Nazism, The Jews and American Zionism, 1933-1948

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At the 1939 World's Fair in New York City, dozens of nations exhibited artifacts illustrating their economic and cultural achievements. Among the many national pavilions, one represented a people without a country. The Palestine pavilion's opening highlighted the forty-second annual convention of the Zionist Organization of America. Many of the ZOA's leaders had supervised the construction of the exhibit, the cornerstone of which came from Kibbutz Hanita, a young Jewish settlement in Palestine whose founders had withstood a sustained Arab attack in 1938. For American Zionists meeting one month after the publication of the MacDonald White Paper, the stone from Hanita seemed to symbolize their intention to continue the building of a Palestine homeland in the face of official British opposition.

The organizers of the ZOA convention were determined to carry on business as usual. Rabbi Stephen Wise told the audience that Lord Halifax, the British ambassador to the United States, had informed him that there were times when moral claims, such as the Zionists' on Palestine, had to yield to administrative necessities like the White Paper. Wise disagreed with the British official and brought the ZOA delegates to their feet when he asserted that: "Jewish history affirms that every administrative necessity yields before the uncancelable moral claim of the Jewish people to live and rebuild Eretz Israel." Rabbi Solomon Goldman, president of the ZOA, also attacked the White Paper, admitting that it was a setback for Zionists but also proclaiming his refusal "to convert a temporary setback into a rout." Former ZOA president Morris Rothenberg predicted that the White Paper would shortly become just "another
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exhibit in the dusty archives of inept British statesmanship,” and Louis Lipsky bravely commented that “the work of Palestine goes on. No power on earth can completely stop it.”

In spite of these heroic words of resistance, the ZOA leadership’s hopeful good humor was just a facade to camouflage the despair and confusion caused by the new British pro-Arab policy. On May 10, 1939, Justice Louis Brandeis confided to Robert Szold that Zionist leaders in Palestine were “panic stricken” over the imminent publication of the White Paper. Most of the plans they suggested, he continued, were either “impossible” to fulfill or were “unwise.”

American Zionists shared the anxiety and pessimism of their Palestinian counterparts. Solomon Goldman, dismissing the strategic imperatives that dictated British policy in Palestine, believed that the new White Paper was the latest in a long series of atrocities committed against the Jews. Equating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, Goldman concluded that Nazi racist doctrines had affected Great Britain. Rose Jacobs, a former leader of Hadassah and an American representative on the Jewish Agency in Palestine, compared the British White Paper to the Munich Pact and the betrayal of the Czechs. Zionists, she worried, might have done a terrible disservice to the Jewish people because they had “led a whole generation of youth to believe that they could be secure in Palestine, and that security had now become a myth.”

While Jacobs worried about the future, the practical and businesslike leaders of Hadassah began to discuss the decrease in contributions to the Youth Aliyah program that would probably follow the implementation of the new British immigration restrictions. The Hadassah women could not have found much solace in the opinions of Solomon Goldman and Louis Brandeis, who “optimistically” noted that the MacDonald White Paper “at least” gave Zionists five years to organize against the planned total halting of Jewish immigration to Palestine.

The religiously orthodox Mizrachi organization, like Hadassah, also began the painful task of adapting to the post-White Paper world situation. Realizing that the task of resettling the Jewish homeland could not, at least for the time being, be continued, Mizrachi officials decided to concentrate their efforts on the religious education of American Jewish youth who would have to assume the burden of keeping the Zionist dream alive.

There seemed to be little direct action that the Zionists could take against the British. American Zionists wondered how they could adopt a strong anti-British policy and still work with London against their common enemy, Adolf Hitler. Rose Jacobs wearily commented, “This dilemma demonstrated most clearly how alone the Jews are as a people. They have no place to look to for help in the outside world.”

Several Zionist organizations tried to organize and coordinate protests against the British policy; two hundred leading Jewish nationalists agreed to travel to
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Washington to lobby among representatives and senators. Zionist leaders hoped to demonstrate that “although Zionist membership in this country might be small, Zionist sentiment was very large.” Jewish leaders did not expect these demonstrations to have an immediate effect on the British, but they hoped that the public actions would provide the Zionist rank and file with an “outlet” for their “indignation” and would also help “secure their loyalty and support for the long struggle ahead.”

While world Jewish leaders organized popular protests, they also struggled to bring the Palestine situation before the League of Nations. The League had incorporated the Balfour pledge into the Palestine Mandate it awarded to Great Britain, and it could censure London for its restrictive immigration policies. However, there was slight chance that the Chamberlain government would give much credence to the desires of the League, which had already proven its impotence in the face of German, Italian, and Japanese aggression.

In the face of catastrophe, Zionist leaders desperately sought reason for hope. Some Zionists found solace in an almost mystical belief in the indestructibility of the Jewish people who had endured so many persecutions and setbacks. Many also looked to the eventual election of a new government in England, which they hoped would be more supportive of the Zionist program than the Conservative party.

