALESTINE  
(1945-1948)**

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On 14 May 1948, General Sir Alan Cunningham, the last High Commissioner for the Mandate in Palestine, presided over the official departure of the British administration from Jerusalem. The mood that inspired the representatives of the Crown then was wholly different from the exaltation of Allenby's troops when conquering the Holy City from the Ottomans some thirty years before: Allenby's entry into Jerusalem on December 11<sup>th</sup> 1917 had indeed been carefully designed by the British government as a moment that could enhance the morale of the nation after three years of severe war [NEWELL]. By contrast, in 1948, British Mandate officials who were about to leave Palestine were gripped by a feeling of despondency and humiliation. Yet, they were so much engrossed in the day-to-day work of unwinding the Mandate that they lost sight of the historical significance of the events they were witnessing. In the last entry of his diary, Sir Henry Gurney, Chief Secretary of the Mandate administration from 1946 to 1948, accounted for the final day of the Mandate and underlined how practical details of organisation obliterated the importance of the moment:

...We had thought out this last day so often that its historical importance had long given way in our minds to details of timing and transport. Nothing was left to chance. [...]. In the end, like all well-organised operations, it all looked very simple. The night before, the Palestine Broadcasting Service came to an end with a broadcast by the High Commissioner and then, simply, God Save the King. In the silence that followed, you could think what you liked; the thoughts of most of us were woven against a vast background of difficult problems solved and hard work done, and our consciences were clear. But perhaps, at that short range, we missed the full point of what was

happening: a page of history was turning over. [GURNEY, Diary : 14 May 1948]

For a few years already, the British had known that their rule in Palestine would end soon and in late 1947, the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office together with the Army and the Mandate administration in Jerusalem had worked out a minute timetable for departure. The Mandate therefore ended as the British had wished: in Jerusalem and not anywhere else, quietly, and in a rather dignified manner – ‘not with a bang but a whimper’ [CLIVE, Diary : 14 May 1948]. But in the final years of the Mandate, the British had been in control of little else: with the multiplication of terrorist incidents and the steady increase in casualties, the Mandate administration found themselves in a state of siege, living behind barbed wire in security enclaves which the Jewish community scornfully referred to as ‘Bevingrads’. Such a state of latent war did not take the British by surprise since Palestine had always been one of Britain’s shakier colonies. According to the terms of the Mandate officially entrusted to Britain by the League of Nations in 1923, Britain had committed itself to assist the Jews in establishing a national home in Palestine while safeguarding the rights of the Arab community. Such a project, based on the Balfour Declaration of 1917, proved impossible to achieve and for thirty years, the mandatory power had remained unable to settle the Arab-Zionist conflict which its contradictory promises had fostered.<sup>1</sup> On the eve of the Second World War, however, with the view to appeasing their Arab allies, the British government issued a White Paper which totally reversed the policy of the national home so far pursued in Palestine [COHEN : 571-596]. From then on, Jewish immigration and land sales to Zionists were to be severely curtailed. At a time when European Jews were facing persecution and extermination, denying them access to their only escape route appeared as an incredibly callous decision. Yet, the priority for Britain was to bolster up its defence system in the Middle East

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<sup>1</sup> The simmering conflict between the Zionists and the Palestinian Arabs erupted into violent clashes on numerous occasions during the Mandate: as early as 1918 the Arabs of Palestine protested against the Balfour Declaration as it was ratified by the Allies at the peace conference. Later, in 1920, the religious festival of Nabi Musa turned into a violent demonstration against the Jewish national home (5 Jews were killed). Even more people were killed the next year in Jaffa in May. In 1929, a religious controversy between Jews and Arabs surrounding the Western Wall of the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem paved the way for extremely violent riots during which 133 Jews and 116 Arabs were killed.

and, in the late 1930s, the Zionists could be dismissed as a small – though irritating – thorn in Britain’s foot. In Palestine, only the more extreme Zionists reacted by starting a terrorist campaign against the mandatory power.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, once the conflict with Nazi Germany was over, most of the Yishuv’s defence forces<sup>3</sup> were determined to resort to the use of arms to force Britain change its Palestine policy and allow Jewish refugees enter the Holy Land. While in 1939 Britain’s insensitive attitude to the Jews had provoked little reaction outside Zionist circles, in 1945, when most concentration camps had been liberated by the Allies and the gruesome reality of the Holocaust became apparent to the world, Jewish nationalism was beginning to take a more legitimate dimension. The Palestine problem therefore acquired so many international ramifications that Britain was no longer free to act as it wished. The United States started interfering and backed up Zionist claims at the expense of the British: in August 1945, President Truman for instance requested the immediate admission of 100,000 Jewish refugees into Palestine. Truman’s proposal was rejected by the Foreign Office but it soon became clear that Palestine was once again putting the British in a predicament: while they could not support a Jewish state without alienating their Arab allies, it was also impossible to impose a settlement acceptable to Arab countries without antagonising the Zionists, who were supported by the United States [LOUIS : 1-31]. In Palestine, as in many other territories of the Empire, Britain’s hands were tied.

