
Menachem Begin as George Washington: The Americanizing of the Jewish Revolt Against the British

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"Many Americans feel sympathetic to the fight that the Jews are carrying on in Palestine. They feel that in some respects it is like the fight the American colonies carried on in 1776." So wrote former Vice President Henry Wallace in the *New Republic*, of which he was then editor, in early 1947. I. F. Stone, the Washington editor of America's other major liberal weekly, *The Nation*, concurred. The Jews who had taken up arms against the British in Palestine "are no more gangsters than were the men of Concord or Lexington," wrote Stone.¹

That two of America's most prominent political commentators publicly defended the Jewish revolt in Palestine by comparing it to colonial America's own revolt against England was testimony to the success of the campaign waged by militant American Zionists in 1946–1947 to win public sympathy for their fighting comrades in the Holy Land. While mainstream American Zionist leaders were reluctant to endorse openly the use of force by Palestinian Jews, militant American Zionists boldly took their case to the American public, portrayed the Jewish rebellion in starkly American terms, and gradually succeeded in making their perspective part and parcel of American public discourse regarding Palestine.

The strategy of comparing Palestine's Jewish rebels to those of the American Revolution was a recent innovation for Zionist militants in the United States. The first wave of anti-British violence, undertaken by Irgun Zvai Leumi militants during the months following the May 1939 White Paper, attracted no American endorsements; the Irgun's ideological kinsmen in the United States, the Revisionist Zionists—known as the New Zionist Organization of America (NZOA)—were too few in number and not well organized. When the Irgun, under the leadership of Menachem Begin, declared its formal revolt against the Palestine Mandate authori-



Ben Hecht

Ben Hecht
(1893-1964)

ties, in early 1944, militant Zionists in the United States at first hesitated to express sympathy. The fact that the war in Europe was still raging no doubt contributed to their reluctance; with the American and British armies still fighting side by side against Hitler, even the most nationalist-minded of American Zionists were loath to defend the killing of British soldiers by Palestinian Jews. "The New Zionist Organization has never advocated nor supported any acts of terror in Palestine," NZOA president Col. Morris Mendelsohn declared.² After Jewish militants assassinated Lord Moyne, the senior British official in the Middle East, in November 1944, the NZOA condemned the killing and urged Palestine's Jews to confine themselves to nonviolent political methods.³ Even the NZOA's internal newsletter—a forum in which the militants presumably would have felt less reluctant about expressing sympathy for the Jewish rebels—asserted that the recent Jewish violence against the English "can neither be condoned nor condemned by us."⁴

The events of 1945 radicalized the NZOA's attitude toward the Jewish revolt. Germany's surrender, in May, eliminated the danger that American supporters of the Irgun would be accused of undermining a U.S. ally during wartime. The liberation of the Nazi death camps, throughout the spring, revealed the full horror of the Holocaust and intensified American Jewish sympathy for the immediate establishment of a Jewish homeland, even if by force; it also accelerated American Jewish financial support for the NZOA, giving militant U.S. Zionists the means to conduct a comprehensive nationwide propaganda effort for the first time.

The refusal of England's new Labor government to permit increased Jewish immigration to the Holy Land added fuel to the fire. In the autumn of 1945, the Labor Zionist leadership in Palestine abandoned its previous policy of collaborating with the British against the Irgun, and authorized its military arm, the Haganah, to join the Jewish underground revolt. This united front lent even greater legitimacy to those American Zionists who sympathized with the insurrection. A domestic factor made its appearance too: Peter Bergson, the maverick Jewish activist whose U.S. campaign for the rescue of European Jewry had made headlines

during 1943–1944, announced the establishment of the American League for a Free Palestine (ALFP), a new organization devoted to championing the Jewish revolt against the British. Thus as the Jewish fight in Palestine shifted into high gear in 1945, the NZOA and ALFP were ready to launch a full-scale campaign to win American public sympathy for the Palestine militants—using carefully selected symbols, images, and phrases that would make Jewish violence in Palestine more comprehensible to American audiences.

Whether they realized it or not, Begin's cheerleaders were following in the footsteps of the mainstream American Zionist leadership. American Zionists had always justified Zionism in American terms. As far back as 1902, the Jewish refugees settling in Palestine reminded Richard Gottheil, president of the Federation of American Zionists, of "the Puritans [who] fled from persecution."⁵ The Zionist pioneers "are building the new Judea even as the Puritans built a new England three hundred years ago," declared his colleague, Bernard Rosenblatt, in 1907. "Hederah and her sister colonies are . . . the Jamestown and the Plymouth of the new House of Israel."⁶