During parliamentary debates in May 1939, both the Liberal and Labour parties had vigorously condemned the White Paper. Herbert Morrison, a Labour party member of the House of Commons, attacked the Chamberlain government for its “cynical breach” of the Balfour Declaration, which implicitly pledged to support mass Jewish immigration to Palestine. Now, he continued, alluding to the plight of German Jewry, “the Jews, already victims of other races as a minority in certain countries, are . . . to be made a permanent minority in the country that had been promised to them.” Liberal party leader Sir Archibald Sinclair argued that the world would interpret the White Paper as a surrender to Arab violence and he warned that, if the new policy was instituted in Palestine, “we shall create confusion in that country, [and] we shall incur the scorn of Europe.” Winston Churchill, an arch-opponent of Chamberlain’s policy of appeasing Hitler, likened the White Paper to the Munich Pact. He reminded Parliament that the Balfour Declaration’s “pledge of home of refuge, . . . was not made to the Jews in Palestine but to the . . . vast, unhappy mass of scattered, persecuted, wandering Jews whose intense, unchanging, unconquerable desire has been for a National Home.” He predicted that outside events would not allow Great Britain to carry out its five-year plan of immigration restriction in Palestine, saying:

Europe is more that two-thirds mobilized tonight. . . . That cannot possibly continue for five years, not for four, nor for three years. It may be that it will
not continue beyond the present year. Long before those five years are past, either there will be a Britain which knows how to keep its word on the Balfour Declaration and is not afraid to do so, or, believe me, we shall find ourselves relieved of many overseas responsibilities other than those comprised within the Palestine Mandate.  

While American Zionists waited for Churchill or some other opponent of the White Paper to take possession of 10 Downing Street, Palestinian Jewry, more action-oriented than their American cousins, began to wage war against the British Empire. On May 18, 1939, the day after the publication of the White Paper, Jews throughout Palestine demonstrated against Britain's new policy. In Jerusalem the demonstration turned into a riot as Jewish protesters fought British policemen, wounding four and killing one; 135 members of the Yishuv were hurt in the fight. The Irgun (a small group of Jewish radicals loyal to Revisionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky), which refused to acknowledge the authority of Zionist leaders in Palestine, responded to the White Paper with a terrorist campaign aimed at British and Arab targets. The Irgun set off a bomb at the Palestine Broadcasting Service on May 17 and blew up the main post office on June 12. In August, Irgun assassins murdered Ralph Cairns, commander of the Jewish section of the British Criminal Investigation Department in Palestine. In retaliation for Arab attacks on Jewish civilians, Irgun terrorists killed over seventy Arabs in a series of explosions in Haifa. A tragedy was fortuitously averted on June 9, when British police arrested a young Irgun woman who was about to plant a bomb among a large group of Arab women and children waiting to visit relatives incarcerated in Jerusalem's central prison.  

The Irgun's bloody terrorist campaign against civilians appalled Zionist leaders in Palestine, but they were also determined to respond to the White Paper forcefully. On June 5, 1939, the Jewish Agency in Palestine authorized the secret creation of Haganah Special Squads, which would operate under the direct command of David Ben-Gurion. The Special Squads attacked British targets in Palestine, damaging oil pipelines and sinking a British police boat in August. Although their successes might have been spectacular, the Haganah's military offensive constituted only a minor element of the Yishuv's anti-White Paper campaign. The Zionists devoted most of their resources to Aliyah Bet—the illegal smuggling of Jewish refugees into Palestine. Actually, the first illegal immigration operation occurred in June 1934, when a Polish Zionist youth organization successfully smuggled 350 refugees into Palestine on board the Greek ship Velos. The failure of a second Aliyah Bet attempt in late 1934 convinced Zionist leaders to suspend all further actions in order to avoid a confrontation with British authorities. In 1937, after Britain began to decrease the number of Jews it allowed into Palestine, the Irgun andRevisionist
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Zionist organizations in Europe adopted the illegal immigration tactic, bringing between five and six thousand Jews to Palestine before the outbreak of war in September 1939. Late in 1938, the Haganah and the Jewish Agency established the Mossad I'Aliyah Bet (Institute for Illegal Immigration) to oversee the illegal transportation of refugees into Palestine. After the publication of the 1939 White Paper, the Mossad intensified its efforts, smuggling over six thousand Jews into Palestine in less than two years. A favorite Mossad tactic was to anchor a transport ship off of Palestine's coast. During the night, small boats would shuttle refugees from the ship to one of the many kibbutzim that dotted the Mediterranean shore. Not all these attempts were successful. On June 1, 1939, British naval vessels intercepted a Greek cattle boat carrying 906 Jews to Palestine. Mandatory authorities transported the refugees, including 360 women and children, to Haifa and announced that they would be allowed to remain in Palestine, but that their number would be deducted from the White Paper quota.23

American Zionists, far removed from the action in Palestine, could do little to contribute to the Aliyah Bet campaign. Most generally supported the Mossad’s efforts and compared Aliyah Bet to the Boston Tea Party and other “illegal” American colonial attempts to resist tyrannical British taxation.24 A few Zionist leaders in the United States, however, worried about the potentially serious consequences of illegal immigration. Abba Hillel Silver, chairman of the United Palestine Appeal, a major Zionist fund-raising organization, voiced his concerns at the twenty-first World Zionist Congress, which met in Geneva, Switzerland, in late August 1939. In a rare mood of caution, Silver, who during the next decade would acquire a reputation for aggressive risk taking, asked Zionist authorities to refrain from doing anything that might bring the Yishuv into conflict with British forces. In a public address repeatedly interrupted by hecklers and during private sessions, Silver explained that the Jews could not hope to win a war against Britain and instead should avoid confrontation until British public opinion forced a change in the Mandatory Power’s policy. Asked about the plight of Jewish refugees searching for a haven, Silver replied that thousands of Jews could be settled in Palestine even under the White Paper’s restrictions.