Against this background, British nerves in Palestine were stretched to breaking point. This paper sets out to examine how British officials in Palestine responded to the end of the Mandate and how they perceived the

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<sup>2</sup> The revisionist organisation known as *Lehi* (for ‘Lohamei Herut Israel’ – Israel Freedom Fighters – in Hebrew) or Stern Gang was set up in 1940 and planned the assassination of Lord Moyne, then Resident Minister of State in the Middle East, in November 1944.

<sup>3</sup> These defence forces included *Lehi*, the Irgun and the Haganah. Irgun Zvai Leumi (ITZL, referred to in English as ‘the Irgun’) was created in 1931. Though it originally functioned as a branch of the Haganah, the Irgun broke away in 1937. While the Irgun agreed to cease its activities against the British in 1939, Avraham Stern, who refused the truce with the Mandatory power, left the Irgun to fund the splinter group *Lehi*. On the other hand, the Haganah, which was the oldest and largest defence organization of the Yishuv, had been created in 1920 to protect Jewish settlements from Arab attacks. Formally attached to the Jewish Agency, it was officially recognized by the British administration.

dissolution of British rule in this part of the Empire. First, their attitude to partition will be examined and compared with the outlook adopted by policy-makers in London. Their reactions to Zionist terrorism and Jewish illegal immigration, though not monolithic, testified to their mounting despair and weariness with Palestine. As I hope to show, not all British officials shared the same views about the situation that surrounded them but what united them was probably the feeling that they had been utterly abandoned by the authorities in London, who had left them grappling with an impossible situation, like a 'rudderless ship' [BATTERSHILL, Diary : 15 December 1938]. Finally, as the moment to abdicate responsibility for Palestine approached, most officials responded to the end of British rule rather paradoxically: on the one hand, they were relieved to leave Palestine, soon to be engulfed in war, but the sense of humiliation they felt also prompted them to justify the Mandate as a benevolent enterprise and to praise the British administration's achievements.

#### *Attitudes to partition*

At the end of the Second World War, preserving the cooperation of the Arabs and the special relationship with the Americans were the two overriding priorities for Britain. Yet, like the terms of the Balfour Declaration, these objectives seemed irreconcilable. In the early stages of the Cold War, it seemed indeed crucial to maintain British influence in the Middle East first to offset the military potential of the Soviet Union and second to retain access to essential oil supplies in that region. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, therefore urged the government to keep Palestine as a strategic base<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, President Truman, partly for electoral reasons, cultivated Zionist sympathies and supported partition and the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine<sup>5</sup>, an option the British refused to contemplate because it was unacceptable to the Arabs and would entail a bloodbath in Palestine. In fact, most British officials had long opposed partition on practical as well as on

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<sup>4</sup> Montgomery was CIGS between 1946 and 1948. He urged a military solution with no political-diplomatic concessions for the problem of ongoing unrest in Palestine, especially against the mounting Jewish terrorism.

<sup>5</sup> Truman notably issued a statement on the eve of Yom Kippur in October 1946 endorsing the Zionist position on partitioning Palestine and calling again for large-scale and immediate Jewish immigration to the country.

