THE MAKING OF MODERN ISRAEL
1948-1967

LESLIE STEIN
THE MAKING OF MODERN ISRAEL
Also by Leslie Stein

*The Hope Fulfilled: The Rise of Modern Israel*
To Clara with love
Contents

List of illustrations viii
Acknowledgment x
Preface xi

Introduction 1
Chapter 1 The War of Independence 19
Chapter 2 The Arab Refugees 68
Chapter 3 The Ingathering of the Exiles 83
Chapter 4 Early Social, Economic, and Political Developments 107
Chapter 5 The Scourge of Arab Infiltration 150
Chapter 6 Operation Kadesh: The Sinai Campaign 176
Chapter 7 Interlude Between Wars 217
Chapter 8 The Lead Up to the Six-Day War 263
Chapter 9 The Six-Day War and Its Aftermath 291
Conclusion 327

Appendix: General Election Results 334
Notes to pp. 1–331 337
Glossary 376
Bibliography 379
Index 397
List of Illustrations

Maps
Map 0.1 Palestine on the eve of the War of Independence 17
Map 0.2 United Nations General Assembly Partition Plan 18
Map 1.1 Arab Invasion, May–June 1948 21
Map 1.2 Battle of the Degania 23
Map 1.3 The Burma Road 32
Map 1.4 The Faluja Junction 48
Map 1.5 Israel in 1949 62
Map 6.1 The Sinai Campaign 193

Plates
Plate 1.1 Kibbutz Negba after attack 35
Plate 1.2 Some senior Palmah staff: second from left, Yitzhak Rabin; fifth from left, Yigal Allon 53
Plate 3.1 Yemenite Jews trudging toward Aden 88
Plate 3.2 Yemenite Jews on a flight to Israel 90
Plate 3.3 Immigrant families from East Europe sharing a communal dormitory 98
Plate 4.1 Ben-Gurion (left) and Paula at Sde Boker 114
Plate 4.2 Begin protesting against German reparations
The Hebrew reads: “Our honor will not be traded for money. Our blood will not be atoned with merchandise. We will erase the shame” 130

Plate 6.1 Israeli paratroopers settling in near the Mitla Pass 195
Plate 7.1 Eichmann at his trial in Jerusalem 232
Plate 9.1 Israeli troops in Sinai 298
Plate 9.2 Evacuating Israeli casualties in Sinai 299
Plate 9.3 Israeli paratroopers on reaching the Western Wall 305

Tables
Table 3.1 Number of immigrants arriving in Israel 84
Table 3.2 Major country sources of migrants to Israel during 1948–54. Migrants from Algeria and Tunisia are included with those from Morocco 85
Table 7.1 Number of immigrants (in thousands) 230
Acknowledgment

All photographs in the body of this book are derived with permission from the Israel Government Press Office.
This book aims to provide a succinct overview of one of the most critical periods in Israel’s short history, during which the country’s nature and character were molded. Within a time frame of only 19 years, Israel fought three separate wars. In two of them its very existence was at stake. On the home front, it absorbed a deluge of migrants from a diverse number of countries causing its population to double within four years. From its inception, the state had been confronted with acute economic difficulties, intra-Jewish ethnic tensions, a problematic Arab minority and a secular–religious divide. Apart from defense issues, Israel faced a generally hostile or, at best, indifferent international community. Unlike its Arab neighbors, it was hard pressed to secure great-power patronage or even official sympathy and understanding.

Based mainly on secondary sources, this book is grounded in a wide study of the received literature, both in Hebrew and English. Hopefully, its strength lies in a judicious synthesis of the published material yielding the reader a reliable and novel account of Israel’s fateful and turbulent infancy. Although unashamedly sympathetic to Israel’s general plight, I have not stinted in reporting the country’s blemishes and occasional misdeeds. The educated lay reader as well as the student pursuing Israeli studies can therefore rest assured that the text presents a balanced and, as far as humanely possible, fair rendition of Israel’s early years.
In an effort to ensure accuracy, I was able to secure the assistance of the following eminent Israel historians: Mordechai Bar-On, Yoav Gelber, Efraim Karsh, Michael Oren, and Anita Shapira. They each scrutinized various chapters and proffered advice. Where any defects remain, the fault is purely mine. Warm thanks are due to Andrea Drugan, Polity’s editor, for her enthusiasm, encouragement, and wise counsel. My wife Clara and son Mark gave useful advice relating to stylistic matters whereas Helen Boneham and Debbie Jeffrey, both of Macquarie University, assisted me respectively with the construction of maps and the backup of files. As usual, the staff members of my university’s inter-library loan department were extraordinarily forthcoming. To all of the above, I wish to express my gratitude.