Berl Katznelson, a Palestinian socialist Zionist leader and editor of the Hebrew daily Davar, refuted Silver’s position, warning that criticism of Aliyah Bet betrayed the refugees and young Yishuv members who were spearheading the battle against Britain. Katznelson’s argument proved to be irresistible for most of the Zionists at Geneva, including many in the large delegation from the United States. Even those Americans who shared Silver’s doubts could not bring themselves to censure or disown the courageous Aliyah Bet operatives.25

While Aliyah Bet caused some controversy within Zionist ranks, neither it nor the Irgun’s terror campaign were having the desired effect of forcing Great Britain to alter its Palestine policy. London, preparing for a possible war with Germany,
was determined to pacify the Middle East in order to insure that, in the event of war, British resources could be concentrated on the Western Front, not dwindled away in suppressing Arab revolts or threats to the Suez Canal. In a war, the British coldly calculated, the Jews of Palestine would have little choice but to support those forces battling Hitler. In the meantime, British resources in Palestine were sufficient to limit the impact of the “Jewish revolt” against the White Paper. On August 31, British police in Palestine raided a house in Tel Aviv and arrested most of the Irgun command. Other Jewish terrorists were shot down by the Palestinian police. Even Aliyah Bet proved to be no more than a nuisance for the British authorities.26

WORLD WAR II: NEW HOPE

Because American Zionists did not fully comprehend British imperial strategy, the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, and the English and French declarations of war that followed boosted their morale. Many tended to compare the 1939 White Paper with the Munich Pact and anticipated that the outbreak of war would discredit all forms of appeasement, whether it be of Nazis or Arabs. Stephen Wise thought that the White Paper would be one of the first casualties of a new European war.27 Mrs. Moses Epstein of Hadassah analyzed the Zionist position just four days after German tanks rolled across the Polish frontier and found it to be stronger than it had been before the outbreak of hostilities. The democracies, she naively reported, were finally accepting the fact “that Nazi and Fascist persecution of a Jewish minority inevitably leads to persecution of other minorities, and in the last analysis is a threat to the democratic structure itself.” Renewed British support of Zionism would surely follow, she predicted.28

American Zionist optimism at the start of World War II was based not only on the conviction that all forms of appeasement would soon end. Of even greater importance was the fact that Zionists, like most Americans, believed that the Second World War would follow the course of the first and would end with an international peace conference where the victorious powers would redraw political boundaries and create new states. At Versailles, Jewish delegations had lobbied for the granting of political and cultural rights to Jews and other European minorities, and had won international support for the Balfour Declaration. ZOA President Solomon Goldman expected the Jewish nationalists at a post-World War II peace conference would be able to improve on the concessions they had won from the Allies following World War I.29

American Zionists who had been despondent about the British White Paper now had reason to believe that better times were near. Zionist contributions to
the British war effort would win renewed British support of Jewish nationalism and lead to the abandonment of the White Paper, a development that would safeguard the Zionist experiment in Palestine and would benefit the Jewish refugees who were struggling to escape Hitler's grasp.

Chaim Weizmann in London and Jewish leaders in Palestine shared the views of their American comrades and quickly took steps to assure that a Zionist delegation would be present at the peace conference that would end the Second World War. Immediately after the German invasion of Poland, David Ben-Gurion announced that, while the Yishuv would never accept the White Paper's immigration restrictions, Jewish Palestine would use all of its resources to help Great Britain defeat Hitler. Weizmann offered the Chamberlain government the total assistance of the world Zionist movement and as a personal contribution to the war effort he cooperated with British scientific efforts to produce artificial rubber and high-octane fuel.30

Even the Irgun decided to support the British war effort. On September 9, 1939, the organization's high command announced a suspension of all anti-British actions and offered their services to the imperial forces.31 Avraham Stern, a leading member of the Irgun, refused to accept the dictates of his superiors and with a small number of followers bolted from the organization in order to carry on the struggle against the British. In no mood to tolerate resistance, Mandatory security forces hunted Stern down, finally apprehending him in a Tel Aviv apartment where he was summarily executed.32

Stern's anti-British program found practically no support within Zionist ranks. Ben-Gurion, Weizmann, and their comrades looked forward to London accepting their offers of cooperation and expected the British to mobilize the Yishuv youth into Jewish fighting units, perhaps even a Jewish army. The Jewish soldiers would enter battle with two goals in mind. Their primary mission would be the defeat of the hated Hitler. Their sacrifices in the field would also allow Zionist statesmen to demand recognition as a co-belligerent with Great Britain and would insure that Jewish Palestine's interests would be considered in the reconstruction of the postwar world.

To the dismay of all Zionists, the Chamberlain government was reluctant to accept their help. British officials were convinced that the advantages of Yishuv support would be outweighed by the wave of Arab unrest that an alliance with the Zionists would surely spark. Accordingly, London continued to enforce its White Paper policy and allowed only a small number of Jews to serve in military support units in Palestine. The German conquest of France in the spring of 1940 forced the British to reconsider their position. The new government of Winston Churchill was more prepared than its predecessor to accept Zionist assistance and allowed a larger number of Palestinian Jews to enter military service. In the spring of 1941, with Rommel's Afrika Korps threatening the entire Middle East, the British army
cooperated with the Haganah in the creation of the Palmach, a small unit of Jewish youth that would operate as a guerrilla force in the event of a German conquest of Palestine. However, in spite of England's grave military condition, the British General Staff and, in particular, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden remained convinced that the empire's security depended on the continued appeasement of Arab leaders and nationalist movements. They knew that the Arabs, unlike the members of the Yishuv, were not eager to enlist in the British army, but they also realized that Britain could not afford to divert any military resource to the suppression of a new Arab revolt in Palestine. Churchill, heeding the advice of his cabinet, refused to authorize the total mobilization of the Yishuv and rejected repeated Zionist requests for the revocation of the White Paper.33

