

2nd edition

BRITISH COUNTERINSURGENCY

John Newsinger

**“...a masterful work of historical synthesis
with a refreshingly radical bite”**

- Huw Bennett, Aberystwyth University, Wales



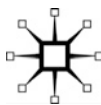
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*To Jack Newsinger (1921–82) and
Mary Newsinger (1925–2015)*

Contents

Introduction to the 2nd Edition	1
1 At War with Zion	5
2 The Running Dog War: Malaya	33
3 The Mau Mau Revolt	62
4 Cyprus and EOKA	88
5 The Struggle for South Yemen	112
6 The Unknown Wars: Oman and Dhofar	136
7 The Long War: Northern Ireland	157
8 America's Wars: Afghanistan and Iraq	201
<i>Notes</i>	243
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	275
<i>Index</i>	277

Introduction to the 2nd Edition

When this book was first published in 2002, the Introduction commented on how the major counterinsurgency campaigns that the British state had waged in Palestine, Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, South Yemen, Dhofar and Northern Ireland since 1945 had produced a largely celebratory literature. The general argument of this literature was that Britain's campaigns had been conducted with considerable success. This contrasted with the French experience in Indo-China and Algeria, with the Dutch in Indonesia, with the Portuguese in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, with the Americans in Vietnam and with the Russians in Afghanistan. The British, it was argued, knew how to conduct counterinsurgency campaigns and, moreover, conducted them without bringing dishonour on their cause through the use of massacre and torture. This was a distortion of the historical record. First of all, the post-war record included important defeats in Palestine and South Yemen, and included the British failure, despite overwhelming numerical and material superiority, to successfully destroy their opponents in Cyprus and Northern Ireland.

Another important point was that starting with the Labour government of 1945–51, the British took the decision to withdraw rather than confront full-scale rebellion and insurgency in any large, heavily populated Imperial territory. The decision to withdraw from India and Burma, for example, saved the British Empire from its Algeria, from its Vietnam, from its Afghanistan. If the Conservative Party had been returned to power in 1945, there is every likelihood that it would have provoked revolutionary war in India and Burma on a scale that would have completely dwarfed any of the colonial wars that actually did take place post-1945. These wars would certainly have ended in costly defeats. Moreover, the scale of the fighting would have inevitably ensured that

they were accompanied by a level of atrocity such as that associated with the French war in Algeria and the American war in Vietnam. The British reputation for comparative restraint would have never taken off. The emphasis here is very much on the word comparative. The claim that the British waged counterinsurgency operations humanely, always practising the minimum use of force and seeking to win hearts and minds, was always a myth. But it was a myth that was given legs by the small scale of the wars that the British chose to fight, the weakness of their opponents and the corresponding low level of British casualties. Nevertheless, where necessary, considerable force was used, sometimes successfully, sometimes not; moreover, the war in Kenya, it is by now generally acknowledged, was conducted with a terrible severity by any standard, certainly comparable with the worst excesses of the French in Algeria or of the Americans in Vietnam. Indeed, a good case can be made that minimum force was generally interpreted by the British as allowing as much force as was considered necessary.

Success, partial success or failure in British counterinsurgency campaigning was not dependent on any supposed military superiority in waging these campaigns, but rather on the ability to establish a large enough political base among sections of the local population so as to enlist their support and assistance in the defeat of the insurgents. Put crudely, but nevertheless accurately, divide and rule remained the key to success in the wars that accompanied the end of the British Empire. The point is also worth making that Britain's post-war counterinsurgency campaigns took place in a context of Imperial retreat, of admittedly often reluctant decolonisation but nevertheless still decolonisation.

It seems fair to say that when *British Counterinsurgency* was first published, the critical stance it took towards the post-1945 campaigns was very much a minority stance. This is no longer the case. Indeed, there is a new consensus today, one that is openly dismissive of the notion that the British were humane counterinsurgents practising minimum force, winning hearts and minds, or particularly successful. Instead, coercion has moved centre stage. As David French put it: 'The cornerstones of most British counter-insurgency campaigns were coercion and counter-terror, not kindness and economic development... waging counter-insurgency operations by employing coercion and intimidation continued to be a mainstay of British practice after 1945'.¹ This new consensus is a product of the work of a number of other scholars as well, including David Anderson, Caroline Elkins, Huw Bennett, Andrew Mumford, Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon and others.² Certainly it has been a welcome change. This new consensus has been so successful, in

fact, that it has recently been argued that there never was a celebratory consensus anyway!³

What is also important, however, is to acknowledge the context within which this new consensus has emerged, a context that facilitated it and gave it more than academic credibility. Whereas the British counterinsurgency campaigns in Palestine, Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus and South Yemen could all be seen as fighting retreats, Tony Blair's New Labour government took the decision to effectively hand the British Army over to the United States for deployment in the American wars of aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq. These were conflicts that no post-war British government would have participated in of its own volition. However, in order to further the so-called special relationship, the British government committed British troops to fight alongside the Americans in the 'War on Terror', an ideological construct intended to justify military action against governments the US regarded as threatening its interests. The British government and the British military wilfully surrendered their strategic judgement to the most incompetent post-war US administration led by the worst post-war President; indeed, many would say this involved one of the most incompetent US administrations ever and arguably the worst President ever.⁴

