

THE IRGUN HOAX

By Catherine Wilson

THE exploits of the Palestine terrorist movement, Irgun Zevai Leumi, have aroused among many American Jews great sympathy and pride in the fact that Jews too can fight back. This sympathy and pride are grounded more in emotion than in a knowledge of the facts. For the facts, when studied, reveal a tale far removed from the propaganda build-up that representatives of the Irgun in America have astutely engineered.

"This is the Resistance . . . Palestine's Fighting Army of Liberation" is the title of a pamphlet, recently issued here by the American League for a Free Palestine, one of these American representatives, to glorify the Irgun Zevai Leumi (National Military Organization) of Palestine as a people's liberation movement, fighting for "an independent, democratic republic" and promising "full freedom and equal rights to all, whether Jew, Moslem or Christian." The appearance of this pamphlet marks the climax of one of the most skillful propaganda hoaxes perpetrated on Americans in recent years: the endeavor of the political representatives of the Irgun in the United States to cloak this terrorist organization in the inspired tradition of the wartime underground armies, which forged united people's fronts to wage exalted wars for the liberty and independence of their homelands.

The Irgun appears to have the trappings of a genuine resistance movement. Its acts against British terror, its killing of British soldiers and policemen, breaching of British prisons, derailment of trains and blowing up of government offices seem—to the uninformed—the heroic acts of Jewish Maquis. In the United States, representatives of the Irgun, organized in a network of publicity-mad organizations, publicize proposals for a "Hebrew" government-in-exile to direct the fight for a free Jewish state in Palestine. The propaganda of the Irgunists here stresses that the Irgun stands for attack, open war, action in contrast to the "cautious line," the "collaborationism," the "restraint" of the organized Jewish community.

Irgun's Friends and Enemies

The record and achievements of the Irgun and its representatives in the United States suggest, however, that it is far from being a genuine resistance movement. A true liberation movement draws its strength and character from the participation and support of the people. Its genuineness may be judged by its friends and its enemies. But the Irgun, with a membership estimated between 4,000 and 10,000 has alienated the Arab masses with its revolting

chauvinism. It has been condemned by every responsible Jewish group in Palestine. Its enemies are all groups in Palestine from left to right which understand well how the Irgun harms the cause of the Yishuv. For the Irgun unleashes its terror not only against the British but against the innocent Arab and Jew, as well.

In true terrorist tradition it secures its funds by extortion, blackmail and robbery of the Yishuv which it would not need to do, if it were a genuine people's movement. The *Palestine Post* in March 1947 reported that ten Jews and ten Arabs had been killed by terrorist action in one week alone. The Irgun has bombed the print shop of the newspaper *Neu Velt*, organ of the left *Poale Zion* (Labor Zionists), burned newspaper stands which sell Yiddish and German papers, kidnapped labor and Haganah people, attacked and burned down workers clubs of the Hashomer Hatzair (Socialist-Zionist Youth). Haganah, the defense agency recognized by a majority in the Yishuv, addressed a recent leaflet to the terrorists: "You are a deserter. . . . We struggle in a disciplined way. But you throw bombs without rhyme or reason. You inflict terror on the Jewish public. You are sabotaging our struggle." Fourteen Palestine youth organizations, from the left to right, recently issued a joint appeal for an end to terrorism.

These are the opinions of the people in whose interests the Irgun is presumably fighting. The elements against whom the Irgun is supposed to wage its struggle, however, think quite differently of its activities. The attitude of the Arab fascist clique, guided by the pro-Nazi Mufti, is publicly known. Jamal el Hussein, the former Grand Mufti's deputy as chairman of the Arab Higher Committee, was quoted by the *New York Times*, May 2, 1947, as saying: "As for Jewish terrorism, I pray to God that it may continue, as it is in our interest." Nor is the Irgun hated by all the reactionary and rightist elements in the Jewish community. In a dispatch from Jerusalem, April 27, 1947, *PM* correspondent I. F. Stone wrote, "The two terrorist groups (the Irgun and the Stern gang) are shot through with the contempt for the masses and for life that is characteristic of fascist movements. Covertly cooperating with them are rightist and conservative groupings which see in the Irgun Zevai Leumi a way to smash Palestine's powerful labor movement and labor party under the cover of patriotic and national fervor."