Britain's behavior forced Ben-Gurion and Weizmann to conclude that a full-scale political campaign would be required to force London to accept the Zionist movement as an ally. The actual task of negotiating with British officials would remain in their hands, but American Zionists would also have an important role to perform. If enough American public support for a Jewish army could be amassed, Britain, desperate for American assistance in the war against Hitler, might be forced to change its policies. Weizmann traveled to the United States in early 1940 in order to rally American Zionist support,34 and in June 1940 Ben-Gurion sent an urgent message to the ZOA annual convention informing the already concerned organization: "Never has our people, never has our country faced as great danger as today." Nearly five million Jews were now in Hitler's control and Nazi armies were themselves threatening Palestine, whose conquest would wipe out all the great Zionist achievements of the preceding half century. He warned that "history" would never forgive American Jewry, the largest free Jewish population in the world, if they did not do everything possible to give the Yishuv the chance to defend itself.35

American Zionists enthusiastically responded to Ben-Gurion's call for action. The Mizrachi, representing Orthodox religious Zionists in the United States, proclaimed: "We must in this grave and critical hour concentrate all efforts for the defense of Eretz Israel."36 Louis Lipsky called on American Zionists to sacrifice and do everything possible to support Palestinian Jewry in their "great defensive effort."37 Almost eight hundred ZOA delegates, recognizing that American Jewry represented "the last bulwark of moral and material support for the development of the Jewish Homeland in Palestine,"38 urged Winston Churchill to allow Palestinian Jewry to form combat units to fight in defense of the Middle East.39

American Zionists attempted to demonstrate that the Jewish and British war efforts were inextricably linked. Zionists repeatedly pointed out that the Jews were the first victims of "Nazi aggression." According to ZOA president Solomon Goldman, while German Jewry struggled through years of persecution, the democratic powers attempted to avert war by ignoring Nazi atrocities and militarism. Zionists, he claimed, being among the first to understand that nazism was a threat to all
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democracies, welcomed the British to the battle against fascism. Jewish nationalists
could, more easily than anyone else, understand the terror and despair of those
peoples struggling to free their countries from German domination because their
nation, Palestine, had been conquered by Roman armies two thousand years be­
fore. Members of the Yishuv were already contributing to the British battle to halt
Nazi aggression and free Europe; all they asked was to be allowed to enlist in
larger numbers. After Hitler was defeated, Goldman concluded, Zionists would
expect their allies to complete the crusade for liberation by allowing the Jews to
return to Palestine.  0

The American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs (AECZA) attempted
to coordinate Zionist efforts in the United States to build public support for the
creation of a Jewish army and the revocation of the White Paper. Established in
late 1939, the AECZA had twenty-four members representing all the major
American Zionist organizations. Although Stephen Wise served as chairman of
the AECZA, Emanuel Neumann directed the day-to-day work of the organization. 41
Personal and organizational rivalries crippled the AECZA and frustrated Neumann
who resigned his position and complained that AECZA members “were acting
not as a unified body, but as ambassadors from sovereign organizations. Some
of them insisted that they had to consult their respective organizations—their ‘gov­
ernments’—before any action could be taken.” The ZOA, Hadassah, Poale Zion,
and Mizrachi refused to supply the AECZA with the $250,000 Neumann felt was
necessary to mount an effective political campaign. 42 Louis Brandeis and his
supporters, unwilling to let old conflicts die, were suspicious about the activities
and loyalty of their old opponent Louis Lipsky, an AECZA member. Robert Szold and
Morris Rothenberg of the ZOA opposed Neumann’s organizational activities because
they worried that a politically powerful and independent AECZA would absorb
“Zionist work in this country so as to leave the ZOA with nothing except member­
ship work to do.” 43

In fact, American Zionism desperately needed just the type of organization
Rothenberg and Szold dreaded. In the years following Hitler’s seizure of power,
Zionist groups in the United States experienced tremendous growth. By the sum­
mer of 1941, the ZOA and Hadassah claimed a joint membership of two hundred
thousand, while the much smaller Mizrachi and Poale Zion had both more than
doubled their membership since 1933. 44 However, without some organizational
structure that would transcend petty organizational and personal rivalries, Zionists
could not hope to develop the resources and skills necessary to build political
support outside of the American Jewish community. The impotency of the AECZA
was primarily responsible for the failure of Zionists to mount any effective drive
in support of a Jewish army or against the White Paper before the Japanese attack
on Pearl Harbor.

Political immaturity was not the only difficulty American Zionists confronted
during this period. Their strong support of Britain’s war effort pitted them against powerful isolationist forces in the United States, including Robert R. McCormick, publisher of the Chicago Tribune, the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh, and socialist leader Norman Thomas. Lindbergh attacked American Jews for their strong support of Great Britain and accused them of conspiring to push the United States into war. Even the Reverend John Haynes Holmes, a supporter of Jewish nationalism, spiritual leader of New York’s Community Church, and a close friend of Stephen Wise, who had defended Zionist interests during the Arab Revolt of 1936, preached the doctrine of isolationism.

