The situation was desperate and, as in all such situations, a mass of contradictions: even though the British went ahead with their White Paper policy, closed Palestine to Europe’s Jews, and rejected the Yishuv’s demand to fight in the war as a nation, the Yishuv, in order to defend Palestine, had only one option: to cooperate with the British army, enlist in its ranks, and assist in any way possible in the effort to defeat Hitler.


The Jewish Agency forthwith mobilized the Yishuv’s resources for wartime agricultural and industrial purposes. Soil under tillage was expanded by 70 percent. Two thousand Palestine Jewish factories were operating when the war broke out. Within the next year, four hundred new ones were built, essentially related to British military needs, and the number tripled by 1945. Indeed, the Yishuv’s economy overall was progressively linked to Britain’s defense effort. Among the equipment produced were antitank mines, weapons’ components, tank engines and treads, light naval craft, machine tools, and uniforms. Guns, ships, and machinery were repaired; specialized scientific apparatus, optical instruments, medical supplies, and vaccines and pharmaceuticals were manufactured. By 1943, 63 percent of the total Jewish work force was employed in occupations immediately connected with defense needs. It was a superlative effort that, not incidentally, laid the basis for an expanded postwar Jewish economy in Palestine.

The Yishuv’s identification with Britain’s cause assumed other, equally tangible forms. In the first month of the war, the Va’ad Le’umi announced the registration of volunteers for national service. Within five days, 136,000 men and women enrolled. Their motivation was not simply an understandable desire for battle against the Nazis, but the expectation that an armed and active Jewish force would obligate Britain to reconsider the Zionist case. Additionally, military skills acquired during the war could be put to good use later. It was the Jewish Agency’s hope, meanwhile, to organize these troops as a separate force under its own flag, something akin to the Jewish Legion of World War I.

**Vocabulary**

*Va’ad Leumi*: the Jewish People’s Council, the main national executive institution of the Jewish community in Palestine.

General Sir Edmund Ironside, Chief of the Imperial Staff, wrote to Weizmann in late December 1939 that he agreed in principle to the raising of a Jewish division, but there was no further progress until after Churchill had become prime minister, when Weizmann was told by Lord Lloyd that Jewish units would be established in the British army. “A great day,” Mrs. Blanche Dugdale, Blanche’s niece and an ardent Zionist, wrote in her diary. “The walls of Jericho have fallen. Chaim just back from this interview elated and solemn. He said: ‘It is almost as great a day as the Balfour Declaration.’”

The War Office appointed a brigadier as liaison officer with the Jewish Agency and another to command the Jewish division. Methods of recruitment, rates of pay and allowances had already been discussed, when Weizmann was suddenly informed by Lord Moyne, who had succeeded Lord Lloyd, that Churchill had decided that owing to the shortage of equipment the project was to be put off for six months. But the real obstacle was the opposition of the mandatory officials as well as of General Wavell, C-in-C Cairo. After six months had passed, Weizmann was informed that new technical difficulties had arisen which made it necessary to keep the project in cold storage for the time being. On 23 October 1941 there was a further communication from Lord Moyne: since the government had to give all possible help to Russia, shipping space could not be spared and it would not be possible to form a Jewish division.

**Vocabulary**

C-in-C: Commander-In-Chief

On 29 May 1940 [Weizmann] forwarded to Churchill a comprehensive programme outlining how the Jews could contribute to the British war effort. Point by point he elaborated the same proposal that [Former PM Neville] Chamberlain had cold-shouldered at the beginning of the war. Promising to mobilize ‘the economic, military, political and technical resources of the Jewish people in Palestine and elsewhere for the British cause’, he singled out supplies, economic warfare, and propaganda for special mention. Regarding military aid, he proposed:

(a) We can raise several divisions in Palestine and elsewhere for service with the British army. We have in Palestine about 30,000 men who have had some training either as auxiliaries to the British Force there or in European armies. (b) We can organize an Air Force unit (squadron) … (c) We can help with Military Intelligence.

For every Zionist, the right of the Jews to arm and defend themselves, to raise an independent Jewish fighting force in a war against their most vicious persecutor, was axiomatic. ‘If we have to go down,’ Weizmann clarified to Lord Moyne, ‘we are entitled to go down fighting, and the Mandatory Power is in duty bound to grant us this elementary human right.’

With the passing of time it became abundantly apparent that the British were moved mainly by political motives. Any obligations incurred to the Jews would unquestionably provoke the hostility of the Arab, perhaps Muslim, world, while the political implications of maintaining a Jewish force, commanded by its own officer corps, were too radical for the government to sanction. It was General Barker, commander of British forces in Palestine, who voiced this attitude most violently. He informed Ben Gurion that the Haganah ‘were preparing for rebellion against Great Britain’ and that ‘he felt it his duty to smash that organization.’

Instead, the government decided it would allow Jews to join the Buffs, the Royal East Kent Infantry Regiment already stationed in Palestine. As a further restriction, it insisted that Jews and Arabs be recruited in equal numbers. But this parity, however prudent a diplomatic policy, was never a reality. By August, 1942, when the Buffs were merged into a new colonial force, the three battalions of the Palestine Regiment, there were more than three times as many Jewish volunteers in the British army as Arabs.

[C]ollaboration between the British and the Jews reached its peak at the most threatening phase of the Middle Eastern fighting, as Rommel bore down on Alexandria in the summer of 1942. The British set about fortifying northern Palestine and the Judean mountain range. The Zionist defense machinery in turn was rapidly enlarged, as a broadened recruitment effort was launched equally for the British army and the Haganah reserves. At the same time, British staff officers began organizing the Palmach units into a special task force to meet the developing Nazi threat. …

In July 1942, Rommel’s forces were hurled back at al-Alamein, and four months later driven out of Libya altogether by a reorganized Eighth Army under the command of Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery. By then in any case the joint effort with the Jews was becoming a source of discomfiture to the mandatory government; Zionist spokesmen already were making pointed contrasts between the Jewish and Arab war efforts. Once the danger to Palestine ebbed in the autumn of 1942, therefore, the British closed the various Palmach training bases, allowed the “German platoon” and the “Arabic platoon” to dwindle, and even demanded lists containing names and addresses of Palmach members. The alliance finally ended in bad blood when the British army appropriated the weapons it had distributed earlier to the Palmach.
Yet as the plans to enter Berlin were being drawn, as the first eye-witness reports about the systematic extent of Nazi atrocities were beginning to be published, Churchill decided he had had enough of “the usual silly objections.” He sent a personal telegram to President Roosevelt arguing that “the Jews … of all other races have the right to strike at the Germans as a recognizable body.” Five days later the president replied: “I perceive no objection. …”

On the evening of September 19, 1944, when Rosh Hashanah, the celebration of the Jewish New Year, began, the British War Office published an official proclamation: “His Majesty’s government have decided that a Jewish Brigade should be formed to take part in active operations. The Infantry Brigade will be based on the Jewish Battalions of the Palestine Regiment. The necessary concentration for training is now taking place before dispatch to a theatre of war…”