In retrospect, the idea of letting George W. Bush decide where British troops should fight seems even more preposterous now than it did at the time. This failure was compounded by a refusal to actually put into the field enough troops and resources for them to have any serious chance of accomplishing the tasks that they had been volunteered for. The result was defeat in both Basra and in Helmand, defeats that paradoxically seriously compromised the very 'special relationship' the original deployments were meant to strengthen and sustain. Indeed, today, because of these defeats, the Americans no longer regard the British as worthwhile military assets. As Andrew Mumford put it, 'Basra pulled the mask away from the hitherto rosy popular trans-Atlantic perception of British competence at counter-insurgency' and pointed 'to an increasingly inescapable conclusion that the British are not as good at counter-insurgency as was previously assumed'.⁵ And, of course, far from these initial campaigns in the War on Terror actually defeating the terrorists, they have, as many predicted at the time, led to a dramatic increase in their strength and support. In Aaron Edwards's nice phrase, the invasion of Iraq served as 'a force multiplier for terrorists like Al Qaeda'.⁶ While the politicians obviously bear the main responsibility for these bloody fiascos, the generals are also culpable for promising to deliver without ensuring adequate resources. And, of course, throughout the

whole dismal affair, every effort was made to mislead, manipulate and manage public opinion. In this respect, an area that urgently needs to be explored is the relationship between the Ministry of Defence and News International. One is inevitably reminded of H. R. McMaster's account of decision-making during the Vietnam War, his appropriately entitled *Dereliction of Duty*.⁷ This recent history of defeat and failure provides the context for the new consensus.

What this new edition of *British Counterinsurgency* will attempt is to once again examine the challenges the British faced in Palestine, Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, South Yemen, Dhofar and Northern Ireland, incorporating as far as possible the latest research. There is also an additional chapter examining the British participation in America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

1

At War with Zion

When the Second World War finally came to an end, the British found themselves confronted by a challenge from the Yishuv, the small Zionist settlement in Palestine. This challenge, tacitly supported by the United States, was to compromise the British Empire's overall position in the Middle East and thereby begin the process of its dissolution in the region. This failure to overcome the Zionist challenge is one of the most humiliating episodes in immediate post-war British history. How was it that the Yishuv was able to inflict such a defeat on a British military establishment fresh from its victories over Germany and Japan?

Exercising the Mandate

At the time the challenge was mounted, the British considered Palestine to be a territory of vital strategic importance, providing a military base from which to dominate the rest of the Middle East. In this way oil supplies and oil profits could be secured and any threat from the Soviet Union could be countered. Such was the region's importance that in the event of war with the Russians the British planned a hurried withdrawal from continental Europe but intended to defend the Middle East at all costs, according the area a priority second only to the defence of the British Isles themselves.¹ The incoming Labour government hoped to be able to control the region informally, by means of a series of unequal relationships with a network of Arab client states, but a large military presence was still regarded as essential. Only British troops could, in the last resort, it was thought, ensure that friendly governments remained in power and defend against external attack in the event of another world war. The Mandate over Palestine was seen as providing the British with a degree of freedom of action which they were in the process of

losing in Egypt and would not possess anywhere else in the region. There was certainly no expectation that the British position was soon to crumble.²

British policy was fatally compromised by the Zionist settlement in Palestine, a settlement that had initially been sponsored as a counterweight to Arab nationalism. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 committed Britain to supporting the establishment of a European Jewish colony in a land overwhelmingly inhabited by Arabs. While the settlement initially stagnated, the numbers seeking entry rose dramatically with the rise of Nazism in Germany. Whereas in 1931 there were only 4075 Jewish immigrants, by 1935 the number had risen to 66 472. Denied entry to other European countries or to the United States, German and Central European Jews increasingly came to look to Palestine as a safe haven.³

Arab opposition to this colonisation of their homeland culminated in the great revolt of 1936–39, the first Intifada, which led to what was, in effect, the reconquest of the Mandate by British troops. The insurgency was only suppressed with great difficulty and considerable brutality, costing over 3000 lives. The British turned to the Zionist settlers for assistance in the campaign, recruiting some 19 000 Jewish police and encouraging the activities of the Special Night Squads, Jewish murder gangs, trained by a British officer with strong Zionist sympathies, Orde Wingate. The Arab revolt was defeated and the Palestinians left disarmed, disorganised and leaderless to confront a Yishuv that was to increase dramatically in strength and determination during the Second World War.⁴

At the time, however, while the Palestinian Arabs might well have been defeated militarily, the scale of their revolt, together with the hostility of the Arab states to the Zionist colony, won a significant political victory in the shape of the 1939 White Paper. With war imminent in Europe, the British felt the need to conciliate Arab opinion. The White Paper limited Jewish immigration, restricted Jewish settlement and promised independence to an Arab Palestine within ten years.⁵ This commitment was condemned at the time by British Zionist sympathisers, among them Winston Churchill, as a betrayal of the Balfour Declaration and was, of course, bitterly opposed by all elements of the Yishuv.

The Zionist movement was divided in its response to the White Paper, with the Jewish Agency and the rival Revisionist movement taking very different stands. The Jewish Agency functioned as the effective settler government in Palestine, had the allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the Jewish population and was determined to overturn the White Paper by diplomatic methods. The Agency was sympathetic to

the British Empire, which was still regarded as a friend and protector, and rallied to the British war effort against Nazi Germany, the enemy of all Jews. Settlers were encouraged to enlist in the British armed forces and an attempt was made to persuade the British to establish a distinct Zionist army brigade. Altogether some 32 000 settlers served in the British armed forces, fighting in Greece, North Africa and Italy. Within the Jewish Agency, this stance was strongly associated with Chaim Weizmann. It was to be challenged as the war progressed by more militant elements, led by David Ben Gurion, who looked increasingly to the United States for help in pressurising a recalcitrant Britain. While the war continued, however, the Jewish Agency remained committed to the British Empire on whose victory its very survival depended.⁶