ethical ground. The British Foreign Secretary of the time, Ernest Bevin, was indisputably one of the fiercest opponents to partition, not only because supporting the Arabs served his imperial strategy in the Middle East but also because he considered them as an indigenous people with a legitimate claim to the land of Palestine. Palestine nevertheless also represented a considerable drain on Britain's finances: one tenth of its armed forces was concentrated in a territory the size of Wales and the cost of Palestine's defence and security amounted to approximately £40 million every year. At a time when financial resources were already overstretched on the domestic front and Britons had to suffer privations even harsher than those endured in wartime,<sup>6</sup> a broad consensus of public, parliamentary and Cabinet opinion recognised withdrawal as an economic imperative. Consequently, in February 1947, Ernest Bevin announced his government's intention to surrender the Mandate and referred the Palestine question to the United Nations, who then formed a Special Committee on Palestine, known as UNSCOP. The latter published its recommendations – in favour of partition – in late August 1947 but even at this stage, the British view was that a two-thirds majority vote in favour of partition at the United Nations was very unlikely. The Foreign Office assumed that on this issue like on others the United States and the Soviet Union would gravitate into opposite camps. Indeed, while it was obvious that the United States, and especially President Truman,<sup>7</sup> supported partition and the creation of a Jewish state, the Soviet Union, on the other hand, had declared its opposition to Zionist goals on numerous occasions. Moreover, with their East European allies together with Arab and Muslim countries, the Russians would be able to block a UN proposal for partition. Therefore, the British were quite taken aback when they realised that, against all odds, the General Assembly of the United Nations would vote in favour of a partition plan, as they effectively did on 29 November 1947.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Especially during the fuel crisis and bitter winter 1947-1948.

<sup>7</sup> The American chief executive was indeed at loggerheads with the diplomats of the State Department who repeatedly warned him about the dangers to American national interests of any espousal of the Zionist programme for a separate Jewish state. See GROSE : 32-6.

<sup>8</sup> Following this, on December 4, the British Government issued a timetable leading to departure – the Mandate would end on 15 May 1948 at midnight and the evacuation of the armed forces should be completed by 1 August 1948 – as well as guiding principles for the last months of the administration: British officials should neither obstruct nor help the implementation of the partition resolution.

The 'men on the spot', however, no longer regarded partition as anathema. In fact, though rapidly dismissed as 'impractical', partition had once been on the British government's agenda for Palestine. In the context of the Arab insurrection started in 1936, the Peel Commission had envisaged partition as the only possible outcome to an insoluble conflict. Reginald Coupland,<sup>9</sup> the main contributor to the report published in 1937, had compared Palestine with Ireland and India and argued that since the British had failed to foster a unitary state, partition was the only practical solution. Coupland underlined the unbridgeable cultural and economic gap which separated the Jewish community from the Arabs, implying therefore that Palestine was *de facto* already composed of two national communities whose ambitions were incompatible. Palestine was not the first territory of the Empire where national communities clashed but, according to Coupland, because of the absence of a British element in Palestine's population it would be impossible to overcome the centuries-old conflict between Arabs and Jews:

...where the conflict of nationalities has been overcome and unity achieved – in Britain itself, in Canada, in South Africa – one of the parties concerned was English or British, and where ... that has not been so, as in the schism between the Northern and Southern Irish, or between Hindus and Moslems in India, the quarrel, though it is centuries old, has not yet been composed. [*Palestine Royal Commission Report: 375*]

A partition plan would therefore only represent the territorial endorsement of an already existing situation. In fact, it would even facilitate the task of

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<sup>9</sup> Reginald Coupland was a prominent historian of the British Empire who held the Beit Professorship of Colonial History at the University of Oxford between 1920 and 1948. From 1917 to 1919, he had also been editor-in-chief of *The Round Table*, a journal created in 1910 by Lord Milner to promote a federal system for the British Empire. Coupland published numerous books on India (including a *Report on the Constitutional Problem in India*, Oxford, 1945) but he is best known for his work on East African history (*The Exploitation of East Africa, 1856-1890: The Slave Trade and the Scramble*, London, 1943). He also devoted a book to the abolitionist movement in Britain, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (1933) and wrote a biography of its leader, William Wilberforce (*Wilberforce*, London, 1945). When Lord Peel fell ill in 1936, Coupland became responsible for writing the report of the Commission of Inquiry on Palestine.

British officials who, for years, had been striving to conciliate the Jews with the Arabs in vain. Nonetheless the report's recommendations were rejected by the British government only one year after its publication on the ground that they were unworkable.

Towards the end of the Mandate, at a time when the Labour Cabinet led by Clement Attlee persistently opposed partition for strategic reasons, the idea resurfaced in the private papers of British officials on duty in Palestine. Weary of the successive failures of British policy, they seemed to have resigned themselves to this idea without great conviction. In 1946, Henry Gurney testified to this change of heart among his administration:

...among our own people, the most die-hard and idealist advocates of a unitary Palestine seem now to be converted to partition, seeing as they do that there could be no clearer demonstration of defeat than the present state of things. Since partition must become more difficult to do with every month that passes, just as it is infinitely harder now than it would have been in 1937, and since it is quite apparent now that there is no other possible solution, we must openly work towards it. [GURNEY. Letter to John Martin, 26 October 1946]