The British Don't Mind

Most interesting of all is the opinion of what is presumably the main target of terrorist activity. The British attitude to the Irgun and Stern terrorists was described by Mr. Stone in the same dispatch. "As for the British," he wrote, "just as they covertly support the Husseinis and the ex-

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tremist Mufti faction of the Arabs—shutting their eyes to their assassinations and making life uncomfortable for the anti-Husseini Arabs—so they seem constantly to adopt policies and take steps which strengthen the hold of terrorist leadership on the Jewish community.”

This British attitude is understandable. For the Irgun terror campaign, although apparently directed against the British, is not prompted by any overall program against British imperialism. Such a program would demand cooperation with the groups already engaged in the anti-imperialist struggle. The Irgun not only refuses to cooperate with these groups but rejects the will of the Jewish majority. The bombing of the King David Hotel last year is a case in point. After the arrest of Zionist leaders, June 29, the major Jewish organizations planned an organized demonstration in which the entire Yishuv was to take part. Before this plan could be carried out, however, the Irgun bombed the hotel, taking the initiative out of the hands of the people, and giving it to the British authorities, who promptly took punitive action against Tel Aviv.

That the Irgun's aim is to seize power for itself, at whatever expense to the Yishuv, is made clear in a dispatch from Jerusalem by World News Services correspondent R. S. Gordon, in February 1947. He described the terrorists as “the truly imperialist-minded elements in the Jewish community,” and “not the least bit interested in democracy for Palestine Jews or anyone else,” adding: “Their basic aim is not so much to wage war against the British as to create an empire of their own in the Middle East. . . . The Irgun Zevai Leumi, the Stern gang and their supporters plan and execute their acts of violence with the aim of attaining a Jewish State in all of Palestine by force. By the same methods, they propose to extend the projected Jewish state to include neighboring Transjordan. Some calmly talk of turning at least part of the Middle East into a colonial hinterland to be exploited and developed by their as yet non-existent Palestine-Transjordan state.” Since the Irgun's outrageous aims cannot possibly be attained in the face of the resistance of 70,000,000 Arabs, and are therefore no threat to British imperialist control, Britain can well afford to encourage and safeguard the Irgun's existence as an instrument in its profitable colonial policy of “divide and rule.”

Origin and Paternity

This characterization would not be such a shock to many Americans, Jewish and non-Jewish, if they were aware of the origin of the Irgun. And the enthusiasm of these generous Americans, beguiled by the exploits of the Irgun, might be somewhat abated if they knew the organization's political paternity. The Irgun was originally organized out of a gang of strikebreakers, called “The Strong Arm Squad” (in Hebrew, *kvutzat habiryonim*) and developed from a political movement which preached strike-breaking and the crushing of the trade unions as a patriotic duty. Irgun was formed in 1931; its first activities were raids on union halls, breaking up union meetings, wrecking the offices of labor

papers. It won prominence in the period of the Arab riots, 1936-39, when the Yishuv adopted the policy maintained since the early days: active defense against attack but no blind or indiscriminate retaliation. This concept of *havaga*, self-restraint, developed as an extension of the concept of self-defense and was intimately associated with the idea of a defense corps made up of the workers themselves. The Irgun not only refused to take part in the defense of the Jewish community against the Arab terrorists but launched a terror of its own, bombing Arab market places and riding through Arab villages mowing down everything in sight with machine guns.