Having made use of the settlers to help in the defeat of the Arab revolt, once war broke out, and in line with the White Paper policy, the British withdrew their encouragement of Zionist paramilitary forces. There was a crackdown that drove the Jewish Agency's militia, the Haganah, underground, imprisoning a number of its cadres and seizing whatever arms could be found. Defeat in Europe and the German threat to the Middle East led to yet another change in British policy. The Haganah was once again recognised and an elite formation, the Palmach, was formed from its ranks and trained in partisan warfare by officers from the Special Operations Executive (SOE). This force was to organise resistance if the German Afrika Korps should overrun Palestine. A number of volunteers also played a part in Britain's undercover war against the Axis. As far as the Jewish Agency was concerned, however, the most important development was the eventual establishment of a Zionist brigade within the British Army in 1944 which went into combat in Italy the following year. This was regarded as a diplomatic triumph presaging the abandonment of the White Paper policy and there was considerable confidence that, once the war was over, Britain would return to its Zionist commitment. After all, Churchill was known to be sympathetic, and the Labour Party, his coalition partner and the only alternative government, was committed by its 1944 conference to a Zionist policy more extreme than that advocated by the World Zionist Organisation itself.⁷

On the right of the Zionist spectrum was the minority Revisionist movement established by Vladimir Jabotinsky, an admirer of Benito Mussolini and Italian Fascism. The Revisionists had their own paramilitary forces, the Irgun Zvei Leumi (IZL), which had carried out indiscriminate bombings and shootings against the Arab population during the Arab revolt and who were prepared to fight the British in 1939 in order to overturn the White Paper policy. With the outbreak of war, however,

the main body of the Revisionist movement rallied to the British Empire and suspended hostilities. Indeed, the IZL commander, David Raziel, was killed on a SOE operation in Iraq in May 1941.⁸

LEHI and IZL

The exception was a small breakaway terrorist group, the Lohamei Herut Israel (LEHI), usually known after its founder, Abraham Stern, as the Stern Group or by the British as the 'Stern Gang'. This tiny organisation identified the British Empire as Zionism's main enemy and throughout the war continued a terrorist campaign of assassinations and bombings against the Palestine police and the administration. The LEHI went so far as to offer its services to Nazi Germany, proposing to act as a fifth column in the German conquest of Palestine in return for an agreement to resettle Europe's Jews there. Its politics, a peculiar amalgam of anti-imperialism and fascism, were informed by a mystical belief that the Jewish people would have to be redeemed by sacrificial violence. They were actually proud to call themselves 'Terrorists'.⁹

On its own the LEHI never constituted a serious threat to British control over Palestine. The organisation never numbered more than a few hundred members during the war, and it was extremely unpopular with the rest of the Yishuv both because of its continuing terrorist activities and because of its fundraising through armed robbery and extortion. This hostility ensured that the police received the necessary intelligence effectively to cripple the organisation. It became involved in a bloody vendetta with the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), a vendetta in which Stern himself was a casualty, shot dead while in custody in January 1942.¹⁰ By the middle of that year further arrests and shootings appeared to have eliminated the organisation.

The situation began to change in 1944. By this time it was clear that the Allies were winning the war and that the Yishuv was no longer under direct threat from the Nazis. The impact of the Holocaust was also changing attitudes, with a growing number of people convinced that British refusal to allow Jewish refugees into Palestine had sentenced them to death. Britain was from this point of view an accessory to the Holocaust. Together these factors contributed to the revival of the Revisionist paramilitary formations.

The LEHI regrouped under the leadership of a three-man executive consisting of Yitzhak Shamir, Nathan Yellin-Mor and Israel Scheib. The organisation quickly returned to its vendetta with the Palestine police. More important, however, was the reorganisation of the IZL, a much

more substantial force that had almost disintegrated in the early years of the war with so many of its leading cadres following Raziel into the British armed forces. Now the IZL reformed itself and under the leadership of a refugee from Poland, the hard-line right-winger Menachem Begin, prepared for armed revolt. The IZL rejected the individual terrorism of the LEHI in favour of a protracted campaign of guerrilla warfare intended not to persuade the British to return to the Balfour commitment, as the Jewish Agency intended, but to drive them out of Palestine altogether. The decision to wage war was taken in 1943, but the proclamation of the armed revolt against the British was not made until 1 February 1944.

The declaration, addressed to both the Yishuv and the British, declared:

Four years have passed since the war began, and all the hopes that beat in your hearts then have evaporated without a trace. We have not been accorded international status, no Jewish Army has been set up, the gates of the country have not been opened. The British regime has sealed its shameful betrayal of the Jewish people and there is no moral basis whatsoever for its presence in Eretz Israel.

We shall fearlessly draw conclusions. There is no longer any armistice between the Jewish people and the British Administration in Eretz Israel which hands our brothers over to Hitler. Our people is at war with this regime – war to the end... We shall fight, every Jew in the Homeland will fight. The God of Israel, the Lord of Hosts will aid us. There will be no retreat. Freedom – or death.¹¹

As the year progressed there was a succession of attacks that left an increasing toll of destruction, dead and injured. The British only began to take the revolt seriously after a series of co-ordinated attacks on the police on 23 March when the LEHI shot up police stations in Tel Aviv, killing two policemen, while the IZL made bomb attacks on police stations in Jerusalem, Jaffa and Haifa, killing six more. These attacks were followed by a curfew that lasted for nine days and large-scale searches in the districts affected. On 28 July the High Commissioner, Sir Harold MacMichael, reported to London that, 'The security position may be deteriorating, and the outlook is not encouraging'.¹² Only ten days later, on 8 August, the LEHI narrowly missed assassinating him, machine-gunning his car on the Jerusalem-to-Jaffa road and killing his ADC in the attempt. The attacks continued into September. On 27 August some 150 IZL guerrillas made co-ordinated attacks on four heavily fortified

police outposts, leaving two soldiers and two policemen dead. Two days later a CID Assistant Superintendent, Tom Wilkins, regarded as the most dangerous of the group's enemies, was assassinated, shot 11 times by LEHI gunmen in broad daylight in Jerusalem.