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By the late nineteenth century, the Jews, who had been in exile for almost two thousand years, found their ancestral homeland in Palestine largely occupied by Arabs and governed by the Turks. Considering that they were then dispersed throughout the world as a weak and vulnerable minority, their ascendancy to statehood some decades later, in May 1948, constituted an extraordinary historic landmark. Many likened the rebirth of Israel to a modern miracle. Even distinguished savants, who could not bring themselves to believe in miracles, were awed by Israel’s re-emergence. Included among them was Arthur Koestler who wrote: “If a golf ball were suddenly to start off towards the hole without being hit, this would not constitute a miracle but merely what is called a statistically highly improbable event. In the same way the rebirth of Israel is not a miracle, but it is, there is no getting around it, a statistically highly improbable event.”

Israel’s re-emergence resulted from the interplay of actions undertaken by Jews and non-Jews alike. As the Jews strove for statehood by dint of hard work and sacrifice, external variables were critical in either promoting or retarding their venture.

Essentially, Koestler’s golf ball began to get rolling in 1881 when the Russian Czar, Alexander II, was assassinated. Because a woman who had played a secondary role in Alexander II’s demise was identified as being
Jewish, the Russian press inferred that the Jews were generally culpable. A month later, that is, in mid-April and about the time of the Russian Orthodox Easter, when the Passover blood libel was usually circulated, a series of pogroms (anti-Jewish riots) erupted, encompassing more than a hundred different localities.

There seemed little doubt that the pogroms were pre-planned and, if not government-organized, then at least government-inspired. The general populace reveled in the outrages and, to the dismay of the Jews, the revolutionary and liberal establishment either endorsed the violence or stood aloof in stony silence. Not surprisingly, most Jews concluded that they had no future in Russia. Increasingly, they set their sights on migrating to more enlightened western countries. Nonetheless, a tiny minority determined that, no matter where they went, they would always be strangers in strange lands and that their only salvation lay in returning to and redeeming the land of Israel. By the end of 1882, acting on such convictions, some seven thousand Russian Jews settled in Palestine.

Palestine at that time was an Ottoman Empire backwater. It was populated by less than half a million Arabs who overwhelmingly were subsistence farmers subject to wretched housing and sanitary conditions. Most were illiterate and, plagued by malaria, typhus, typhoid and cholera, they had very low life expectancies. Large tracts of land were desolate and swamp-ridden and transport and communication facilities were few and far between. In a letter from Palestine dated July 29, 1882, Leib Bienstock wrote that

to this day there are no roads, not only from village to village but also from the city of one region to another. The road between Jaffa and Jerusalem is riddled with ridges and potholes even though the coachmen pay excessive taxes. Throughout the entire length of the road, you will not find a single stone that has been laid properly.\(^2\)

The Jaffa to Jerusalem road was only laid in 1869 to commemorate the official visit of the Austrian Kaiser Franz Joseph. Up to then wagons were a sight unseen, with all transport being undertaken on pack animals.

Among the Arabs were some 25,000 pious Jews who had over the
centuries gravitated to Palestine to engage in prayer and contemplation. Not being in the least bit Zionistic (see Zionism in glossary), they resented the arrival of those bent on farming. Furthermore, dismayed by what they regarded as the lax religious observance by the newcomers, their rabbis, in 1883, proclaimed that Palestine was incapable of sustaining mass immigration and that the settlers were “not walking in the road of the Torah and the fear of God and, far from drawing redemption near, they were delaying it, God forbid!”

Upon their arrival in Palestine, Jewish aspiring farmers purchased derelict and malaria-infested land along the coastal plain and in parts of the Galilee which they began to cultivate. Most of the newcomers were family men, drawn from the ranks of the lower middle class. To their dismay, a combination of inexperience, the harsh physical environment, and bureaucratic obstructionism rapidly caused their scant savings to be depleted. Hovering on the verge of bankruptcy, they were rescued by Baron Edmond de Rothschild who not only provided them with capital and technical expertise but also attended to their consumer and social needs. By 1904, in no small part through Rothschild’s seemingly boundless munificence, the Jewish population in Palestine (known in Hebrew as the “Yishuv”) had reached a total of 55,000.