Politically the Irgun emerged from the Revisionist movement—the Jewish form of reaction—led by Vladimir Jabotinsky. In Palestine today the Irgun placards the walls with posters hailing Jabotinsky as its prophet and proclaiming his inspiration of its revolt. Prof. Johan J. Smertenko, a leading spokesman for the American League for a Free Palestine, makes the Irgun-Revisionist relationship clear: “A group of Revisionist youth organized an underground self-defense corps which soon became famous as the Irgun Zevai Leumi.” Revisionism early saw the need for such military organizations. One of the Revisionist leaders was Aba Achimeir, of whom Jabotinsky wrote in the *New York Morning Journal* in 1930, “I take my hat off to my friend and teacher, Achimeir.” This friend and teacher proclaimed: “We must create groups for action; to exterminate the Histadruth (Jewish Federation of Labor) physically; they are worse than the Arabs, bomb their gatherings.”

Around Jabotinsky's banner rallied the right wing of the Yishuv which demanded a Palestine without “socialist illusions” and with unlimited possibilities for capitalist exploitation and profit. Revisionism called for a strong hand against Jewish workers: it fed on the widespread disillusionment with British policy, limited immigration and growing poverty of the working class in the world economic crisis of the thirties. Revisionism proclaimed that “the danger comes from within” and identified the inner enemy as the worker. The attitude of Revisionism towards the working class struggle is clearly indicated in its *Basic Principles of Revisionism* (1929), which states: “Differences between Labor and Capital are to be adjusted solely by means of compromise. The Yishuv must proclaim a national arbitration regime and create a system of national arbitral courts. . . . Any infraction of the decision of the national arbitration bodies (lockouts, strikes, boycott of Jewish labor) are to be regarded as treason to the Nation.” At one Zionist Congress a Revisionist leader warned the workers' delegates: “Don't boast about your strength. There was a workers' movement in Germany, too, and it turned to dust and ashes overnight.” Jabotinsky, canon saint of the Irgun, proclaimed: “Every labor strike is treason.” He preached strike-breaking: “I remove the moral stigma attaching to the expression ‘strike-breaking’ in Palestine.” He called the Histadruth “this cursed cancer feeding on the body of the Yishuv.” Under this incitement, his brown-shirted followers did not hesitate to put his precepts into action.

Kinship with Fascism

Revisionism's kinship with fascism was clearly recognized by those best able to judge. The Italian Information Bureau, "Oriente Moderne," reporting greetings sent to the Revisionist Congress in Vienna in 1935 by the Mussolini government, said: "The Revisionists take a friendly position towards Italy. Its paper, *Hayarden*, has supported Italy in the Ethiopian affair, since the Revisionists are radical-nationalists and active enemies of the workers." Another Revisionist document declared: "Mussolini is the man who saved humanity from Communism. We are the pioneers in the struggle against socialism, Marxism and Communism. For ten years we have been seeking a Jewish Mussolini. Help us find him."

The brown-shirted, black-tied Betar Youth movement, of which Jabotinsky was commander-in-chief, received permission from the nazis to parade in Germany in 1934. The anti-Semitic Polish Government in 1937 urged Jewish youth in Poland to join Betar. In both Germany and Poland, the Betar movement, which was organized on the military lines of the Hitler youth movement and subscribed to a similar ideology, betrayed the Socialist-Zionist Jewish youth group, the Hashomer Hatzair, to the fascist authorities. The London Revisionist weekly, the *Jewish Standard*, was discovered in 1942 to be on the subsidy list of the anti-Semitic Polish government-in-exile. That same year an underground report smuggled out of Europe by Jewish partisans charged that some Revisionists were acting as ghetto police for the nazis. That the Revisionist movement has not changed its pro-fascist orientation is clear from the fact that today the *Hamashkif*, organ of the Palestinian Revisionists, supports Franco in Spain and the Greek monarchist government against the EAM.

The year nazism came to power in Germany found the Revisionists smashing collection boxes of the Jewish National Fund and, in the murder of the Socialist-Zionist Arlosoroff, carrying out the precepts of Jabotinsky's "friend and teacher" Achmeir, who preached assassination. Achmeir once declared: "It is by the amount of bloodshed that we can evaluate a revolution and not by the beautiful ideas for which the blood is shed."