The decisive act of this first phase of the revolt, however, occurred on 6 November 1944 when two young LEHI gunmen, Eliahu Hakim and Eliahu Bet-Zouri, assassinated the British Minister Resident in the Middle East, Walter Guinness, Lord Moyne.¹³ According to Yellin-Mor, 'We weren't yet in a position to try to hit Churchill in London, so the logical second best was to hit Lord Moyne in Cairo'.¹⁴ This killing of a senior government figure and a personal friend of Churchill's had a shattering effect. Lord Moyne's death broke Churchill's already weakening faith in the reliability of the Yishuv as an ally, and he warned in the House of Commons that if these outrages continued, 'many like myself will have to reconsider the position we have maintained so consistently in the past'.¹⁵

Lord Moyne's assassination provoked the Jewish Agency into action. The activities of the IZL and LEHI were beginning to compromise the security of the whole Yishuv, undermining its diplomatic position and threatening to bring British reprisals. However spectacular their attacks, the dissident Zionist organisations were still only very small (the LEHI and IZL between them probably had only about a thousand members) and enjoyed the support of only a tiny proportion of the settler population, less than one per cent according to one estimate.¹⁶ By way of contrast, the Jewish Agency commanded the allegiance of virtually the entire Yishuv, had considerable financial resources both in Palestine and abroad, controlled the 60 000-strong Haganah militia together with its elite strike force, the Palmach, and had quantities of weapons hidden throughout the country. The IZL and LEHI were putting all this at risk. Moreover, as far as Ben Gurion was concerned they were politically little better than Nazis; indeed, he condemned the IZL as a 'Nazi gang' and as 'Jewish Nazis' and compared Begin to Hitler.¹⁷

The 'Saison'

As far as Ben Gurion and the Jewish Agency were concerned, the real enemy was not the British Empire but the Arabs. In the end, the Zionists were going to have to fight the Arabs for control of Palestine and whatever other Arab territory they might eventually be able to seize. For this reason it was absolutely vital to avoid a full-scale confrontation with the British which, even if it ended with their withdrawal, would still leave

the Yishuv crippled in the face of Arab attack. The IZL and LEHI threatened to provoke such a confrontation, and indeed this was very much Begin's intention. The British were aware of plans being hatched in New York for an uprising modelled on the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916, involving the seizure of buildings in Jerusalem, including the General Post Office.¹⁸ While this particular plan was stillborn, Begin still hoped to bring about a full-scale rebellion involving the entire Yishuv, an outcome that Ben Gurion quite correctly regarded as a recipe for disaster. The British, with their overwhelming military superiority, would have been able to inflict a crushing defeat on a full-scale rebellion. Moreover, at the time it still appeared possible that once the war was over the British government would return to its Zionist commitments without the need for conflict in the Mandate. The Jewish Agency therefore resolved to put a stop to the activities of the dissident organisations.

Once it was made clear that the Agency intended to take the necessary physical measures to curb the dissidents, the LEHI promptly agreed to suspend operations. Begin, however, refused to comply, whereupon Ben Gurion launched the 'Saison', a campaign of intimidation and betrayal that saw Palmach volunteers collaborating with the CID in an effort to smash the IZL. The split within Zionism between the followers of Ben Gurion and the followers of Begin was to be one of the decisive factors in Israeli politics for many years.

From the very beginning of the IZL offensive in February 1944, elements within the Haganah had taken action against their rivals, but only towards the end of the year did this become a co-ordinated campaign designed to root them out of the colony once and for all. Palmach volunteers, working together with Haganah intelligence, the Shai, began by seizing suspected or known IZL members, inflicting salutary beatings or holding them for interrogation, which often involved force and sometimes torture. Some IZL cadres were held captive for months in conditions that were intended to break their spirit. The IZL intelligence chief, Eli Tavin, for example, was tortured and then held in solitary confinement for seven months. It quickly became clear that there was a limit to the number of dissidents who could be imprisoned, so the decision was taken to inform on them to the British. Altogether some 700 names were passed over to the CID, which made large-scale arrests, seizing some 300 IZL activists. Sympathisers were intimidated and victimised, sacked from their jobs and even expelled from school.

The 'Saison' was extremely effective, resulting in the removal of virtually the entire IZL leadership with the important exception of Begin himself, driving the organisation deep undercover and preventing the

continuation of its guerrilla campaign. It is important to note that this conflict within the Zionist camp took place along a sharp political divide. For the Palmach members involved in combating the IZL, the dissidents were traitors to the Yishuv, refusing to acknowledge its government and putting it at risk by their adventurism. More than that though, the dissidents also rejected, from an extreme right-wing position, the collectivist kibbutz ethos that still informed the Yishuv, and were consequently regarded as little better than Nazis. Even so, many who were prepared to take action against the IZL were very uncomfortable about handing them over to the British, and indeed this policy became untenable once it became clear that the British had no intention of satisfying Zionist ambitions.¹⁹

What of the IZL? Despite the damage done to it, the organisation survived underground. Much of the credit for this must go to Begin, who insisted that there should be no retaliation against the Jewish Agency, even once it became known that 'third degree' methods were being used against IZL members and that they were being handed over to the police. He presents this as a decision from the heart, that Jew should not fight Jew, but almost certainly the decision was also informed by the knowledge that if the conflict became a shooting affair the IZL would inevitably be destroyed as would any hope that it could ride out the 'Saison'. This would only benefit the British. Instead Begin believed that if the IZL could hold out long enough, then the British government would inevitably disappoint the hopes the Jewish Agency placed on it and the IZL strategy would be recognised as correct. This simple conviction was to be at least partly rewarded.²⁰