At the close of the nineteenth century, a modern political Zionist movement emerged. The inception of political Zionism (see glossary) was largely the outcome of the single-handed efforts of its founder, Theodor Herzl. In 1891, Herzl, who was born into a reform Jewish-Hungarian family, became the Paris correspondent of the Vienna based Neue Freie Presse. During the course of his journalistic assignments, he became increasingly troubled by manifestations of rabid anti-Semitism. Having become obsessed with the “Jewish problem,” he eventually concluded that the primary cause of his people’s tribulations lay in their statelessness. In 1896, he published his famous booklet in which he argued the case for the formation of a Jewish state. This resulted in a flurry of well-wishers and offers of support. Matters rapidly gathered momentum and, by August 1897, Herzl presided over the founding congress of the World Zionist Organization, held at Basel, Switzerland. Over two hundred delegates from twenty different countries attended. Their goals, encapsulated into what became known as the Basel Program, were expressed in terms of their seeking “to secure
the creation of a home for the Jewish people in Palestine secured by public law.”

Even beforehand, Herzl had made overtures to various personages and heads of state in his quest for an internationally recognized charter to facilitate Jewish settlement in Palestine. While none of his efforts bore fruit, the new Zionist movement established valuable economic institutions, such as the Jewish National Fund and the Jewish Colonial Bank for Palestine. When, in the period 1904 to 1914, a second migratory wave of Jewish migrants streamed into Palestine, a locally based office of the World Zionist Organization was able to afford them a modest amount of practical assistance.

Like the initial migratory wave (aliyah) that preceded it, the second one was the product of endemic Russian-Jewish persecution. In the years immediately prior to the 1905 Russian revolution and in the period shortly thereafter, as reactionary forces regrouped to undermine the democratic reforms, the Jews were once again bedeviled by pogroms. The first one took place in April 1903 in Kishinev. Later, in September of the same year, violence broke out in Homel. Then in October 1905, at the height of the revolutionary fervor, approximately 690 separate pogroms, mainly in the Ukraine, were recorded. All told, a total of 876 Jews were slaughtered.

Traumatized by such events, socialist Zionist youth hastened to Palestine, where they devised a doctrine of the “conquest of labor,” entailing the transformation of Jews from occupations in commerce (where they were unduly represented) to those involving manual labor. They upheld that the “normalization” of the structure of the Jewish work force resting on a solid working-class base was an essential prerequisite for the formation of a viable and self-reliant Jewish society. True to their beliefs, they sought employment as unskilled farm hands. This put them on a collision course with the now established farmers of the first aliyah whose Zionist ardor had already waned and who preferred hiring cheaper and more compliant Arabs. As a result, the process of obtaining work was often a humiliating one. One youngster by the name of Eliyahu Even-Tov remembered standing on the threshold of a farmer’s abode while the farmer and his family ate their evening meal. While partaking of his food and drink, the farmer fixed his gaze on him. Eventually, speaking in Yiddish, the farmer grunted “You idiots. This is
the land of the Ishmaelites [Arabs] and not the land of Israel. If fellows like you would only go to America where you would make a fortune, then even here things would not be so bad.” As Even-Tov later wrote, “twenty-five years have passed since then and still within my heart, there lingers the painful image of my standing alongside that door.”

Being paid a pittance, the youngsters dwelled in decrepit shacks where they made do with discarded boxes for furniture. To sustain themselves, they entered into makeshift communes, pooling their meager earnings and arranging for women comrades to cook for them. At the end of a day’s grinding toil, they were able to derive some sense of solidarity and comfort from dancing the hora (a circle dance). Given such conditions, the turnover rate was high but in 1910, some, among the more stout-hearted, managed to establish the first kibbutz, Degania.

David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, was among such youth. Arriving in Palestine from Poland in 1906 at the age of twenty, he first worked as a farm hand before moving full-time into the political arena by joining the newly formed Poalei Zion (Workers of Zion) party. Along with Moshe Sharett, who migrated with his family to Palestine in 1906 at the age of twelve, Ben-Gurion spent a couple of years in Istanbul studying law and acquiring a working knowledge of Turkish. Sharett, by virtue of his father first settling in a remote Arab village, had already attained fluency in Arabic. During the First World War, Ben-Gurion found himself in America where he joined the (British) Jewish Legion to return to Palestine in uniform. After the war, he was among the founders of the Histadrut (Jewish Labor Federation) and for many years served as its secretary general. Subsequently, both he and Sharett occupied key posts in the Jewish Agency, which, from 1923, represented and administered the Jewish community. Although physically short in stature, Ben-Gurion towered above all others and was the main driving force in declaring Israel’s independence.