In Gurney's point of view, partition would therefore be a way for the British to regain leadership in Palestine; it would at last give the administration a renewed sense of purpose. Nevertheless, as Ivan Lloyd Phillips pointed out, British officials were aware that partition would have to be enforced against the Arabs' will and that it would lead to yet more violence:

I have lately felt that partition is the only solution, but it will have to be imposed and there will be bloodshed – of our own people as well as on the other communities – but otherwise I can see no other alternative: Jew and Arab will not live together nor will they fuse into a single state; we have alternately led both of them to think they would receive the whole country, but as that is impossible, the next best thing is to give such half, we might then wind ourselves with some credit out of their unhappy country... [LLOYD PHILLIPS. 18 August 1945]

Surprisingly in this extract, partition appears as a way for the British to regain honour, or at least, not to lose face. Though partition used to appear as an admission of failure and the bankruptcy of the policy of the Jewish national home encapsulated in the Balfour Declaration, by 1945, it seemed

better than leaving the British administration in Jerusalem with no policy whatsoever to enforce. For years indeed, the 'men on the spot' had complained about the government's wait-and-see attitude: 'I wish the Colonial Office would make up their minds and declare exactly what they intend to do...' Ivan Lloyd Phillips wrote to his father as early as 1938 [LLOYD PHILLIPS. 4 December 1938]. Mandate officials reckoned that their role merely consisted in implementing decisions taken in London; as a result, when they were left in the middle of a predicament without any directions, they felt let down and betrayed by their superiors. That the administration could keep on with their job in such circumstances was a source of pride and patriotism for Alan Cunningham, the last High Commissioner of the Mandate:

For three years or more we had been ruling in Palestine without a policy, amid turbulence, vilification, assassination and kidnapping. That the British should have been able to stand the strain for so long, without a goal to aim at, was due to the superlative quality of the civil service, whose integrity, impartiality and courage were beyond praise, and to the tolerance and patience of the soldiers and the police, the standard of which could have been reached by no other nation. [CUNNINGHAM: 490]

These reflections suggest that British officials in Palestine did not share the grand strategic considerations of their colleagues at the Colonial or Foreign Office. Nor did they have the same hindsight on imperial questions. Thus, although they first opposed partition, as time passed by, they were gradually converted to the idea and considered it as the most honest plan they could implement in Palestine.

### *Reactions to Jewish illegal immigration and Zionist terrorism*

A very powerful factor in this change of mind about partition was the pressure exercised by the Zionist campaign of terrorism from 1944 onwards. In spite of the restrictions imposed by the British on Jewish immigration in 1939, almost all Zionist defence organisations had agreed to declare a truce and join forces with the British for the duration of the war. Their priority was of course to defeat Nazi Germany and forming a united front with the British appeared as the simplest expedient. Yet, as the conflict drew to a close and the Allies' victory appeared more and more likely, Zionist



insurgents<sup>10</sup> organised to force the British to withdraw from Palestine by inflicting a political and military defeat on them. On 22 July 1946, the Irgun, a Zionist underground military organisation, blew up the King David Hotel, the headquarters of the Mandate administration in Jerusalem. Ninety-one people – including Britons, but also Arabs and Jews – were killed, and dozens wounded. This event had a tremendous impact on the British staff for everyone knew someone who had been killed or injured at the King David. In a letter to his father in which he recalled the explosion (which he witnessed), Ivan Lloyd Phillips concluded: ‘...it will be grand when I leave Palestine never to have to speak to another Jew again – they have murdered too many of my friends’ [LLOYD PHILLIPS. 26 July 1946]. In the wake of the blowing up of the King David Hotel, such comments, tainted with an obvious anti-Jewish bias, were not uncommon among the British administration and army. For instance, the General Commanding in Palestine, Sir Evelyn Barker, issued a non-fraternisation order to British troops, forbidding them to have ‘social intercourse with any Jew’ in order to punish the Jews ‘in a way the race dislikes as much as any, by striking at their pockets and showing our contempt for them’ [SHERMAN: 183]. Intemperate public statements as this, articulating the old stereotype about Jews and their supposed love of money, was of course exploited by Zionist propagandists as the proof of widespread anti-Semitism among the British.