The 'Saison' had come to an end even before the election of the Labour government in July 1945. The IZL had disappeared underground and the handing over of its members to the police had caused increasing dissatisfaction among Palmach volunteers involved in the operation. Now, however, the whole episode seemed likely to become irrelevant with the election of a Labour government ostensibly committed to abandoning the White Paper policy, establishing a Zionist state and allowing unrestricted immigration. One senior Labour politician, Hugh Dalton, a future Chancellor of the Exchequer, actually advocated paying the Palestinians to vacate the country and expanding its borders.²¹ David Horowitz has recalled the 'jubilant atmosphere' that gripped the Yishuv when news of the election result arrived. This joy was short-lived. It soon became clear that whatever its position in opposition, the new Labour government regarded the need to maintain good relations with the Arabs, thereby safeguarding the

British Empire's strategic position in the Middle East, as a more vital interest than any sentimental attachment to Zionist ideals. This turnabout on the part of Labour was, once again, according to Horowitz, 'the greatest disappointment and disillusionment suffered in the history of Zionism'. A wave of bitterness swept through the colony: 'Disappointment, anxiety, despair and restlessness spread through the Yishuv'.²² This sense of betrayal was to be compounded by the continued refusal of the British to allow the survivors of the death camps into Palestine. The Labour government, it is worth noting, also refused to allow their entry into Britain!²³

The Jewish revolt

In these changed circumstances the Jewish Agency decided that a show of strength was necessary in order to force the British to accede to Zionist demands. They had to demonstrate that the maintenance of the British position required their support and that this would only be possible if the British agreed to honour the Balfour Declaration. Their strategy had three aspects to it. First, there was to be campaign of sabotage and civil disobedience inside Palestine, it was hoped with minimal loss of life. This would demonstrate that security in the Mandate could only be maintained with the co-operation of the Jewish Agency. Secondly, they intended to organise mass illegal immigration, confronting the British with the enormity of forcibly denying entry to survivors of the Holocaust. Thirdly, the Zionist movement in the United States would be used in an attempt to bring pressure from Washington to bear on the British. Given Britain's economic weakness and dependence upon the US, American support was a crucial element in the Jewish Agency's strategy. There was still a fixed determination to avoid a full-scale conflict with the British, the intention being to pressurise them into changing their policy, not to drive them out of Palestine by force of arms. Nevertheless, to achieve this objective the 'Saison' was called off and the Jewish Agency entered into an uneasy secret alliance with the dissident organisations, the LEHI and IZL, both of which were committed to very different strategies. A United Resistance Movement was established in mid-October 1945, bringing all the various armed formations under a unified command.

On the night of 31 October–1 November, 'the Night of the Trains', the United Resistance Movement launched its first joint operation against the British. In an impressive display of co-ordinated action, some 1000 Palmach members paralysed the railway system throughout

the Mandate, cutting the track in 242 places, and sunk or damaged police patrol boats used to prevent illegal immigration at Haifa and Jaffa. Simultaneously, the IZL attacked the Lydda railway junction, blowing up buildings, locomotives and rolling stock, and killing one British soldier, while the LEHI bombed the oil refineries at Haifa. This demonstration would, it was hoped, influence the Labour government's forthcoming statement on Palestine. The second phase of revolt had begun.

In retrospect it can be seen that the British seriously underestimated the strength of the Yishuv and its ability to conduct a struggle against them. The war years, while an unprecedented catastrophe for Europe's Jewish population, had paradoxically seen the Jewish colony in Palestine grow in wealth and power. By 1946 the population of the Yishuv numbered some 560 000 and the number of settlements had increased to 348. Agriculture had prospered and, more significantly, industrial development – much of it war production – had increased dramatically. The number of Jewish factory workers rose from 22 000 in 1937 to 46 000 in 1943 and, over the same period, industrial output increased nearly five-fold from £7.9 million to £37.5 million.²⁴ This, together with the Jewish Agency's increased military capability, made the Yishuv a force to be reckoned with. British protection from the Arabs was no longer regarded as necessary. The Yishuv was beginning to realise that it no longer needed the British Empire.

For the British, the Zionist revolt posed an impossible dilemma which in the end was to force them to abandon the Mandate. In order to secure their position in Palestine and throughout the Middle East they had to try to find a formula that would reconcile the incompatible ambitions of both the Zionists and the Palestinian Arabs and neighbouring Arab states. Concessions to the Arabs were made impossible by a Zionist recalcitrance increasingly endorsed by the United States. Concessions to the Zionists were made impossible by Arab hostility to the colony that had been established in their midst and was taking their land. The British government failed to find a political solution that the security forces could then seek to impose. It was in this difficult context that British counterinsurgency operations were to fail so humiliatingly.

Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary, was left unmoved by the United Resistance Movement's explosive demonstration of its capabilities on the night of 31 October. He had already been informed by intelligence sources that such an event was planned and had warned Weizmann, a staunch Anglophile, that if 'you want a fight you can have it'. This was not the sort of language that the Zionist leader expected

from Labour politicians. Bevin, however, was positively hostile towards Zionism. He had no sympathy whatsoever with the establishing of a Jewish state in Palestine and, more importantly, he was also convinced that such an ambition was a threat to the British Empire's position in the Middle East and so had to be defeated. On 13 November he made his statement on Palestine to the House of Commons. This announced the setting up of an Anglo-American Commission which would report back on the problem and, it was hoped, endorse British government policy. The commission was intended to involve the United States in decision-making in the Middle East and thereby counter Zionist influence in American domestic politics. The struggle for influence in the United States was recognised as a crucial arena of the conflict. At the same time his statement also made quite clear that Labour's commitment to Zionism when in opposition was a thing of the past and that Labour in government was not prepared to antagonise Arab opinion. Bevin followed this up with a press conference at which he warned that if Jewish refugees wanted to get to the head of the queue for resettlement then they risked the 'danger of another anti-Semitic reaction'. This crass and offensive allegation of queue-jumping outraged Jewish opinion, both Zionist and non-Zionist. The honeymoon with the Labour government was over.²⁵