Holmes, a life-long pacifist and admirer of India’s Mahatma Gandhi, often spoke out against any American support for Britain’s war against Hitler. In December 1940, the Christian Century, a liberal Protestant periodical, asked Holmes if he would support the United States if it was “drawn into the war.” His response was an unequivocal no. Hitler, the Protestant clergyman wrote, was not the source of the world’s troubles, but was only one symptom of mankind’s moral decay. The war between Britain and Germany was a “fundamentally immoral clash of competing imperialisms” and, Holmes concluded, “if America goes into the war, it will not be for idealistic reasons but to serve her own imperialistic interests so closely identified with those of Britain.”

Holmes’s refusal to support the British war effort troubled Stephen Wise, who admired his friend’s allegiance to Gandhi and pacifism. More than twenty years before, the rabbi and the minister had both applauded Woodrow Wilson’s neutrality policies and worked to insure the President’s reelection in 1916. When the United States declared war against Germany in April 1917, the two parted ways as Holmes condemned Wilson’s “betrayal” of neutrality, while Wise, believing that German militarism made war unavoidable, offered his services to the administration, even working one summer as a unskilled worker in a military shipyard. After the armistice, Wise slowly drifted back into pacifism and reconciled his differences with Holmes. He even encouraged his congregation to see If This Be Treason, an antiwar play coauthored by Holmes and Reginald Laurence, which received little critical acclaim.

The fascist threat again led Wise to revise his views on war. Following the German invasion of Poland, Wise, believing that a German victory “would mean the blackest night for civilization,” led the effort to rally American Jews and Zionists to Great Britain’s defense saying:

The question has ceased to be one of war versus peace, but is rather become a question whether unbridled might and immoral [sic] power shall again rule over the destinies of men and nation. Insofar as England and France have taken up the gage, insofar as the two great democracies of Western Europe dared to say to Hitler after his threat to Poland, “Thus far shalt thou go and no further,” it is for peoples who are, and for men who would remain free,
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their most sacred obligation to give moral, political and material aid and furtherance to Britain and France.51

Wise urged all ZOA members to cooperate with William Allen White's efforts to awaken the American public to the Nazi threat.52 In 1941, as president of the American Jewish Congress, he directed financial campaigns within the American Jewish community that netted over $100,000 for Britain's defense.53 Following the German conquest of France in June 1940, Wise, saying that England was "the Maginot Line of the United States," urged Americans to extend to Britain all support short of war.54

Although Wise never called on the United States to actually declare war against Germany, he supported all the president's efforts, which slowly made Washington an ally of London, including Lend Lease and the use of American ships against German U-boats. In May 1940, Wise, referring to Roosevelt's opposition to isolationism, called the president the "one clear voice in the world today" and "the earth's foremost statesman."55 It was a view most American Jews and Zionists shared. At its annual convention in June 1940, the ZOA unanimously and without debate passed a resolution urging all Americans to support Roosevelt's efforts to supply London with the resources it needed to defeat the totalitarian regimes that threatened to "plunge" America into "catastrophe."56 As political scientist Lawrence H. Fuchs noted, "there was no stronger interventionist group in the United States than the Jews." Understanding that every Nazi conquest subjected thousands of their co-religionists to terrible persecution, American Jews in overwhelming numbers turned to the anti-isolationist Roosevelt for salvation and security. According to surveys by the American Institute of Public Opinion and by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Denver, more than 90 percent of Jewish voters cast their ballots for Roosevelt in 1940.57

Significantly, most American Jews supported Roosevelt in spite of his failure to take a strong stand on Zionism. The President respectfully sent welcoming messages to Zionist conventions, but his administration did little to further the Zionist quest. For example, Roosevelt and the State Department did not endorse the 1939 British White Paper, but neither did they seriously attempt to convince London to revoke it. Generally, Roosevelt seemed to believe that the future of Palestine was a British concern.58

MOVING TOWARD STATEHOOD

Even as Wise and Roosevelt cooperated in the campaign to build public support for American intervention in a second world war, Zionists began to comprehend the profound contradictions that plagued their wartime program. The war against
Newton, Chaim Weizmann noted, put Jewish nationalists in the paradoxical position of supporting their “British friends,” while their would-be ally’s policies threatened to destroy the Zionist project in Palestine. The schizophrenic nature of this situation was apparent at the November 1940 convention of the National Labor Committee for Palestine, which drew together delegations representing several American Zionist groups. The convention delegates supported Stephen Wise’s demand that the United States do everything “short of war” to strengthen Britain in its defense of civilization. Shortly afterwards, the same audience enthusiastically responded as Wise condemned Britain’s decision to deport 1,800 “illegal immigrants” from Palestine. Infuriated by this dilemma, an angry Abba Hillel Silver protested:

Our desire to help Great Britain in this war is maneuvering us into a policy distinctly harmful to Zionism. We are asked not only to withhold criticism of outrageous acts . . ., but actually . . . [to] become apologists for the Palestine Government. In the meantime England intends to pursue her policy of appeasing the Arabs even more aggressively than she did before the war . . . This is an intolerable situation into which we are being moved. Every people speaks up for its own rights in this desperate time, . . . The Jews alone, the most hard-pressed of all, must speak up only in behalf of Great Britain.

Britain’s cruel and insensitive wartime policies exacerbated the dismay and intensified the fury of Silver and his fellow Zionists. London not only continued to refuse to establish a Jewish army, but also strictly enforced the 1939 White Paper in spite of the desperate plight of European Jewry. As German armies raced across Western Europe in the spring of 1940, the “free world” knew that Jews in Nazi-occupied lands were singled out for special abuse. This was particularly true for the three million Jews of Poland who, in 1940, were forcibly moved into small, overcrowded ghettos. Cut off from their Christian neighbors, Polish Jewry struggled to survive the famine and disease that characterized ghetto life. Small groups of European Jews, sometimes with the aid of Mossad or Revisionist agents, were able to board ships in order to seek refuge in Palestine. These ships were usually small and barely seaworthy; not all of them made it safely to Palestine’s shores.