In the summer 1947, another manifestation of Zionist insurgency inspired widespread revulsion in Palestine as well as Britain. In July, after the execution of three Irgun members by the army, two British sergeants were abducted and hanged. After their death, their bodies were suspended from trees and booby-trapped, thus injuring another soldier sent to retrieve the bodies. The murder of the two sergeants made the headlines in Britain: the front page of the *Daily Express* of 1 August 1947 carried the story of the two sergeants illustrated by a grim photograph showing their bodies hanging in a eucalyptus grove. On the same day, *The Times* reported with outrage that

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<sup>10</sup> From 1945 onwards, the Haganah cooperated with the Irgun and *Lehi*, even though their strategies greatly differed: while the Haganah envisaged a negotiated solution and considered warfare as simply a pressure tactic to compel Britain to reconsider its policies, the Irgun and *Lehi* rejected a negotiated settlement with the Mandatory power and aimed at forcing Britain to relinquish Palestine. The bombing of the King David Hotel by Irgun forces however caused the Haganah to retreat from extremist violence.

the men 'were kidnapped unarmed and defenceless. They were murdered for no offence'. Meanwhile, *The Observer* held that 'the mimicry of Nazi methods by the terrorists leads straight to the conclusion that we cannot go on sending our young soldiers to the odious cauldron of crime and passion'. As these extracts reveal, this single incident focused public attention on the risks to British troops and provoked indignation about the cost of Palestine in lives, treasure and prestige. In Tel Aviv, several units of British police retaliated by storming a Jewish café and killed five Jews in the course of numerous assaults. Their conduct was condemned by the High Commissioner according to whom 'such conduct on the part of a disciplined force cannot be excused' but Cunningham then added in partial explanation that the mostly young recruits, after working for months under severe strain, had been brought to 'a pitch of fury which momentarily blinded them to the dictates of discipline, reason and humanity alike' [SHERMAN : 207]. Likewise, Henry Gurney repeatedly complained about the need to 'civilise the police' and restore its 'civilian character' [GURNEY. Letter to John Martin, 16 January 1947]. Yet, at the same time, he could not but express sympathy with a force caught up in the dissolution of the Empire, a process which involved increasingly unpleasant and violent tasks for which they had had no preparation:

I am not entirely happy about our British police. Many of them now see themselves deprived of the career in a 'fine force' held out to them implicitly in recruiting campaigns: many again, who have been up against Jewish terrorists for two years with no help from the Jews, may be a bit late in turning out to prevent Arab dealing with Jews and will be reluctant to take a hand in enforcing a solution which they do not believe to be just to the Arabs; many others faced with family difficulties in separation, will want to go. [...] How do you maintain the march of a force occupied in preparing its own funeral in operations in which a good many other funerals are inevitable? [GURNEY. Letter to John Martin, 1 September 1947]

Not all British officials were as tolerant as Gurney or Cunningham. John Watson, a young member of the Royal Air Force carrying out his national service as an announcer in the Forces Broadcasting Service, first admitted that the killing of the two British sergeants by the Irgun was an 'atrocious' before toning down his judgement by comparing this murder with Russian or German pogroms:

I admit it was an atrocity. But what is it in comparison to the atrocities committed by Germans and Russians where the victims were counted by the thousand, not the single unit! [...]. The next day a Palestine Police (British) armoured car-load of avenging (British) angels, let loose hell into a busload of ordinary Jewish civilians in the middle of Tel Aviv. 5 innocent people (including an 8-year-old girl) died and 40 were seriously injured in this outrage. Yet, that is considered only natural, and of course hushed up by the authorities. Do you remember those films about the Nazis in occupied Europe, when you saw German armoured cars sweeping through towns, moving down the crowds with machine gun fire? [WATSON. 28 July 1947]

In his correspondence with his family, Watson chose to emphasise British reprisals in Tel Aviv. Portraying the Jews as innocent victims and the Palestine Police as an occupation army wreaking their anger on terrified civilians, Watson made it clear that his sympathies lay with the Zionists. His pro-Jewish bias makes Watson a noteworthy exception in the ranks of the British military. But his impressions of the situation in Palestine were coloured by the nature of his duties: his experience as an announcer with the Forces Broadcasting Units clearly differed from that of other members of the British forces, whose time was spent controlling riots, carrying out cordon and search operations or invigilating curfews. Moreover, Watson had only spent a very short time in Palestine (he arrived three months after the attack on the King David Hotel) and had little background knowledge of the antagonism between the British and the Zionists. As a consequence, he showed very little solidarity with his comrades and even argued that it was time for the British to withdraw from Palestine:

The trouble there, of course, is the British colonial types, who are so very snobbish, in a kind of lower middle-class way ... These people assume quite unnatural importance, locally, treat anyone non-English if local as slaves, and generally behave in such a stupid snooty way... No wonder any country in the world still occupied by the British resents it, and will do anything to get rid of them... [WATSON. 14 July 1947]

Rather than sympathising with the plight of the British peace-keeping troops, Watson expressed unambiguous anti-imperialist views, thus giving the impression that he had been convinced by the radical stance of the Zionist freedom fighters who, like him, associated the British with the Nazis

and talked of Palestine as an *occupied* country whose *independence* they needed to fight for. In posters which appeared all over Palestine, the Irgun indeed appealed to the British rank and file, 'as soldiers address soldiers', and assured the troops that their operations were not directed against them personally, but against a 'regime of treachery and oppression' trying to crush a movement of national liberation [SHERMAN : 191].