The youthful Jewish farm laborers were not the only ones then breaking new ground. Middle-class immigrants living in Jaffa, a port city dominated by Arabs, assumed the initiative in establishing Tel Aviv. They were driven to do so by Jaffa’s general lack of sanitation and by its all pervading filth and malodor. Running water was unavailable and the wells from which it was drawn were frequently contaminated, giving rise to repetitive outbreaks of typhoid. There were no shops selling
fresh food, which could only be secured in an oriental-style bazaar or in open air markets. For good measure, a shortage of accommodation led to high rental costs.

In 1907, some sixty Jewish Jaffa residents formed a housing estate association and, with finance supplied by the Jewish National Fund, they were by 1910 able to move into their new homes on sand dunes acquired just north of Jaffa. In accordance with their stated aims, the houses were built “in an orderly manner, with wide and attractive streets, to include, in as much as possible, sanitary installations, such as sewage drains, water pipes and so on, and to set an exemplary standard for the general development of urban Jewish settlement.”

Soon other housing associations were formed and by 1914 Tel Aviv (still officially part of Jaffa) contained 139 private dwellings housing 1,419 people. The Palestine Office of the World Zionist Organization relocated there, as did a number of workshops. Under the mayoralty of Meir Dizengoff, Tel Aviv began to assume the role of the center of the Yishuv. As Arthur Ruppin, the World Zionist Organization’s emissary, enthused: “You will find in the Jewish neighborhood [Tel Aviv] an effervescent Jewish life that possibly has no counterpart anywhere else in the world.”

Two other and possibly linked pre-World War One events bear mentioning. On account of the early Jewish settlements being subject to the depredations of marauding Arab bands, in 1909 members of Poalei Zion founded a Jewish defense organization called Hashomer (the Guard). Adherents of Hashomer had a romantic and heroic aura about them. They tended to dress in Arabic garments, complete with keffiyas (headscarves) held in place by thick woollen bands. With their dazzling moustaches, their bandoliers and large riding boots, they cut dashing figures as they mounted their caparisoned horses. All were armed, some sporting rifles and revolvers and some even brandishing swords. Their presence in the settlements that hired them provided farmers with a measure of security.

During the same period, aspects of an Arab nationalism began to emerge. In Palestine, this was expressed through petitions to Turkish authorities requesting the prohibition of both further Jewish immigration and land sales to Jews. While almost all articulate Arabs were opposed to the Zionist enterprise, some writers were not oblivious to the merit of the Zionists’ case. For example, in his book, The Awakening
INTRODUCTION

of the Arab Nation in Turkish Asia, published in 1905, Neguib Azoury wrote: “Two important phenomena, with the same characteristics but which are diametrically opposed to each other, and which have so far not attracted notice, are appearing in Turkish Asia. They are the Arab national awakening and the latent efforts of Jews to re-establish, on a grand scale, their ancient kingdom of Israel.” Even earlier, in 1899, in a letter to Rabbi Zadok Kahn, the chief rabbi of Paris, Yusuf al-Khalidi, a prominent Jerusalem Arab, wrote: “Who can challenge the rights of the Jews to Palestine? Good lord, historically it is really your country.” But he hastened to add that the native population would not countenance Zionism. Nevertheless, such opposition did not manifest itself in any serious or generally violent way until after the First World War when the masses were whipped up by the Muslim clergy.

It was the First World War itself that initially posed a serious challenge to the continuity of the Yishuv. Since almost all Jews who settled in Palestine retained the citizenship of their countries of origin, Russian-Jewish nationals were deemed to be enemy aliens (Turkey had allied itself with Germany). In December 1914, 7,000 were summarily expelled followed, during the next year, by another 4,000. Those that remained had to contend with unbearable hardships. Palestine was ravished by a locust plague and, after being cut off from trading with the outside world, a chronic and severe food shortage unfolded causing widespread hunger and malnutrition.

The Jews were not simply passive spectators. In March 1915, throwing in their lot with the Allied Forces, some 500 exiled members of the Yishuv enlisted in the British army’s Zion Mule Corps to serve as muleteers in Gallipoli under the command of Colonel John Patterson. Their senior Zionist officer was Captain Joseph Trumpeldor who, as a Jewish-Russian soldier in 1904, lost his left arm in the Russian–Japanese War. Despite his physical handicap, Trumpeldor not only served in the corps with due dispatch but just prior to that he was farming in Palestine. After the war, he supervised the defense of the Jewish settlement of Tel Hai, where he was fatally shot. As a doctor attended to him, he murmured: “It doesn’t matter. It is good to die for our country.” Both his words and deeds inspired generations of pioneers to ride out the seemingly endless struggles that culminated in Israel’s independence.

