

Guide

EZEL Movement in Mandatory Palestine *Archives 1936-1948*

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Ezra Movement

in Mandatory Palestine

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ABOUT THE IRGUN ZVAĪ LEUMI ("Ezel" Underground Organization)

An historical introduction by Dr. Yaagov shavit, Tel-Aviv University

In 1931, the Irgun ZvaĪ Leumi (literally translated: National Military Organization) or Ezel, as it is known by its Hebrew acronym, was founded in Erez-Israēl after its separation from the Hagana underground organization as a consequence of the Arab riots in 1929. The founders were composed of former Hagana members who opposed the self-restraint of the Hagana leadership as well as members of Betar, the youth movement of Ha-Zohar (the Union of Revisionist Zionists). In 1937, however, about half of Ezel's members returned to the Hagana when the Arab Revolt began and the Peel Commission put forth its plan for the partition of Palestine. The remaining members established Ezel as the underground military arm of Ha-Zohar and Betar under the leadership of Zeēv (Vladimir) Jabotinsky and formed a bond with them politically, ideologically and, to a certain extent, organizationally.

During 1937-39, the years of the Arab Revolt, Ezel carried out acts of retaliation, warning and vengeance against the Arab population. These acts culminated in the execution of Shlelomo Ben-Yosef who had taken part in the retaliatory attack on an Arab bus in May, 1938. The policy of the British Mandatory Government's White Book caused Ezel to intensify its campaigns but with the outbreak of World War II there was a change. Ezel started to cooperate with the British authorities. Its third commander, David Raziēl, was actually killed in May, 1941, on a mission to Iraq on behalf of Britain's Middle East Headquarters. Members of Ezel even volunteered for the British Army while the Organization, as such, stagnated and suffered from internal crisis.

While these events occurred in Erez-Israēl, Ezel in its breakaway from the National Movement in general and Betar in particular, developed into underground cells struggling against the authorities of the legal movement. In February, 1939, this struggle led to the Paris Agreement which was intended to bridge differences between Betar and the Ezel underground elements. However, towards the end of that year, those who were not only opposed to cooperating with the British authorities, but were also opposed to Ezel's ideology, separated from Ezel and subsequently established the Lohamei Herut Israēl ("Lehi") organization in 1940 under Avraham Stern (Yair).

The first news about the European Holocaust as well as the conviction that Britain would not return to a pro-Zionist attitude after the war, resulted in a revolutionary change in Ezel's policy. In December, 1943, Ezel established new headquarters under the command of Menaḥem Begin, formerly Betar's leader in Poland, 1938-39. On the 1st of February, 1944, Ezel proclaimed its official revolt against Britain with the declared aim to force complete withdrawal of the British presence from Erez-Israēl west of the Jordan and to establish a Jewish State there. During the years 1944-48, Ezel carried out more than 200 attacks and acts of destruction against military camps and administrative premises. Two bold key projects successfully executed were the explosion at Jerusalem's King David Hotel, then the Mandatory Government's administrative centre, in August, 1946, and the break into Acre's fortified prison in May, 1947.

At the height of its activities, Ezel's headquarters had commands in 6 districts and almost 3000 fighting men and auxiliary personnel at its disposal. Its military set-up was hierarchic. Ezel held out in spite of the fact that it was shunned by the public and its members were time and again arrested by the British authorities. From October, 1944, hundreds of its members were exiled to detention camps in Eritrea, Sudan and Kenya.

Already in the wake of Lord Moyne's assassination by Lehi (the Stern group) in Cairo in 1944, the Hagana had started to extradite Ezel members to the British authorities, and to even capture some themselves (the so-called hunting "Season"). When World War II came to an end, the British Government's policy under Bevin temporarily brought about a unified framework for Hagana, Ezel and Lehi, but this dissolved when the "King David" explosion occurred.

During all this time, Ezel engaged in intensive propaganda and explanatory work in various languages by way of clandestine publications and underground radio transmissions. Ezel even maintained diplomatic

relations, mainly in France. Various European organizations extended their help to Ezel, but it was the American League for a Free Palestine that offered the greatest aid.

On April 2, 1948, an agreement was signed calling for the voluntary disbandment of Ezel and its integration into the Israel army that was to be. The agreement notwithstanding Ezel took part in the fighting at various key centres, among which were Ramle and, most important, Jerusalem. It even initiated the capture of Arab-populated Jaffa and the Arab village of Deir-Yassin; the action at Deir-Yassin aroused bitter controversy. Shortly after, a shambles was made of the agreement when in June the weapon-loaded ship "Altalena" arrived at the shores of Tel Aviv and became the scene of a violent incident. It was not until the end of September, 1948 that Ezel finally dissolved and established its political party, Herut.

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Note: A complete bio-bibliography by Yaaqov Amarni of all publications on Ezel appeared in "Bibliographia shimushit". Hadar Publishers, Tel-Aviv, 1975.

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