Though exceptional because of his support to the Zionist cause, Watson was not the only one to find justifications for Jewish terrorism. Even though they refused to condone it, some explained violence and terror as inbuilt features of the Jewish mind. Ernest Bevin, frequently vilified as an anti-Semite by the Zionists,<sup>11</sup> told his parliamentary undersecretary Christopher Mayhew that the Jews had 'taught Hitler the technique of terror – and were even now paralleling the Nazis in Palestine. They were preachers of violence and war – "What could you expect when people are brought up from the cradle on the Old Testament?"' [WEILER : 171]. Richard Catling, head of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Palestine Police between 1944 and 1948, also quoted the Old Testament at length to explain Zionist terrorism as 'the Jews' heritage' or a 'tradition of sanctified violence':

...when they look to a renascent Israel, the turn they wish their history to take is the turn it has taken often before 'in the days that the enemies of the Jews hoped to have rule over them; whereas it was turned to the contrary, that the Jews had rule over them that hated them [...] and the Jews smote all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and with slaughter and destruction, and did what they would unto them that hated them.' It was the divine will that their feet should be set on this path; to follow it in their inescapable fate; there can be no thought of condemnation but, in practical dealings with them, it is necessary to

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<sup>11</sup> In the eyes of the Zionists, Ernest Bevin was a notorious anti-Semite. Several colossal 'blunders' had earned him this reputation: in November 1945, he infuriated Jews worldwide when urging European Jews not to press for particular claims to the detriment of other refugees: 'If the Jews, with all their sufferings want to get too much ahead of the queue, you have the danger of another anti-Semitic reaction through it all'. In June 1946, he contended that American officials favoured admission of Holocaust survivors to Palestine only because 'they did not want too many Jews in New York'. Yet, before becoming Foreign Secretary in 1945, Bevin had cultivated Jewish or Zionist sympathies on several occasions: in 1930, for instance, he did not hesitate to publicly give his support to the Zionist cause so that the Labour Party could get the votes of Jewish electors in Whitechapel [GORNY : 91-96].

see clearly and evenly the way that they go. [...] In the eyes of the Jews of Palestine and of many in the Diaspora, the maintenance of Defence Forces, even though the law should regard them as illegal semi-military organisations, is not merely blameless but positively praiseworthy. 'This is nothing else than the sword of Gideon'. [...] On the Jewish consciousness of their people's high mission is superimposed ... the influence of those centuries during which their race has been hounded, persecuted and segregated... Above all are the determination that the pogroms and humiliation of Europe shall not occur in the National Home and the consciousness that, given the strength, the Jews themselves can see that it is so. [CATLING]

But in his account of Jewish defense organisations, Catling gives equal weight to what he sees as a cultural or religious legacy and the influence of centuries of persecution. Such a remark could lead us to think that the extermination of millions of European Jews during the Second World War played a prominent role in British officials' understanding of the Zionist campaign for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. This, however, was far from being so.

The well-known *Exodus* affair aptly shows to what extent the British authorities underestimated the emotional impact of the Holocaust and failed to perceive that it strengthened the Zionist cause at their own expense. The *Exodus 1947* was an American steamer converted into a ferry, which had left Marseilles crowded with approximately 4,500 Jewish refugees with a view to breaking the British blockade on immigration. In order to increase international pressure on the British and give worldwide publicity to their cause, Zionist leaders had planned to land the ship in Palestine while members of the United Nations Special Committee (UNSCOP) were collecting information for their report. As it approached the coast of Palestine, the Royal Navy took control of *Exodus* and forcibly transferred its passengers into three British boats to ship them back to France. Once arrived in Marseilles, the passengers refused to land and the French authorities renounced using force against them. They were therefore sent back to Hamburg, in the British zone of occupation, and forcibly disembarked on German soil. The entire incident, prolonged over nearly two months and flashed all over the world, was a propaganda defeat of the first magnitude for the British. In sending Jewish survivors of concentration camps back to the country where the Holocaust had been perpetrated, the British only succeeded in shocking the world community into deeper sympathy for the