The Zion Mule Corps was wound down in December 1915 at the
end of the Gallipoli campaign, to be replaced, in 1918, by the formation of the British Jewish Legion, also commanded by Colonel Patterson. Some of the 5,000 Jewish Legionnaires saw action in Palestine just before the war ended. Finally, a small group within the Yishuv banded together to spy on behalf of Britain. Their ring, which they called Nili, supplied the British with vital information relating to the strength and deployment of Turkish forces. It was uncovered when one of its carrier pigeons landed among the chief of police’s own birds. The group was soon rounded up and badly manhandled. Their leader, Sara Aaronson, was subject to agonizing torture. At one point she was escorted back to her house for a change of clothing and, while alone in her bathroom, she reached for a pistol secreted behind a panel and shot herself. She died three days later.

In September 1918, the British, who had captured Jerusalem the previous December, completed their conquest of Palestine. Turkish rule, which dated from 1517, had finally been brought to an end and the country was now in the hands of a benevolent world power. More significantly, that power had recently committed itself to “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.” The commitment was conveyed in a letter to Lord Rothschild issued on November 2, 1917, by Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary. It soon became known as the Balfour Declaration and essentially it represented the charter that had so eluded Herzl.

A lion’s share of the credit for the issuing of the Balfour Declaration can be attributed to Dr Chaim Weizmann, who became Israel’s first president. Born in Russia in 1874, Weizmann studied biochemistry in both Switzerland and Germany. In 1904, he took up a lectureship in chemistry at Manchester University. On account of his groundbreaking research into a fermentation process which could facilitate the production of acetone, needed for explosives, Weizmann was appointed as an adviser to the Ministry of Munitions and the Admiralty, both overseen by Lloyd George. At the same time, he was a fully fledged Zionist, holding the co-vice presidency of the British Zionist Federation. Being an urbane and cosmopolitan intellectual, Weizmann used his charm to prevent British cabinet ministers from deviating from their chosen path of issuing a proclamation in favor of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Although they were primarily interested in securing the backing of
American Jewry for the war effort, they were also motivated by a religious sense of fair play.

Armed with a League of Nations mandate to administer Palestine in accordance with the objectives of the Balfour Declaration, Britain assumed full responsibility for the running of the country. Between 1919 and 1923, 35,000 Jews immigrated to Palestine. Then in the period 1924–6, another 62,000 arrived. The first group consisted of young pioneers fleeing from a wave of persecution sweeping through the Ukraine and White Russia where, between 1915 and 1921, perhaps a quarter of a million Jews “were slain or allowed to starve to death.”10

The second group was made up of mature-aged middle-class migrants leaving Poland on account of legislation that undermined Jewish economic life.

The young pioneers provided welcome support to the budding kibbutz movement by creating new collective settlements on stretches of land in the Jezreel Valley purchased by the Jewish National Fund. The land in question, which had been neglected over many generations, was for the most part barren. It was strewn with rocks, covered with weeds and thistles, remote and swarming with snakes and scorpions. The lower parts were swamp-ridden and infested with malaria-bearing mosquitoes. During the day, there were few, if any, trees to provide shade and at night the sound of howling jackals and the constant expectation of attacks from roving Bedouin provided an uneasy rest for the settlers. When draining the swamps, the settlers stood waist-deep in water, digging channels and laying grids of clearance pipes. Some of them succumbed to malaria, others were chronically enervated.

With the government allocating large sums of money for public works, partly to provide jobs for unemployed migrants, pioneers organized temporary labor brigades to secure subcontracts for the construction of various sections of a highway. Like the kibbutzim (plural of kibbutz), the labor brigades were organized on a collective and equitable basis. Sleeping in camps and rising at dawn, members would set to work dynamiting large boulders that would then be piled next to the road in the making. Sitting astride each pile, young women would pound the rocks into small gravel stones, which after being laid, were compressed by steamrollers. The road workers were subject to the searing Palestinian heat waves that invariably occur each summer and
which were exacerbated by the nature of the materials which they had to handle. In winter, torrential rains loosened their tent pegs, allowing strong gusts of wind to sweep away their canvas covers. Food on hand was barely edible and dysentery was rife.