In the fall of 1940, Bulgaria, a German ally, exiled several hundred Jews from Dobrudja, a territory it acquired from Romania in September 1940. From this group, 380 chartered the Salvador, a sixty-ton Bulgarian sailing vessel, on which they hoped to reach Palestine. After the ship encountered stormy seas, the Turkish government allowed the vessel to anchor temporarily in the Strait of Bosporus. When the weather improved on December 13, the Turks, unwilling to have their country become a haven for Jewish refugees, ordered the Salvador to sail. Sixty miles from Istanbul, heavy winds knocked out the ship’s small auxiliary motor. The captain and crew struggled to maintain control of the boat, but, as one refugee remembered: “Suddenly a violent shock aroused us. We had been hurled onto
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a reef. The ensuing scenes were terrible. Prayers and shrieks mingled with the howling of the gale, and in the pitch darkness the white-crested waves broke over us and water poured through thousands of fissures as the ancient craft began to break up.” That night, 231 refugees drowned.63

Some refugee boats were lucky enough to reach Palestinian waters, but the Royal Navy usually apprehended the vessels before their Jewish passengers could disembark. At first, British authorities allowed the “illegal immigrants” (who often spent months in internment camps) to remain in Palestine after subtracting their number from the White Paper immigration quotas. The British cabinet in late 1940, intent on discouraging European Jews from seeking refuge in Palestine, decided to deport illegal immigrants to British detention camps on the island of Mauritius. Government leaders explained, with very little evidence, that the Nazis were using the refugee exodus to smuggle spies and saboteurs into Palestine.

In November, nearly two thousand illegal immigrants boarded the British ship Patria for transport to Mauritius. After London refused to consider repeated Zionist appeals for clemency, Munia Mardor, a Haganah agent, smuggled explosives onto the Patria. His intent was to disable the ship in order to prevent its sailing. Tragically, Mardor’s demolition skills were weak, and the bomb that exploded on November 15 was much more powerful than expected, killing more than two hundred of the refugees. The British announced that the Patria survivors would be allowed to remain in Palestine, but refused to extend the same hospitality to the 1,581 immigrants who had reached Palestine on board the Atlantic the day before the Patria catastrophe. On December 9, two British ships began the voyage to Mauritius carrying the despondent refugees.64

A year after the Patria incident, the Struma, a decrepit old steamer, slowly made its way into Istanbul Harbor. The almost eight hundred Jews on the ship had wanted to reach Palestine, but the Struma was dangerously unseaworthy, and the refugees decided to request sanctuary from the Turkish government. Turkey refused to grant the Jews’ request, and the ship remained in Istanbul for months while Jewish leaders attempted to convince British officials to give the refugees special permission to enter Palestine. The English, unwilling to stray from the 1939 White Paper policy, refused to give the Struma passengers any type of visa, and the Turkish government finally gave orders for the removal of the ship. On February 24, 1942, tugboats pulled the Struma beyond Turkey’s territorial waters. Shortly afterward the ship sank: 767 men, women and children drowned.65

Angered and disillusioned by Britain’s seemingly unshakeable hostility to the Zionist cause, Yishuv leaders began to reconsider their tactics and philosophy. The Zionists’ wartime strategy, developed after the German invasion of Poland, assumed that the White Paper was an aberration, a temporary reversal of London’s traditional support of Jewish settlement of Palestine. Jewish nationalists believed that Zionist material and political assistance to Great Britain would convince Lon-
don to conclude that the empire's interests would be best served by an alliance with the Yishuv, not by appeasement of the Arabs. With the anticipated reversal of Britain's anti-Zionist policies, the situation in Palestine would revert back to that of the pre-Arab-revolt "golden age" of 1933-36. Those refugees who could escape Nazi-occupied Europe would find a home in Palestine, and in the postwar period mass Jewish immigration to the Holy Land would resume. Within a short period of time a Jewish majority would emerge in Palestine and Zionists could then realize their ultimate goal—the creation of a Jewish state.

By late 1940, David Ben-Gurion and some of his Palestinian colleagues had concluded that time was no longer on their side. The White Paper was over one year old, and the British gave no hint of its imminent demise. Continued immigration restriction would insure that the Jews would remain a permanent minority in Palestine; the "Jewish National Home," it seemed, was destined to become an Arab state.

Desperate times demanded radical action. Armed struggle against the British was, as least for the moment, completely out of the question. The Yishuv simply was materially unprepared for revolution, nor could Jews, in good conscience, do anything that might contribute to Hitler's triumph. Instead, Ben-Gurion, in consultation with several of his closest advisers, decided that the Zionist movement must alter its timetable. Sovereignty could no longer remain the distant long-term goal of the movement. Recent experience with the British proved that large numbers of Jews would enter Palestine only when the Zionists themselves were free to establish and administer the territory's immigration policies. Therefore, it was imperative for Zionists to mount, as quickly as possible, a powerful pro-statehood political campaign. Ben-Gurion understood that the success of this venture would depend, in no small measure, on the ability of American Zionists to become a potent political force.66