The Zionist response to Bevin's statement in Palestine was the calling of a general strike on 14 November. In Tel Aviv this was accompanied by serious rioting. When troops from the 6th Airborne Division arrived to restore order, they were stoned and after repeated warnings responded with directed fire, that is, marksmen shooting individuals identified as ringleaders. This was the traditional method for dealing with crowd disturbance in the colonies. When the rioting came to an end, six Jews had been killed and another 60 injured. This was regarded with some satisfaction by the military, but for the administration it was little short of disastrous. American sympathy for Zionism meant that Jews could not be treated like other natives. Worse was to follow. On 25 November, 50 Haganah men attacked the Sidna Ali coastguard station and then disappeared into two settlements, Hogla and Givat Haim. When troops attempted to carry out searches, they met with fierce resistance from the settlers, who fought them hand-to-hand. Eventually some 10 000 troops were involved in establishing British control over the two settlements, killing eight settlers in the process and arresting more than 300. After this episode the practice of searching settlements involved the assembly of overwhelming force in an effort to deter any attempt at resistance.²⁶

The insurgency grows

The six months following the launching of the United Resistance Movement's Campaign saw some 50 serious attacks on police stations, airfields, army bases and installations, government buildings and the railways. The British were confronted by a guerrilla insurgency waged by a well-organised underground, operating with the support of the overwhelming majority of the Yishuv. While the Haganah by and large confined its operations to the destruction of the system of immigration control, the LEHI and IZL attacked what they regarded as the forces of occupation with a ruthlessness that took the British military completely by surprise. They conducted a relentless campaign against the Palestine police, and its CID branch in particular, determined to cripple the British intelligence apparatus. On 27 December the two organisations made a combined attack on the CID offices in Jerusalem and Jaffa. These daring commando-style raids left ten police and soldiers dead and another 11 wounded. The British responded with a curfew, large-scale searches and the screening of the male population in the affected districts. By the time the curfew was lifted on 5 January, some 50 suspects had been detained and a handful of weapons discovered. They had completely failed to inflict any serious damage on the underground.

In his study of the revolt Bowyer Bell provides an excellent account of the situation that confronted the new High Commissioner, Lieutenant General Sir Alan Cunningham:

By December he had what should have been the means to impose order. All twenty-thousand men of the Sixth Airborne Division had been moved to the Mandate, and British troop strength continued to rise to eighty thousand. There were also thousands of police, units of the Transjordan Arab Legion, and others attached to security duty. There were two cruisers, three destroyers, other naval units off the coast, and naval radar and communication bases on shore. The ratio of British security forces to the Jewish population was approximately one to five. By 1946 the Mandate was an armed camp... Security regulations ran on for over fifty densely-printed paragraphs, including the death penalty for any member of a group whose other members had committed one of several crimes... There were curfews, confiscations, searches in the streets, sweeps through the countryside, collective fines, detentions and arrests... The Mandate became a garrison state under internal siege, and the garrison, despite its size, equipment, and determination, proved ineffectual and self-defeating.²⁷

Why was it that despite this large and growing military presence the insurgents were able to operate with comparative impunity? Inevitably operations sometimes miscarried and there were casualties, but this cannot disguise the fact that the security forces failed to cause any serious harm to the underground organisations. There were two reasons for this failure: inappropriate military tactics and a lack of intelligence.

The British response

The only way the British army knew of responding to rebellion was derived from the pre-war doctrine of 'Imperial Policing', a tried and tested way of suppressing tribal insurgency. This involved mobile columns and punitive expeditions marauding through rebel territory, the free use of artillery and bombing, the destruction of villages, crops and livestock and the hanging of large numbers of rebel prisoners. Overwhelming force would be deployed against the insurgents, who would be battered into submission and taught a healthy respect for British power. It was a doctrine that involved straightforward military action in open country against clearly identifiable rebel forces and their supporters without any great need for political considerations to be taken into account. Such a doctrine was completely inappropriate in the politically charged campaign against the mainly urban terrorism of the United Resistance Movement. In Palestine, guerrilla attacks were invariably surprise commando-type raids against carefully reconnoitred targets, usually in urban areas, with the attackers in civilian clothes or even British uniforms. They would disappear without trace into the city streets. There were no rebel forces to bomb or shell into submission. Moreover, while the British had almost no intelligence relating to their opponents, the police force was heavily infiltrated by the Haganah. According to one senior British officer, 'every order of his was in Jewish hands within 24 hours'.²⁸

The British response was to carry out large-scale cordon-and-search operations, sealing off the district where the insurgents were believed to have gone to ground, searching every house and screening the civilian population. These affairs inevitably brought the troops into conflict with the population whose homes were invaded and who were manhandled with varying degrees of force and abuse, effectively alienating them. These operations invariably failed to produce results. The troops were not adequately trained in search-and-screening procedures. Furthermore, the special unit which was trained in these procedures, the Police Mobile Force, had to be disbanded because of manpower

shortages. The most these cordon-and-search operations achieved was to restrict the guerrillas' freedom of movement. The lesson of British counterinsurgency operations throughout the post-war period, a lesson that had to be learned time after time, was that the most effective way of combating guerrilla forces was the use of small-unit tactics, small patrols, ambush parties and undercover squads. As we shall see, these methods were beginning to be introduced towards the end of the conflict, but too late to have any real effect.²⁹

The most significant factor, however, was the lack of intelligence. The security forces had too little information about the underground and most of what they knew concerned the Haganah. They were, to all intents and purposes, fighting blind and this inevitably meant that their operations were clumsy and misdirected. In many ways large-scale cordon-and-search operations were an attempt to compensate for the lack of intelligence. Without effective intelligence, the security forces were always on the defensive, at best responding to guerrilla attacks, but never able to take the initiative to carry the battle to them. This intelligence failure is without any doubt the key to the security forces' inability to defeat the Zionist underground.