Rallying to such workers were Golda Meir and Levi Eshkol, both of whom were destined to become Israeli prime ministers. Born in Kiev in 1896, Meir along with her parents migrated to the USA in 1903. But by 1921, she and her husband Morris Meyerson, a sign painter, went to Palestine where they were accepted as members of Kibbutz Merhavia situated in the Jezreel Valley. In 1924, Meir left the kibbutz to become a labor Zionist functionary, occupying various posts in the Histadrut and then in the Jewish Agency. Levi Eshkol, a year older than Meir, was born in a village not far from Kiev. Unlike Meir, he went to Palestine in 1914 and joined the Jewish Legion after British forces had occupied much of the country. But at the war’s end, he too became a kibbutz member (of Kibbutz Degania Beth) and, like Meir, he ultimately abandoned kibbutz farming to embroil himself in labor affairs, being (among other things) a founding member of the Histadrut and then a leading light in its agricultural center.

Throughout most of the 1920s, Palestine enjoyed relative tranquility but, both at the beginning and end of the decade, there were serious anti-Jewish disturbances. In response, the Jews established an underground defense militia known as the Haganah that superseded Hashomer and which had a more serious military orientation. The initial outburst of unrest in 1921 was quickly contained yet, by 1929, incited by Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, attacks upon Jews resumed with an even greater degree of venom. That 67 pious non-Zionist Jews in Hebron and 45 in Safad were massacred suggests that the assailants were motivated by Islamic anti-Semitism.

Al-Husseini was in essence handed the post of Mufti of Jerusalem by Sir Herbert Samuel, the country’s first high commissioner. Being himself a Jew, Samuel was anxious to demonstrate to the Arabs that he was even-handed. That led to him being easily persuaded to promote al-Husseini, an outright anti-Semite and opponent of the British administration whose clerical accreditations were, to boot, minimal. Compounding his poor judgment, Samuel also appointed al-Husseini as president of the newly formed Supreme Muslim Council. The Council,
which had a large non-audited government financed budget, had been accredited with official control of all Muslim religious trusts and courts. By assuming its presidency, al-Husseini not only became the recognized head of the country’s Muslim community, but also the most powerful political force within the Arab-Palestinian movement.11

During the 1930s, the Jewish population increased significantly. Between 1930 and 1939, when Central and Eastern Europe was gripped by an exceedingly virulent strain of racist Jewish hatred, more than 270,000 sought refuge in Palestine bringing the Yishuv’s numbers to 475,000, or slightly more than 30 percent of the entire population. A large proportion of the Jewish immigrants emanated from Nazi Germany and Austria. Many were members of the free professions while others were scientists and entrepreneurs, au fait with commerce and industry and with a flair for sound organization and order. Mobilizing its enriched human resources, as well as large quantities of imported capital, the Yishuv made significant economic headway. It also widened its cultural life. In 1936 under the leadership of the world famous violinist, Bronislaw Huberman, the Palestine Symphony Orchestra was formed. Its first conductor was Arturo Toscanini.

Meanwhile, the Arabs began to be increasingly alarmed at the accelerating pace of Jewish immigration. Had it continued, they would most certainly have become a minority. Matters reached a climax in April 1936 with the outbreak of a general Arab uprising, entailing volunteers from neighboring countries. The main thrust of the rebels’ enmity was directed against the British seen as the Yishuv’s official sponsors and protectors. The scale of the fighting was both ferocious and extensive. At one point the rebels captured Hebron, Beersheba, and the Old City of Jerusalem, while in Nablus they strutted about armed to the teeth without let or hindrance. With the government’s resources being stretched to the limit, the cooperation of the Yishuv was elicited. A special mandatory auxiliary police force, manned by Jewish volunteers, almost all of whom were members of the Haganah, was commissioned. By the spring of 1939 that force numbered close to 21,000 men.12 In addition, the Hanagah openly organized its own mobile units, some of which received guidance and instruction from Orde Wingate, a sympathetic British officer. By the end of 1939, after the arrival of British reinforcements under the command of General
Bernard Montgomery (later famous for defeating the Nazis in the battle of El Alamein) and after applying torture, arbitrary executions in the field and the imposition of collective punishment, the government ultimately prevailed.