During two long stays in the United States, Ben-Gurion explained his views to American Zionist leaders. On December 5, 1940, shortly after the Patria disaster, Ben-Gurion met with eight prominent American Zionists, including Abba Hillel Silver, Stephen Wise, Israel Goldstein, and Louis Lipsky of the ZOA, and Tamar de Sola Pool of Hadassah. Ben-Gurion told his compatriots that the European war would leave four to five million Jews destitute and demoralized. Palestine could easily absorb these pitiful victims of anti-Semitism, but the British White Paper threatened to prevent the Zionist movement from accomplishing its mission of mercy. Statehood, Ben-Gurion argued, was the only "means" through which future Jewish emigration to Palestine could be ensured. Remembering the bitter conflict over the Peel Commission's partition proposal, he quickly pointed out that the question of the future state's boundaries and its relationship to Britain could be left to future discussion. The reconstituted Jewish nation might opt for membership in the British Commonwealth or could even join in a postwar federation of Middle Eastern states.67
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Ben-Gurion was not naive. He knew that London, intent on keeping Jews out of Palestine, would not simply comply with the Zionist request for statehood. However, Ben-Gurion believed that World War II would substantially reduce Great Britain's influence in the Middle East. The long series of British military disasters since the German invasion of Poland proved that the empire, on its own, could not defeat the Axis. American material support was sustaining Churchill's armies; it would have to increase if Europe was to be liberated. Ben-Gurion, with an eye on a future peace conference, calculated that Washington, not London, would control the destiny of Palestine. Therefore, it was imperative for all American Zionist groups to set aside their differences and join together in a concerted drive to build public and political support for Jewish statehood. As Ben-Gurion told the AECZA in November 1941: "There was no doubt that England will be influenced by what America says, and it was most important to develop political Zionism in America. Public opinion must be convinced that Palestine is the only solution to the Jewish problem. If the Jews here were won over to faith in our cause, then . . . we could win over the government." 68

At the December 5 meeting, Abba Hillel Silver, who was thoroughly disgusted with British anti-Zionism, agreed with Ben-Gurion's analysis. Silver had opposed Palestine's partition during the Peel Report controversy, but now that the issue of boundaries was no longer being debated, he wholeheartedly adopted the goal of Jewish statehood. Nahum Goldmann also supported Ben-Gurion. A German-born Zionist who served as a representative of the Jewish Agency in Washington, Goldmann predicted that the tactic of using a postwar refugee problem to justify the establishment of a Jewish state would be very effective. American Jews were extremely concerned about the fate of their European co-religionists and doubted, given the American public's strong opposition to mass immigration, whether the refugees would be able to find a home in the United States after the war. Therefore, if Zionists could suggest a large, dramatic solution to the predicted refugee problem, wide public support would follow. 69

Stephen Wise also supported the goal of statehood at the December meeting, but the elderly rabbi found his colleagues' rhetoric to be excessively militant. He warned that the aggressive political campaign Ben-Gurion was suggesting would add to London's burdens just at a time when British armies were barely holding off the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe. He reminded his comrades that they too had a stake in Britain's war; the defeat of Hitler was the prime objective of all Jews. 70

Silver disagreed with Wise's position, arguing that the New York rabbi "was talking himself into a position disastrous to Zionism." Ben-Gurion agreed with Silver and added that Wise's policy would be an injustice to the British cause. He explained that London's failings had to be publicized and corrected so that the moral basis of England's fight could be preserved. 71

Ben-Gurion's persistent arguing of his case and Britain's uncompromising
enforcement of the White Paper steadily convinced most American Zionist leaders to accept the goal of statehood. On December 12, 1940, the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs voted, with Ben-Gurion's encouragement, to adopt a stronger stand against the White Paper. At the end of January 1941, Abba Hillel Silver delivered a stirring address to the annual convention of the United Palestine Appeal, the largest American Zionist fund-raising organization. Responding to Silver's call for American Jewry to go on a “war-footing,” the two thousand delegates of the convention resolved that the refugee problem that would arise at the end of the war could only be solved by the creation of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine.

In September 1941, Stephen Wise, who had voiced reservations at his meeting with Ben-Gurion nine months earlier, asked the annual ZOA convention to approve the policy of making Palestine’s postwar autonomy the goal of their movement. The statement of principle unanimously ratified by the convention repeated many of the arguments used by David Ben-Gurion at the December 1940 Winthrop Hotel meeting. It maintained that the millions of uprooted Jews who would survive the war could only find peace and salvation if “afforded the opportunity to re-establish themselves in a land of their own.” The rapid resettlement of refugees depended on “the reconstitution of Palestine in its historic boundaries of the Jewish Commonwealth.”

At the convention, Henry Montor, an officer of the United Palestine Appeal, called on his fellow Jewish nationalists to “go forward in comradeship and dedication, to the achievement of the unequivocal, the unexpressed and the inexpres­sible post-war aim of the Zionist movement, the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.” Solomon Goldman told the ZOA audience that the Jews suffering Nazi persecution wanted to live a creative and idealistic life in freedom. He pleaded with Winston Churchill to give a sign so that all would know that “Eretz Israel is the assured, the guaranteed Homeland, the sovereign Homeland, dependent Homeland, self-governing Homeland of the Jewish people.”