Zionists. But according to British officials in Palestine, this episode only revealed the Zionists' mastery of modern propaganda techniques. To them, the Holocaust was above all a rhetorical tool which the Zionists used to persuade the American government and world opinion to support the creation of a Jewish state. Retrospectively, Henry Gurney even expressed doubts about the extent of the Holocaust:

The Jews maintain that of the seventeen million Jews in the world in 1939 six millions were killed in Europe during the last war. This figure is generally accepted but there seems to be no evidence to substantiate this estimate. Whether or not it is an exaggeration, the story has been widely used to build up American sentiment in support of a Jewish State in Palestine. In fact it was open to Jewish D.P.'s [displaced persons] in Europe to resume life in their own countries, which many of them would have been only too glad to do, or in other parts of the world, but the Zionists were strong enough to prevent any such diversion materialising and used all their money and influence to keep the eyes of the D.P.'s firmly fixed on Palestine. [GURNEY. 'Palestine Postscript' : 13-14]

According to Gurney, were it not for the activism of Zionist militants, Jewish refugees could very well have gone back to a normal life in the countries of Europe where they came from. This was also the opinion of General Gordon McMillan, who was in charge of fighting Zionist organisations planning illegal immigration into Palestine. For him, there was nothing cruel in sending the *Exodus* passengers back to Germany because '... as far as the Germans were no longer Hitlerites... they were going back to what was soon to become a civilised Germany...' [LAPPING: 103].<sup>12</sup> Although such statements are bound to be considered as outrageously unfeeling nowadays, they faithfully reflect the mindset of British officials in the immediate post-war period. British officials serving in Palestine indeed seemed unable to fathom the emotional impact of the Holocaust and therefore remained totally impervious to the urgency with which Zionist leaders regarded Jewish immigration, 'a subject', Gurney said, 'on which despair and the

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<sup>12</sup> While Gurney's attitude could be explained by his lack of hindsight, this was not the case of McMillan whose declaration, which was made in 1985, could appear as far more controversial.

Jewish psychology combine to exclude all reason' [GURNEY, 8 December 1946].<sup>13</sup>

Yet, we should be wary not to exaggerate British insensitivity: even though the figure of the Jewish refugee and the Holocaust were assuming a more and more important role in Zionist propaganda, Zionist freedom fighters themselves tended to despise the survivors of the Holocaust because of their submissiveness, a moral characteristic which they deemed typical of Jews living in exile.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, when interviewed by the United Nations Special Committee, Zionist leaders defended their project of a Jewish state in Palestine by arguing that it would be economically viable and even beneficial to the Arab population of the region. In other words, their discourse totally overlooked the fate of Jewish refugees gathered in assembly centres all over Europe and relied on arguments used ever since the early days of the Mandate. In addition, the United Nations Special Committee also made it clear in their report that their objective was to settle the Arab-Jewish conflict specific to Palestine and not to find a general solution to the problem of Jewish refugees arising from the Second World War.

#### *Evacuation and retrospective assessments of the Mandate*

As the time approached to abdicate imperial responsibility for Palestine, the sense of letdown and humiliation became pervasive in British officials' private papers. Indeed, at the critical stage of evacuation, the administration was unable to protect itself but it was committed to hang on until the middle of May. Formally, the British were still in charge of Palestine but found themselves in an increasingly untenable position and were prevented from

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<sup>13</sup> In his correspondence with John Martin, Gurney repeatedly talks of the Zionists' 'hysteria' or 'insanity', as if these were ingrained features of the Jewish mind. About Golda Meyerson (who was to change her name to 'Meir'), he remarked: 'Her Zionist fervour has brought her good nature to the verge of insanity' [GURNEY, 24 January 1947]. Later, he wrote: 'The Jews are generally in a state of complete panic and hysteria' [GURNEY, 24 December 1947].