Louis Brandeis, the great "Americanizer" of post-World War I Zionism, reveled in such comparisons. Brandeis's enthusiastic fusion of Zionist activities and American symbolism played a vital role in making American Jews feel that their nationalist sentiments were acceptable, particularly during the war and the immediate postwar period, when nativism was running at a fever pitch and Theodore Roosevelt was thundering against "hyphenated Americans." Brandeis spoke of "the Jewish Pilgrim Fathers" in Palestine,⁷ working in "the Colonies,"⁸ in a region that most closely resembled "a miniature California."⁹

The tension between the Jewish pioneers and local Arabs provided more grist for the analogy mills. The Federation of American Zionists' official *Course in Zionism* (1915) saw no need to worry about Arab violence, since the Zionists had their *Shomrim*, armed guards who "have all the accomplishments of Western cow-boys, [and] are rugged, efficient, fearless."¹⁰ If there were occasional Arab attacks, Brandeis thought, that was inevitable, for the

American pioneers "who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony [likewise] had to protect themselves against the Indians." Arab assaults gave the Jews a chance to demonstrate their "mettle" and polish their "manhood, courage, and ability to look out for themselves" (the very qualities Brandeis most admired in Americans).¹¹ Just as the early American settlers were not deterred by Indian attacks, neither would the Zionists abandon their work because of Arab attacks, reported Irma Lindheim, vice-president of Hadassah, after visiting the Galilee in 1922. The Jews there reminded her of "those of the pioneer times of early New England, [who] went out each day, rifles in hand, to cut their fields into furrows, and plant crops for their subsistence."¹²

Twenty years later, militant American Zionists, inadvertent heirs to the Brandeisian tradition of "Americanizing" Zionism, reached for an American example to which they might compare the Jews who had taken up arms against the British forces in Palestine. The American Revolutionaries were the obvious choice, since they were the ones closest to the hearts of those whom the militant Zionist publicity was targeting. "It's 1776 in Palestine became the rallying cry, as the NZOA and ALFP Americanized Begin's revolt through a torrent of full-page newspaper advertisements, press releases, op-ed essays, radio broadcasts, public meetings, and protest rallies during 1945-1948."¹³

"A revolutionary war is going on in Palestine," wrote Ben Hecht, the fiery playwright who was the ALFP's premier polemicist. "The few survivors [of the Holocaust] . . . are making history in the same way as the Maquis, the Partisans, the Irish rebels and the American revolutionists."¹⁴ Harry Louis Selden, the magazine and book editor who co-chaired the ALFP, minced no words: "[B]ut for an accident of time and place, Dov Gruner [a Jewish militant scheduled to be hanged by the British] might have been fighting in 1776 for American liberty and Nathan Hale might have been hanged in 1947, a martyr to Hebrew Freedom. . . . they fought a common oppressor."¹⁵ A brigade of Americans who volunteered to join the Irgun was named the "George Washington Legion,"¹⁶ while a group that organized boycotts of British goods was dubbed the "Sons of Liberty Committee," in imitation of the

Colonial American boycotters of the same name.¹⁷

When Judah Magnes, the outspoken Jewish pacifist, denounced Hecht and the League for supporting "Jewish terrorism," the ALFP's leaders fired back with a press release quoting the pure American rhetoric of one of their prominent non-Jewish supporters, former Senator Guy Gillette: "Our forefathers started shooting redcoats when the matter of a tea tax was involved. The Hebrews in Palestine have taken a lot more than taxation without representation." The press release concluded by quoting Thomas Jefferson's memorable phrase, "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God."¹⁸

For those who doubted the ability of the small Jewish guerrilla force to defeat the British army, Begin's American backers pointed to England's record. "Britain has capitulated in similar conflicts with the American colonies," one NZOA ad reminded readers of the *New York Post*. "She will capitulate in her ignoble extermination campaign against the Jewish people."¹⁹ An ALFP broadside in the *New Republic* seconded the point: "We have no doubt as to the outcome—Great Britain never won a war against a people fighting for freedom."²⁰ The use of more subtle terminology reinforced the image of Begin's men as modern-day Nathan Hales. The pro-Irgun newspaper ads regularly referred to them as "patriots," and described their aim as the establishment of "a democratic Hebrew Republic"—phrases whose similarity to American Revolutionary rhetoric was more than coincidental.²¹

Ancillary aspects of the American Revolution likewise surfaced in the propaganda of the militant Zionists. "Just as the British stirred up the Iroquois to fight the colonists, so today they are stirring up the Arabs," ran one argument. Another described "the Hessians who were the British mercenaries" (in the 1770s) as "knightly gentlemen" in comparison to the "Arab mercenaries inspired by the British" in the Holy Land.²² The willingness of some Zionist leaders in Palestine to collaborate with the British also reminded Ben Hecht of the Revolutionary era:

[R]espectability and wealth never lined up with a revolution—or a fighting minority. The American Revolutionary Army under George Washington went a long time without shoes, guns or food. The respectable and wealthy American colonists pre-

ferred British admiration to liberty and freedom. They thought it was bad taste to fight for such things—against the British, of all people. And they proved their respectability by playing informer to the British. You can see how little respectability has changed since 1776.²³

Even Hecht himself was utilized to further the analogy. Literature publicizing Hecht's Zionist play, *A Flag Is Born*, pointed out that every "great issue in history has produced literary figures equal to the cause"; the American Revolution had its "Tom Paines and Jeffersons . . . Ben Hecht is in this tradition."²⁴

Hecht's campaign received an important, if unintentional, boost from the mainstream American Zionist leadership. Although the leaders of the major U.S. Zionist groups would have preferred that their coreligionists in Palestine refrain from the use of force, England's refusal to permit postwar Jewish immigration and the harsh measures it used to combat the Jewish underground fighters made Jewish violence seem less unreasonable. Reluctant to side with intransigent London against their own brethren, American Zionist leaders escalated their anti-British rhetoric as the Palestine conflict intensified. While not explicitly justifying Jewish violence, the Zionist leadership implicitly rationalized the militants' behavior by focusing hostile attention on the English as the real cause of the Palestine trouble. "Who Are the Real Terrorists?" asked the headline of a full-page ad in the *New Republic* by the Zionist Organization of America. The ZOA's answer, of course, was the British, whose "illegal military measures and deportation of Jewish refugees to concentration camps" had "provoked acts of desperation by Jewish men and women."²⁵

By frequently utilizing phrases that compared British behavior to that of the Nazis, the American Zionist leaders seemed to be suggesting that the violent resistance of the Jews to the British was as understandable as was Jewish resistance to the Nazis. A British law permitting searches without warrants was cited as evidence that "it is difficult to detect the difference between the laws of [Nazi] Germany and the lawlessness of Britain."²⁶ Abuse of Palestinian Jewish civilians by British soldiers constituted "a Nazi pogrom."²⁷ The Palestine Mandate administration was described as "a virtual Gestapo regime."²⁸ The seizure of boatloads of unau-

thorized Jewish immigrants and their deportation to "concentration camps" in Cyprus was "patterned on the Nazi practice," declared Henry Monsky, leader of the American Jewish Conference.²⁹ By portraying Begin's revolt as a Jewish war against Nazi-like oppressors, the Zionist leaders lent an important helping hand to the militant Zionist campaign on behalf of the Palestine fighters.

How successful was the campaign to Americanize the Jewish revolt? The polling data from the late 1940s are not sufficiently detailed to determine American public attitudes toward Jewish guerrilla activity specifically. Attitudes toward several related issues, however, are clear. Surveys indicate that public support for the creation of a Jewish state increased during 1945–1948. Twice as many—and later, three times as many—Americans sympathized with the Jews as with the Arabs. Only 7 percent thought that the British were treating the Jews better than the Arabs, while more than five times that number believed that the Arabs in Palestine were receiving better treatment. Of the 58 percent of Americans who said (in early 1946) that they "have followed the news about the disorders in Palestine," just 12 percent blamed the Jews, while 33 percent said that the British were to blame (10 percent blamed the Arabs; the rest had no opinion).³⁰

The primary factors that encouraged the spread of such attitudes are readily apparent. Revelations about the full extent of the Holocaust generated sympathy for Zionism. So did the continuing plight of Holocaust survivors in Europe's displaced persons camps. Energetic grass-roots lobbying by hundreds of local branches of the ZOA and the American Zionist Emergency Council certainly contributed to fostering an understanding of Zionist aims.

Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to expect that the violent tactics of the Jewish forces in Palestine would have undermined American public sympathy for the Zionist cause if not for the efforts of the Jewish underground's American friends. The one-two punch of Zionist militants justifying Jewish violence in American terms and Zionist moderates focusing negative attention on Britain as the provoker of Jewish violence helped buttress

public support for Zionism against the erosion that would otherwise have been caused by the steady stream of news reports about Jews killing British soldiers. The Jewish battle against the British, recast to resemble a reincarnation of America's own battle against England, helped redefine American public perceptions of the conflict in Zion.