The most important component of the intelligence apparatus was the 80-strong political section of the CID. The Jewish Affairs section was headed first by Assistant Superintendent Richard Catling and then by John Briance. This was a comparatively small outfit, totally inadequate to the scale of the problem. Expansion was limited by a lack of Hebrew-speaking British policemen and the known unreliability of Jewish policemen, many of whom were either members of or sympathised with the underground. Moreover, the CID was targeted by the IZL and LEHI, which succeeded in killing or wounding a number of its members and in making survival a high priority for the rest. The army had its own intelligence staff but gave this area of operations a low priority. Also involved in the conflict were both MI5 and the SIS, and the latter's Major Desmond Doran, a former head of station in Bucharest, was assassinated in Tel Aviv in September 1946.³⁰

The weaknesses in the intelligence apparatus and the effectiveness of the underground's countermeasures were less important than the fact that the Yishuv was solidly united behind the revolt. This is brought home in R.D. Wilson's history of the 6th Airborne Division in Palestine:

At no stage during the whole period under review did the Jewish community, either individually or collectively, show any desire to

co-operate with the Security Forces... Moreover, on occasions too numerous to mention they actively assisted the dissidents to escape detection. It is worthy of mention that there was not one case in the Divisional area during the whole period under review in which one member of the Jewish community was prompted by his or her conscience to come forward and give evidence against a known criminal. It need not have been done openly; in fact it was quite possible for information to pass without the least danger to the law-abiding citizen. Herein the greatest factor of all, for it is well known that in all forms of guerrilla or underground warfare, if the partisans have the undivided support of their kinsmen, the work of the occupation forces is increased beyond calculation.³¹

As we shall see, neither of the two methods that could have fractured this unity, intensified repression or concession (or a combination of the two), were politically possible.

The conflict continued in the New Year. On 25 February 1946, the LEHI and IZL mounted simultaneous attacks on RAF airfields at Lydda, Kfar Sirkin and Qastina. Under cover of darkness the raiders destroyed three Halifaxes and seriously damaged another eight, destroyed seven Spitfires, two Ansons and three other light aircraft. The cost of the destruction was estimated at around £2 million. The attackers lost one man killed. These raids were a tremendous blow: not only were they humiliating, but they also displayed a worrying degree of expertise and tied down more troops in static defence duties.

Increased security did bear fruit, however. A daring attack on Sarafand army camp on 7 March miscarried with a number of IZL raiders taken prisoner. On 2 April, IZL sabotage of the railway line between Haifa and Acre ended in disaster when the raiding party was trapped within the cordon that the 6th Airborne Division threw around the area. They lost two of their number killed and another 30 captured. Another raid on Ramat Gan police station saw the IZL attackers escape with a haul of weapons but suffer two of their men killed and another, Dov Gruner, wounded and taken prisoner. Then, on the night of 25 April, the LEHI raided the 6th Airborne car park in Tel Aviv, killing seven paratroopers, some of them unarmed and shot down in cold blood, before escaping with 12 rifles. According to the Divisional history, previous attacks had been for arms or to sabotage installations, but this 'was one of, if not, the first, in which the causing of casualties was an objective'.³² More than any other, this attack changed the nature of the conflict as far as the troops were concerned. Previously, off-duty soldiers had gone unarmed

but, henceforth, they almost always carried their weapons. As one paratroop officer subsequently recalled, after this incident, 'The lord help anyone who even smelled like a terrorist'.³³

The car park attack provoked minor outbreaks by angry paratroopers in Nathanya and at Beer Tuvya, but officers and NCOs were able to prevent the more serious trouble which threatened to break out in Tel Aviv itself. There was a great increase in the use of anti-Semitic abuse. General Bernard Paget warned that 'if nothing is done there is risk that the troops will take law into their own hands'.³⁴ The danger of troops going on the rampage sufficiently alarmed the army for it to demand that punitive action be taken against the Yishuv. The 6th Airborne's commander, Major General James Cassells, together with the GOC Palestine, Lieutenant General John D'Arcy, went to see the High Commissioner about the incident. Cassells warned him that the paratroopers were near mutiny and asked for tough action. He wanted a collective fine of £1 million imposed on Tel Aviv, the requisition of buildings in the city for use by the troops, the blowing up of public buildings if the municipality did not hand over the culprits and the closure of all restaurants and places of entertainment from 8 p.m. To his disgust Cunningham only agreed to the last demand.³⁵ On 30 April the decision was taken in London that any serious reprisals against the Yishuv would first have to be agreed by the Cabinet. Military considerations were not to be allowed to interfere with the overriding political need to maintain good relations with the United States.

That same day the report of the Anglo-American Commission was published. While it rejected the establishment of a Jewish state and recommended the continuation of British control over Palestine, it also called for the entry of 100 000 Jewish refugees. This last proposal was immediately given public endorsement by President Truman. Both Attlee and Bevin were outraged by what they regarded as Truman's undermining of the British position for domestic political reasons. As far as they were concerned, the report was unacceptable because of the impact on the Arabs of allowing in 100 000 Jewish refugees. The Chiefs of Staff, for example, warned that this would provoke an Arab revolt in Palestine and cause trouble for Britain throughout the Middle East; they even thought it might cause unrest in India, perhaps a mutiny in the Indian army.³⁶

Was this an opportunity missed? Was the Anglo-American Commission's report a way out of the predicament in which the Labour government found itself? It has been argued that this was indeed the case.³⁷ If the British had accepted the report, the moderates in the

Jewish Agency would have called off the revolt and ensured that the dissident organisations either did likewise or faced a renewed 'Saison'. This argument is not convincing for two reasons. First, as far as the Zionists were concerned (Ben Gurion as well as Begin, Shamir and Co.), there could be no final settlement short of the establishment of a Jewish state and, moreover, a Jewish state controlling territory still inhabited by Arabs. Once the 100 000 refugees had arrived, the problem would have resurrected itself with the demand for further or unrestricted immigration and also for a Jewish state. And this was at a time when the British would have been involved in suppressing an Arab revolt. Secondly, it neglects the fact that maintaining good relations with the Arabs was by now the prime objective of British policy in the Middle East. This aim would not be sacrificed for the sake of Zionism. Instead the Labour government was to bow to the growing demand that the army should be given a freer hand in the battle against terrorism.