The Arab uprising had the perverse effect of enabling the Yishuv to emerge with an enhanced degree of self-confidence in its ability to fend for itself. Indeed, had it not been for the Arab rebellion, which compelled the Jews to realign and reorganize their own paramilitary apparatus, it is highly unlikely that they would have withstood the combined Arab offensive arraigned against them some ten years later. With that aspect of the revolt rebounding to their benefit, there was yet another outcome that was very much to their detriment. As war clouds in Europe gathered momentum, Britain became increasingly anxious to pacify the Arabs. To secure Arab support or, at a minimum, to ensure Arab neutrality, it officially reneged on its commitment to the Zionists. Over a five-year period, commencing in May 1939, a ceiling of only 75,000 additional Jews were to be allowed into Palestine. Thereafter, further inflows were to be contingent upon Arab consent. Given that there was absolutely no chance of such consent being forthcoming, the British volte-face threatened to terminate the entire Zionist venture.

With the Royal Navy undertaking to intercept unauthorized boats bearing Jewish refugees to Palestine, the Haganah planned to sabotage British naval installations. But once Britain, on September 3, 1939 declared war on Germany, the Yishuv offered His Majesty's Government its full cooperation and encouraged its members to enlist in the British armed forces. Some 26,000 did so, including members of the British Jewish Brigade that in the closing months of the war fought in Italy under a banner bearing the Star of David. The Yishuv also rendered the British military assistance in its campaign to subdue Vichy forces in Lebanon. It was while aiding the British in Lebanon that Moshe Dayan, Israel’s future chief of staff and defense minister, lost his left eye. Born in 1915 in Degania and raised in the farming village of Nahalal, Dayan’s disability did not prevent him from serving in the War of Independence and in subsequent wars. He was an intrepid but wayward warrior.

While the Yishuv pulled its weight in helping to defeat Nazi Germany, the Arabs, despite being wooed by Britain with its newfound anti-Zionist policy, tended to side with the enemy. During the war the
Palestinian’s unchallenged leader, Haj Amin al-Husseini, was ensconced in Germany organizing Arab and Muslim volunteers to fight alongside the Germans and broadcasting Nazi propaganda to the Middle East and North Africa. Despite the British–Egyptian Treaty stipulating that Egypt was to come to Britain’s aid in time of war, Egypt declared itself a non-belligerent ally. In Iraq, the British army had to unseat Rashid Ali al Gailani, who, in 1941, after a successful coup, strove to place the Mosul oil fields at Hitler’s disposal.

Immediately after the war and in the wake of Haj Amin al-Husseini’s shameful collaboration with Hitler, involving an appeal to the Nazis to include Palestinian Jews in the Holocaust, the Yishuv anticipated that Britain would revert to its previously held pro-Zionist position. When the British Labour Party was swept to power in July 1945, the Zionists were ecstatic, for its platform included an unequivocal commitment to their cause. The British Labour Party, in a conference held in December 1944, adopted a position that even the most statist of mainstream Zionists hesitated to take. Not only did it favor Palestine in its entirety becoming the Jewish National Home, in which the Jewish Agency would have full freedom to determine the country’s immigration and economic policies but it even suggested that “the Arabs be encouraged to move out as the Jews move in.” As Weizmann emphasized, he and his colleagues “had never contemplated the removal of the Arabs.”

However, on assuming office, the new Labour government, now subject to the anti-Jewish bias of top-ranking foreign affairs officials, had a change of heart. It began to fear for the security of its oil imports and for its standing among Middle Eastern states. Accordingly, it reverted to the anti-Zionist policy of the previous administration. Notwithstanding the intercession of the Americans for an immediate transfer to Palestine of 100,000 displaced Jewish refugees, Britain now set immigration quotas at no more than 1,500 per month.

In despair, the Yishuv took up arms. Key bridges were sabotaged, direct attacks on army and police installations were undertaken, and a wing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, which housed the British military headquarters, was demolished. Three Yishuv organizations took part: the Haganah (representing the bulk of the Yishuv), the Irgun, and the Lehi. The Irgun was a relatively small minority-supported body under the command of Menahem Begin. Born in 1913 in Brest (then
part of Poland), Begin, after graduating in law at the University of Warsaw, became the leading light in Betar, a youth movement dedicated to the establishment via the barrel of a gun of a Jewish state on both sides of the River Jordan. In the early stages of the war he was imprisoned by the Soviets and then, when Germany invaded Russia, he was released and joined the Polish army. Not believing his luck, he was included in a detachment that was sent to Palestine. Once there, friends arranged for his discharge, thereby enabling him to assume control of the Irgun, which was based on Betar principles. In 1977, Begin became prime minister of Israel. He had a solid classical education and was a superb orator and skilled linguist. As to Lehi, an even smaller deviant fighting force than the Irgun, it was far less restrained. Its leader Avraham Stern had a penchant for robbing banks as a means of financing it.