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Notes

1. Henry Wallace, "The Problem of Palestine," *New Republic* 116, no. 6 (April 21, 1947): 12;
1. F. Stone, "Gangsters or Patriots?" *Nation* 162, no. 2 (January 12, 1946): 35.
2. New Zionist Organization of America (hereafter NZOA) press release, November 1, 1944, 16/g/9, Metzudat Ze'ev (Jabotinsky Institute), Tel Aviv (hereafter MZ).
3. NZOA press release, November 11, 1944, 16/g/5, MZ.
4. "Blood, Sweat, Not Tears" (editorial), *NZOA Bulletin* 1, no. 1 (March 9, 1944), 10/g/5, MZ.
5. Richard Gottheil, "The President's Annual Message," *Maccabean* 2 (June 1902): 323.
6. Bernard Rosenblatt, "Palestine: The Future Hebrew State," *Maccabean* 12 (June 1907): 235.
7. Louis D. Brandeis, "Democracy in Palestine" (New York: Provisional Executive Committee for General Zionist Affairs), reel 84, Brandeis Papers, Princeton University (hereafter BP-PU).
8. Brandeis to Hapgood, December 31, 1914, in *Letters of Louis D. Brandeis*, ed. Melvin I. Urofsky and David W. Levy, vol. 3 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973), p. 393.
9. Brandeis to Lubin, September 19, 1918, *ibid.*, vol. 4 (1975), p. 356; Brandeis to Lubin Brandeis, July 10, 1919, *ibid.*, pp. 417-418.
10. *A Course in Zionism* (New York: Federation of American Zionists, 1915), p. 69.
11. "Brandeis Resumes Active Interest in Palestine Cause; Joins with Warburg in Establishing Palestine Corporation," *Jewish Daily Bulletin* 6:1525 (November 26, 1929), pp. 6-7; Brandeis's address to the Palestine Economic Conference, Washington, D.C., November 24, 1929, reel 89, BP-PU.
12. Irma L. Lindheim, *Parallel Quest: A Search of a Person and a People* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1962), p. 138. For an interesting variation on this theme, see the letter from Elisha Friedman, a Zionist activist and longtime Brandeis confidante, in *New York Times*, December 16, 1945, IV:8. Urging support for a proposal by former President Herbert Hoover to resettle Palestinian Arabs in Iraq, Friedman compared the idea of Arabs trekking from Palestine to Iraq to the "hundreds of thousands of farmers from the New England states [who] went West to Ohio, Iowa, Oregon, abandoned poor soil and acquired fertile land." In Friedman's analogy, it was the Arabs, not the Jews, who were comparable to the American frontiersmen.
13. Harry Louis Selden interview with the author, March 29, 1993; "Freedom Fights on Many Fronts," in *The Fight for Liberation and Nationhood: Special Report, 1947* (New York: American League for a Free Palestine, 1947), p. 9; Z.O.A. *Delegates: Shame!* (leaflet, American League for a Free Palestine, F38/566, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem).
14. "Gillette Denies Aid to Terrorists," *New York Times*, December 5, 1946, p. 39.
15. Harry Louis Selden, "Dov Gruner and Nathan Hale: Two Patriots," *The Answer* 6, no. 16 (April 16, 1948): 18.
16. "How About You?" (advertisement), *New York Post*, April 15, 1948, p. 41. There is no evidence that the use of Washington's name was a conscious imitation of the well-publicized use of Abraham Lincoln's name by the brigade of American volunteers who fought in the Spanish Civil war during the 1930s.
17. "Boycott Britain" (advertisement), *New York Post*, May 24, 1948, p. 24.
18. "Gillette Denies Aid to Terrorists," *New York Times*, December 5, 1946, p. 39.
19. "This Is What Americans Think of You, Mr. Bevin!" (advertisement), *New York Post*,

November 4, 1946, p. 50.

20. "There Will Be More Violence" (advertisement), *New Republic* 115, no. 24 (December 16, 1946): 780.

21. "Build Dov Gruner's Memorial" (advertisement), *New Republic* 116, no. 18 (May 5, 1947): 48; "There Will Be More Violence" (advertisement), *New Republic* 115, no. 24 (December 16, 1946): 780.

22. Quoted by Wallace in "The Problem of Palestine"; also see Selden, "Dov Gruner and Nathan Hale," and Lester Cohen, "Resistance to Tyranny Is Obedience to God," *The Answer* 4, no. 1 (January 1946): 2.

23. "Letter to the Terrorists of Palestine" (advertisement), *New York Post*, May 17, 1947. This particular advertisement caused a diplomatic incident. See "Britain Prods U.S. to Stop Funds to Defy Palestine Law," *New York Times*, May 20, 1947, p. 1.

24. "Ben Hecht's *A Flag Is Born*," in *Fight for Liberation and Nationhood*, p. 8.

25. "Who Are the Real Terrorists?" (advertisement), *New Republic* 116, no. 16 (April 21, 1947): 48.

26. "Legalizing Lawlessness" (editorial), *Palestine* 2, nos. 9-10 (November-December 1945): 3.

27. "The Moral Price" (editorial), *Palestine* 4, no. 1 (January 1947): 3.

28. "British Gestapo Regime" (editorial), *Palestine* 4, no. 3 (April-May 1947): 35.

29. "Jews Here Assail Palestine Closing," *New York Times*, August 14, 1946, p. 3.

30. Charles H. Stember et al., *Jews in the Mind of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), pp. 174-180; George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971* (New York: Random House, 1972).