Cracking down

General D'Arcy, the outgoing GOC Palestine, pressed for the forcible disarming of the settler population. This measure would, it was hoped, both intimidate the Yishuv and cripple the underground resistance, leaving only mopping up operations to finish off the revolt. Such a display of British determination would also predispose the Arabs to accept a further measure of Jewish immigration, thus strengthening the hand of the moderates in the Zionist camp. This plan was endorsed by the Chiefs of Staff on D'Arcy's return to London. At the same time, the Jewish Agency was considering making another major demonstration of its military capabilities as a way of putting pressure on the British government and securing the entry of the 100 000 refugees. In a quite unprecedented way, they sought to discover the likely political effect of such a demonstration. Richard Crossman, a Labour MP, staunch Zionist sympathiser and former member of the Anglo-American Commission, was charged with the task and approached John Strachey, a Cabinet member with similar sympathies. Strachey advised that the attack should go ahead.³⁸ On the night of 16–17 June, 'the Night of the Bridges', the Haganah destroyed eight of the nine bridges connecting Palestine with its neighbours. Despite efforts to avoid British casualties, one soldier was killed. This was followed on 18 June by the IZL kidnapping of five British officers having lunch in a Tel Aviv officers' club. They were taken hostage to prevent the hanging of two IZL members sentenced to death

for their part in the Sarafand raid. These two incidents were the last straw for the British.

Montgomery

A crucial figure in the hardening of British attitudes was the incoming Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery. He visited the Mandate as part of an overseas tour in June and subsequently confessed himself 'much perturbed by what I heard and saw'. He thought Cunningham completely unsuited to cope with a crisis situation and complained of indecision all down the line, beginning in Whitehall. 'All this', he went on,

had led to a state of affairs in which British rule existed only in name; the true rulers seemed to me to be the Jews...I made it very clear to the GOC in Palestine that this was no way to carry on. The decision to re-establish effective British authority was a political one; we must press for that decision. If this led to war with the Jews from the Army's point of view it would be a war against a fanatical and cunning enemy...I would then give the troops the fullest support in their difficult job.³⁹

Montgomery attended the Cabinet meeting on 20 June and, with Ernest Bevin's support, carried the day. Cunningham was told to put into effect the army's plan to seize the initiative from the Zionist guerrilla forces.

On Saturday 29 June the British carried out Operation Agatha, known to the Zionists as 'Black Sabbath'. Troops occupied the Jewish Agency headquarters and a number of other buildings in Jerusalem and sealed off over 20 settlements. There were mass arrests. By the end of the day 2718 people had been detained, including four members of the Agency executive. The searches of the various settlements met with resistance in which four Jews were killed and many others injured. Altogether, 33 arms caches were discovered, containing nearly 600 weapons, half a million rounds of ammunition and a quarter of a ton of explosives. This apparent success was misleading. The overwhelming weight of the army's searches fell on the Haganah, the most open and vulnerable of the Zionist armed formations. The Haganah undoubtedly suffered a serious blow, but the LEHI and IZL were virtually untouched, their military capability left intact. Chaim Weizmann was so appalled by the escalating conflict that he threatened to resign as head of the World Zionist Organisation if it were not called off.

Less than a month later the failure of the army's crackdown was brought dramatically home on 22 July when the IZL carried out a bomb attack on the King David Hotel, which housed both army headquarters and the offices of the Palestine Secretariat. The explosion completely destroyed one wing of the building, killing 91 people (41 Arabs, 17 Jews, 28 British and five others) and injuring many more. Most of the dead and injured had nothing to do with the British Administration. Body parts were still being discovered three months later. A warning was given too late for the building to be evacuated, although whether this was the fault of the IZL or the British has never been, and probably never will be, definitively established. The attack left the Palestine Administration seriously rattled.⁴⁰ Immediately after the bombing, the GOC Palestine, General Evelyn Barker, issued a non-fraternisation order, putting all Jewish establishments out of bounds to the troops. This, as he put it, 'will be punishing the Jews in a way the race dislikes as much as any, by striking at their pockets and showing our contempt for them'. This anti-Semitic outburst soon became public knowledge and caused great embarrassment to the British government, particularly in the United States. Despite calls for his removal, Barker was kept in place. When he finally left Palestine he showed his feelings by pointedly urinating on the ground before boarding his plane. Barker was not the only senior officer or official to show evidence of anti-Semitism. According to Matt Golani, Henry Gurney did not miss any opportunity 'to assail the Jews and the Zionists and their tentacular global intentions' in his diary.⁴¹

The British response to the bombing of the King David Hotel was Operation Shark. The 6th Airborne Division was ordered to seal off Tel Aviv, a city of 170 000 people, conduct house-to-house searches and screen the entire adult population. This operation, involving over 17 000 troops, lasted four days and resulted in 787 people, most of them perfectly innocent, being detained. Five arms caches were uncovered, one of them in the basement of the Great Synagogue. The only significant success was the arrest of the LEHI leader, Shamir, picked out by CID Sergeant T.G. Martin despite being disguised as a rabbi. Two months later the LEHI assassinated Martin while he was playing tennis. The troops missed Begin, however, hidden inside a secret compartment in a friend's house. Once again a large-scale operation carried out without effective intelligence, a treasure hunt without clues, had failed to inflict any serious damage on the underground. For the Jewish Agency, however, the situation was getting dangerously out of hand.

Operation Agatha, the bombing of the King David Hotel and Operation Shark together broke the Jewish Agency's nerve. Its strategy was not to