Relations with Imperialism

With a program which proclaimed hostility to the Arabs, declaring that "voluntary reconciliation with Arabs is out of the question," the Revisionists sought allies elsewhere. In 1921 Jabotinsky entered negotiations with the White Russian Petlura, instigator of pogroms which killed thousands of Jews. In 1936 he proposed that Mussolini's Italy take over the Palestine Mandate. In 1937 he was negotiating with the Polish colonel Beck and offering a solution of the "Jewish problem" which provided for the evacuation of three million "surplus" Jews in Europe.

It was in its relations to the Mandatory Power, Great Britain, however, that the true character of the Revisionist

movement was most clearly exposed. On occasion, when it suited their purposes, the Revisionists posed as the most valiant fighters against Britain. The very nature of their movement, however, again and again inevitably brought them into collaboration with Britain against their fellow-Jews. This was apparent in their repeated demands that the British government dissolve the Jewish agency and in their willingness to hand over basic Jewish rights and organs of Jewish autonomy to the British administration. In 1940, for instance, the Revisionists petitioned the British Palestine government to outlaw strikes and to take over from Jewish labor bureaus the responsibility of regulating employment.

Reliance upon Britain is a basic feature of the Revisionist, as it is of the whole Zionist movement. Jabotinsky repeatedly proclaimed his allegiance to England, outlining the Revisionist doctrine on this point in *Jewish State Zionism* in these words: "But a Palestine predominantly Jewish, Palestine as a Jewish state, surrounded on all sides by Arab countries, will in the interests of its own preservation always tend to lean upon some powerful empire, non-Arab and non-Moslem. This is an almost providential basis for a permanent alliance between England and a Jewish (but only a Jewish) Palestine." This policy of alliance with Britain is still pursued by the Revisionists, with some elaboration to meet changing conditions in the Middle East.

The Revisionists are now putting forward the thesis that not only Britain, but also an expanding American imperialism can find a worthy bulwark in an "independent" Jewish Palestine. One of England's leading Revisionists, A. Greenberg, put the proposal bluntly at a press conference in Tel Aviv, August 21, 1946: "It is our duty to convince the British and Americans that just from the strategic point of view an independent Jewish community in Palestine is a positive and not a negative factor in the struggle between the Anglo-Saxon and the Russian worlds. . . . We have to convince the British of the identity of their military interests and the Zionist demands. . . . We have to be the link in the Anglo-American chain of defense." The anti-Soviet bait was offered again by *Hamishkif*, October 4, 1946, when it said: "We desire an alliance with the British Empire, not with the Asiatic countries and not with the Soviet Union."

The present terrorist campaign of the Irgun, which was initiated with a "declaration of war" against Britain, is an essential part of this basic strategy of winning imperialist support for a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan, a Jewish state, cleansed of "socialist illusions" and democratic institutions, a state ready and eager to assume a puppet role in the imperialist combination being organized against the Soviet Union. In Palestine, Irgun's purpose and role is generally understood.

Irgun Fronts in the U.S.A.

The Irgun dares to take the offensive at this time because of the failure of the dominant leadership of the Zionist movement to conduct anti-imperialist struggle. Even left-wing

Zionist organizations have been inconsistent and indecisive in leading the Jewish masses against imperialist domination in Palestine. The Irgun is capitalizing on the failure of legitimate Jewish leadership. Only the Communist Party of Palestine has been conducting consistent struggle against imperialism, together with Arab progressive forces.

But the Irgun has also found encouragement for action in the support won for it in the United States by an energetic group headed by an adventurer called Peter Bergson. This group has straddled the country and has had remarkable success in deceiving a large number of distinguished Americans, Jewish and non-Jewish, from political left to right, into sponsoring or supporting their shifting "front" organizations and in collecting huge sums of money from generous Americans. The Irgun recently expressed its appreciation for this work, declaring, as reported in the *New York Times*, April 19, that Bergson's Hebrew Committee for National Liberation and its associated bodies "support our struggle and conduct a great work of enlightenment for our cause."