The British sought to quash the Yishuv’s uprising by detaining leading Zionists, placing cities and settlements under curfew, and conducting sweeping searches for weapons. Fortunately for the Jews, Britain desisted from applying even more stringent measures so as not to alienate the US, its exclusive economic benefactor. Finally, in February 1947, faced with limited freedom of action and burdened by the growing cost of its involvement in Palestine, Britain reluctantly referred all matters relating to Palestine to the United Nations.

After conducting a thorough investigation, a Special UN Commission recommended that Palestine be partitioned into a Jewish and an Arab state with Jerusalem to be placed under international supervision. In part, the Commission was influenced by the submission of a high-ranking Syrian official who candidly admitted that under an Arab-Palestinian regime all Jews would be expelled. This led the Commission to conclude that the Jews could not reasonably be entrusted to Arab domination and that awarding them a state of their own made both ethical and political sense. In the area of Palestine that the Commission outlined for a Jewish state, the Jews not only constituted a majority but they had also carved out a state in the making. That budding state had its own self-contained economy, a system of democratic self-government, a defense force (albeit an underground one), comprehensive health and educational institutions, its own language (Hebrew), and a vibrant cultural life.

As it happens, there was one other factor that persuaded the UN Commission of the strength of the Jewish case and that was the saga
of the *Exodus*. In July 1947, an old Chesapeake Bay ferryboat, originally named *President Garfield* and then *Exodus*, left Port de Bouc, near Marseilles, France, with 4,500 Jewish Holocaust survivors. Bound for Palestine, it was soon tracked and escorted across the Mediterranean by the British navy which then attacked it, killing three Jews on board. The badly damaged *Exodus* was then taken to the Palestine port of Haifa where the British forced the refugees to return to Port de Bouc in three other vessels. In France, the passengers refused point blank to disembark and, for their part, the French were not prepared to compel them to do so. The ships were then ordered to proceed to Hamburg where the refugees were dragged, kicking and screaming, into a detention camp in the heartland of Germany. All this made a deep impression on the UN Special Commission, convincing it of the immediate need to allow Jews entry into Palestine.

On November 29, 1947, the Commission’s recommendations were adopted by a two-thirds majority of the UN General Assembly. The voting pattern was remarkable; contrary to expectations, the Soviet Union sided with America. Both states had their own reasons for favoring partition, Russia because it provided an opportunity to eject Britain from Palestine, the US because it seemed the decent thing to do.

While the Jews were more than satisfied with the UN decision, the Arabs, who were not prepared to yield as much as an inch of the country, resolutely opposed it. They immediately expressed their opposition by attacking the Yishuv. In the course of the next few months, as Britain gradually relinquished its responsibility to administer the country and to maintain an elementary degree of law and order, the Yishuv found itself at the receiving end of Arab fury. Its access to settlements in the Galilee and the Negev, and more importantly, to Jerusalem, was under constant threat. At first, not wishing to clash with British forces, the Yishuv maintained a relatively passive stance. But by April 1948, when the British evacuation from Palestine was in full swing, the Haganah went on the offensive. Supply convoys reached besieged Jerusalem and in the second half of the month the Yishuv wrested control of Tiberius, Haifa, Safad, and Jaffa.

On May 14, 1948, on the eve of the date set by Britain for the termination of its mandate and with the area that the UN had allotted to the Jews being firmly in their hands, the state of Israel was finally declared.
Its inauguration was announced by David Ben-Gurion at a small gathering that assembled in the main hall of the Tel Aviv Art Museum. (Israel then had only 650,000 Jews.) As the proceedings concluded, strains of the Israeli national anthem, “Hatikvah,” played by the Palestine Symphony Orchestra (now the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra) wafted from the floor above. The hope expressed in the anthem’s final verse: “the hope of two thousand years, to be a free nation in our homeland, the land of Zion and Jerusalem,” was, after many years of blood, sweat and tears, finally realized.

The very next day, the fledgling state was invaded by the Arab armies of Syria, Iraq, Transjordan, and Egypt, plus a small contingent from Saudi Arabia. The Arab League’s objective, as articulated by its secretary general, Abdul Rahman Azzam Pasha, was to ensure that the UN partition demarcations would “be nothing but a line [sic] of fire and blood.”

16