<sup>14</sup> Idith Zertal explains how Palestinian Zionists considered that Diaspora Jews had to prove their worth and atone for failing to stand up and rebel against the Nazis by taking up arms against the British as soon as they arrived in Palestine [ZERTAL : 30-36].

doing administrative routine tasks. The incongruity of such a situation was brought to the fore by Gurney, now writing from a security enclave:

I must say that strain here has been pretty heavy and now that the remaining British are all behind wire we are beginning to wonder how long it will be possible to carry on civil administration here at all. I don't know whether any of our colleagues in the F. O. [Foreign Office] appreciates what it feels like not to be allowed outside your house without an escort in a British territory ... what an odd spectacle is that of a long convoy of British officials being transported to their offices in Jerusalem through streets in which the rest of the population ... move freely. [GURNEY. Letter to John Martin, 8 February 1948]

Fully aware that the battle between the Zionists and the Arabs would unleash mayhem immediately after their departure,<sup>15</sup> they still persisted in their task of winding down the Mandate with a workmanlike pride, simply because for them it would have been unthinkable to do otherwise. While random violence on the part of the Arabs and the Jews continued to claim victims, they recorded the general insecurity that surrounded them in an even tone:

Every day now, about 20 people are killed. Two bullets came quite close to-day; one going to the office this morning, and one outside the house to-night. These incidents become too numerous for words. [GURNEY, diary, 1 April 1948]

Withdrawing without designating a successor, the British did not so much transfer power as abandon it. But, as Gurney made clear, individual officials were not responsible for the conflicting promises, the wishful thinking, the sheer muddle of British Palestine policy:

There are clear signs of attempts to make the Palestine Government the scapegoat in these latest troubles. [...] The present position has been foreseen and predicted by the Palestine Government for years and I for one am not going to stand by and see the High Commissioner ... carry any of the blame for the failure of successive UK governments to face up to the realities of the problem. [...] ... there is no British man in

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<sup>15</sup> In reality the war had already started in earnest. Powerless, the British had stood witness to the massacre of the civilian population of an Arab village, Deir Yassin, by Irgun troops on 9 April 1948.



Palestine today who would place the blame for our present difficulties anywhere else but fairly and squarely on HMG for procrastination and on the Jews for psychological intransigence. [GURNEY. Letter to John Martin, 30 January 1947]

Faithful to the culture of British colonial service, Gurney did not express his emotions in public, especially if they ran contrary to what his position obliged. His diary as well as the letters that he wrote to his friend and colleague, John Martin, who was then Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the Colonial Office, represented a means of emotional release thanks to which he could explain that neither the Colonial Office nor its emissaries in Palestine, nor he himself had anything to be ashamed of. British officials working in Palestine tended to consider themselves as ordinary individuals caught up in an extraordinary situation for which they were not responsible, but the last days of the Mandate represented an opportunity to speak openly and with feeling about the burden Britain had assumed in Palestine. To Gurney,

...the undertaking given by Britain to facilitate the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine represents the only attempt made by any nation in history to help the Jews. It ended in ingratitude, bitterness and tragedy... [GURNEY. Palestine Postscript : 18-19]

Surprisingly enough, despite the Mandate's dismal ending and notwithstanding his numerous and scathing criticisms of the British government's Palestine policy, Gurney eventually set forth an unreserved eulogy for the Mandate:

In the thirty years of its life the Mandatory Administration of Palestine, aided by Jewish finance, skill and enthusiasm, had transformed a poor and backward country into a prosperous and progressive country equipped with all the services of modern western civilisation. For centuries under the Turks Palestine had lain neglected and forlorn, without roads, without water supplies, without a railway and almost without schools and hospitals. All the love professed by the three great monotheistic religions for Jerusalem had never furnished it with even a water supply. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre stood in danger of collapse. There were no telephones. The life of the fellahin pursued its slow round of dust, disease and debt. So had it been since the days of the Old Testament. Then, suddenly, for the first time in its long history, Palestine awoke and became rich. First-class roads and water

supplies, schools and hospitals. Electric power and agricultural research stations, ports and railways followed the inflow of Zionist capital to redeem the Holy Land. [GURNEY. Palestine Postscript : 1-2]

The contrast between this vibrant tribute to British imperialism, which was written by Gurney shortly after his return to England, and the gloomy tone that pervaded his letters and diary while he was still on duty in Jerusalem is striking.<sup>16</sup> For imperial administrators, viewing the Mandate in such a positive light was undoubtedly a means to justify themselves and come to terms with an unsettling experience. It is therefore little wonder that they could leave with, as Gurney said in the last entry of his diary, a 'clear conscience'.

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<sup>16</sup> Such a positive assessment was far from being a unique occurrence: as late as 1978, when Thames Television carried out interviews of former colonial officials with a view to producing a documentary film on the Palestine Mandate, testimonies were still full of praise for the merits of British administration. Like Gurney, many emphasised how, according to them, the British administration had promoted development and opened up Palestine to modernity and prosperity.

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