The key men in the front committees which have been working for the Irgun here arrived in the United States between 1939 and 1941. Some came as a delegation of the Irgun from Palestine, some were emissaries from Europe. Altogether there were ten who formed the nucleus of the successive paper committees, and nearly all had been associated with Irgun or Betar, or both. Bergson, the leader, whose real name is Hillel Kook and who is the son of a Tel Aviv rabbi, took his alias in the mid-thirties when he left Palestine to work in Europe and the Middle East as an agent of the Irgun. Alexander Hadani, for several years an Irgun agent in Europe, headed the Irgun delegation to the Zionist Congress in Geneva in 1939. Considered to be one of the chief "brain trusters" of the group is Samuel Merlin, for many years political secretary to Vladimir Jabotinsky. Jabotinsky died in the United States in 1940 and Merlin joined the Irgun group here at that time. Other members were Jabotinsky's son Eri, Arieh Ben-Eliezer, a member of Betar since its inception, Captain Jeremiah Halpern, another Betar leader and close collaborator of Jabotinsky's, Yitshak Ben Ami, a member of both Betar and the Irgun, and Theodore Bennahum, Phinhas Delougaz and Aaron Kope.

This Irgun group operated through a series of "front" committees—the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine, the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews, the Emergency Committee to Save the Jews of Europe, the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation, and the American League for a Free Palestine—and always claimed to speak in the name of the whole Jewish people, although they were bitterly opposed by most organized Jewish groups and never sought affiliation with other groups.

In the United States, the Irgun speaks not only under a variety of different names, but with another voice. Here its front committees in full page ads and in pamphlets present the Irgun as the vanguard of an oppressed people,

fighting a "revolutionary war of independence" and dedicated to democratic ideals. It tries to be all things to all men. With such a political doctrine, it was possible—and typical—that the Revisionists in the United States in 1944 called for an end to the British Mandate, while the Revisionists in Palestine through *Hamashkif* said, Oct. 4, 1944, "Revisionists want one thing, ties with the British Empire."

At the same time, the Irgun outfits in the United States carried on a campaign for a Jewish state in Palestine "on both sides of the Jordan" and continually attacked the recognized Jewish agencies as "do-nothing" and ineffective. Through the American League for a Free Palestine, the Bergson group in February 1947 called for the dissolution of the Jewish Agency in Palestine and in the pamphlet, *This Is the Resistance*, supported the Irgun demand for a "Provisional Government" and an interim "National Council."

But the fundamental reactionary political doctrine of the Irgun and its American agents explains why its non-Jewish political front in the United States is a gentleman who was on President Roosevelt's purge list as an arch reactionary, ex-Senator Guy Gillette; why its Jewish political front in the United States is a gentleman who wrote one of the most revolting of anti-Semitic books, Ben Hecht of *A Jew in Love* ill-repute. And this political doctrine also explains why the sole political action taken by the American Revisionist organization on the domestic front was to call upon the Jews to vote in the 1946 elections for the most reactionary section of American imperialism, the Dewey-Taft-Hoover gang in the Republican Party, after this party had conducted a presidential election campaign in 1944 on the anti-Semitic slogan of "Clear It With Sidney" and with the open support of the most notorious anti-Semites of the country.

Publicity and Facts

On its record, the purpose of the Bergson group is to confuse public opinion and to win support for the Irgun. It has made lavish use of flamboyant, sensational and sometimes clever press agency and publicity. "For Sale to Humanity—70,000 Jews, Guaranteed Human Beings at \$50 a Piece. . . Rumania will now give Jews away practically for nothing," read one of its ads, reprints of which were mailed out with requests for contributions. The public may be forgiven for having believed that a \$50 contribution would save a Jewish life, although, as it turned out, such was not the case. The financial appeals of the Irgunists invariably suggested that the money collected was intended for relief and rescue of the suffering Jews of Europe. Certainly the contributors to the Emergency Committee to Save the Jews of Europe believed they were giving money to do just that.

However, Ira Hirschmann, special envoy of the President's War Refugee Board in Istanbul, stated on November 23, 1946: "I authorize you to state in my name that as a representative of the American government I had control

over all the funds which Mr. Eri Jabotinsky, representative of the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, received in Constantinople from America, and I say that while I was there I had no evidence whatever that Mr. Jabotinsky—the only one there representing his Committee—saved one European Jew.”

The Irgunists, largely on the basis of appeals for help to the displaced Jews of Europe, succeeded in collecting more than a million dollars from generous Americans. Not one cent of this money was used to bring Jewish refugees to Palestine. “The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” wrote Jesse Zel Lurie in *Congress Weekly*, February 21, 1947, “is that *not one single immigrant* has been brought to Palestine by the League, or through its funds, and every immigrant, every Jew in Palestine knows this for a fact. If Ben Hecht can prove anything to the contrary, he can sue me for libel.”

In October 1944, Peter Bergson, who was then maintaining a Hebrew Embassy in Washington, housed in the former Embassy of Iran, purchased for \$63,000, boasted at a press conference that his Hebrew Committee for National Liberation had collected “one million dollars from generous Americans.” Under questioning by the *Washington Post*, however, he admitted that this Committee, of which he is chairman, says the *Post*, “is not American; has no right to collect funds; is taking no action toward direct relief to ‘Hebrews’; and does not to their knowledge represent either European or Palestinian ‘Hebrews’” (Oct. 4, 1944).

Bergson and his various “front organizations” were denounced in November 1946 by the Haganah radio as “enemies of the Jewish people,” who are guilty “of shameful profiteering in human misery.” Their collections of large sums of money from well meaning people constitutes, declared the Haganah radio, “a black market in Jewish suffering.” The publicity and clamor raised by the Irgunists in their pretense at repatriation has made more difficult the illegal work of the Haganah, which is actually carrying out the immigration work that the Bergson group falsely claimed to be doing.

In recent weeks the Bergson group has for the first time

launched an *open* appeal for aid to the Irgun terrorists, utilizing the emotional appeal of the execution of Dov Gruner, a leading figure in the Palestinian Revisionist movement. The American group has announced a drive for \$7,500,000 to be allocated “to repatriation work, to winning recognition of the Hebrew nation and to relief and aid for the fighters of Palestine.” Some Americans assert that the Irgun has brought the Palestine problem to world attention and therefore merits support. But this view does not probe very deeply. For the basic causes of the climactic developments in Palestine are the complete breakdown of the imperialist “solution” of the Palestine problem and its demonstrated failure, the aggravation of the problem of Jewish DP’s, and the deterioration of the situation in which world imperialism finds itself today. In Palestine itself the claims of the Irgun are characterized by all Jewish parties and groups as completely false. According to representative groups in Palestine the Irgun has succeeded only in arousing all forces against the Jews, has enormously increased the tension between Arab and Jew and has given British imperialism just the provocation it needed to attack the Yishuv and completely to convert Palestine into a full-fledged military base of operations for Middle Eastern imperialism and against the Soviet Union.

Emotionalism will not effect a solution for the Palestine community, terrorized and intimidated as it is by imperialist brutality. If it could, the Palestine problem would already be solved. Only by hard, clear thinking and by a political program that will weld a democratic people’s movement can imperialist mastery be ended. No doubt the brutality, terror and killing instigated by imperialism has driven many young Palestinian Jews to acts of violence and terror, to indiscriminate killing as a result of disillusionment and despair. But the Jews are in too tight a spot both in Palestine and in other parts of the world to allow emotional reactions to an apparently militant struggle against British imperialism—that does not in fact exist—to govern their judgment. It is imperative that Jews re-examine their sympathy and support for the Irgun in the light of the real purposes and effects of this movement.