Ben-Gurion eventually even won the cooperation of his arch rival Chaim Weiz­mann. Since the outbreak of the war, the two men had been moving in opposite directions. The Palestinian believed that Weizmann’s love of Great Britain kept him from realizing that London had become one of Zionism’s major adversaries. Ben-Gurion was determined to unseat Weizmann from his position as president of the World Zionist Organization so that the movement could adopt a more aggressive stance against the British. Weizmann, for his part, considered Ben-Gurion to be a dangerous extremist who would deprive Palestine of the great benefits Britain could bestow. Like the Palestinian leader, Weizmann looked forward to the creation of a Jewish state, but was more willing to compromise this long-term goal for immediate political gains. In May 1941, while Ben-Gurion was rallying American Zionists to the statehood goal, Weizmann organized a meeting of thirty-three
prominent American Jewish leaders, including representatives of the American Jewish Committee (AJC). Wanting to insure the Committee’s support of mass Jewish immigration to Palestine after the war and knowing that the AJC opposed the establishment of a Jewish nation because it would raise questions about the loyalty of Diaspora Jewry, Weizmann deviated from the statehood formula. He explained that the Zionists would be satisfied with the creation of a semi-autonomous Palestine, preferably under Britain’s protection, in which Jews would have control over immigration and colonization policies.77

Weizmann, by late 1941, seems to have found the momentum toward statehood irresistible. In an article for the prestigious American journal Foreign Affairs, he spelled out his plans for Palestine’s future. Like Ben-Gurion, he anticipated a major postwar Jewish refugee problem, which would be exacerbated by a major economic crisis as nations made the transition to peacetime economies. Given this situation, “it would probably be unduly optimistic to assume that countries like the United States, Canada, and some of the South American republics, will radically change their immigration policy after the war.” The Yishuv, on the other hand, had the desire and the capacity to absorb millions of homeless Jews.78

While Weizmann extolled the virtues of Palestinian settlement, he did not follow Ben-Gurion’s example and justify the establishment of a Jewish nation on the grounds that the White Paper experience proved that mass Jewish immigration could take place only under a sovereign Jewish government. Instead, he argued that Jewish statehood was not only a political necessity, but also a moral imperative. The Jews, the “most abject of all the abject victims” of Nazi terror, deserved and demanded a radical solution to the problem of anti-Semitism. That, Zionist doctrine taught, could only be statehood, which would allow Jews, who were everywhere a minority, to prosper and mature as a “normal nation.” Weizmann concluded:

A Jewish state in Palestine would be more than merely the necessary means of securing further Jewish immigration and development. It is a moral need and postulate, and it would be a decisive step toward normality and true emancipation. . . . The latest manifestation of Nazi ingenuity is the decree by which every Jew under Nazi rule must bear on his chest a so-called “badge of shame”–the Shield of David. We wear it with pride. The Shield of David is too ancient and too sacred a symbol to be susceptible of degradation under the pagan Swastika. Hallowed by uncounted ages of suffering and martyrdom, patiently and unrevengefully borne, it will yet shine untarnished over Zion’s gate, long after the horrors of our present night are forgotten in the light of the new day that is to come.79
As the statehood idea gained in acceptance, Emanuel Neumann explained to American Zionists that the political task Ben-Gurion asked them to assume would not be easily accomplished. Neumann knew that Franklin Roosevelt was tremendously popular with American Jews and Zionists who approved of the president's New Deal and interventionist policies. Stephen Wise revered Roosevelt and would tolerate no criticism of him even though the White House had actually done little to support the Zionist cause beyond sending annual greetings to ZOA conventions and issuing a mild rebuke of the White Paper. Recognizing that Roosevelt was "off-limits," Neumann attempted to separate the president from his government. Neumann told a large group of leading Zionists that Roosevelt was genuinely sympathetic to the plight of European Jewry and to the cause of Jewish nationalism. However, he maintained, American diplomats were "not yet in their hearts, prepared to say that the solution [to the Jewish problem] must . . . be the reconstitution of Palestine as the Jewish Commonwealth." The State Department was primarily concerned with providing Great Britain with aid and was inclined to accept London's explanation that military necessity required the denial of Jewish rights to Palestine. Whether Roosevelt would prevail over Zionism's opponents depended on American Jewry, because Neumann explained: "it is obvious that the lengths to which he can go now or later will depend upon the strength of public backing—not only backing but urging—which he will have on the part of the public." The successful establishment of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine depended on the support of the American government, and Neumann urged Zionists to organize mass support for their cause.80

Toward this end, the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs in late 1941 began preparations for a major meeting of American and world Zionist leaders. At the conference, Ben-Gurion hoped, the entire Zionist movement in the United States could formally unite around the goal of immediate statehood. If Zionist groups could pool their resources they would be able to set out to win the support of the entire American Jewish community. With this base secured, Zionists expected that their movement would become a potent political force.81

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor sped up the statehood drive within the Zionist movement. America's entrance into World War II ended any doubts about whether the United States would occupy an important seat at a future peace conference. The eminent Jewish historian Salo Baron observed in June 1942 that "it is enough for us to recollect the transformations in the American Jewish community which took place as a result of the First World War to get an inkling of what changes might be expected from the Second War which is so much greater in the issues at stake, so much more profound in the depth of its upheaval, and so much more encompassing both area and apparent duration."82
Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism

ning out. World War II offered Zionists their last best chance to change the destiny of the Jewish people. If an international peace conference failed to endorse the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, Diaspora Jewry would be doomed to further persecution when a new anti-Semitic demagogue arose to resume Hitler’s work.

With this sobering thought in mind, 586 American Zionists gathered at New York’s Biltmore Hotel for the Extraordinary Zionist Conference, which would plan the redemption of the Jewish people. They were joined by 67 guests from abroad including Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion. The organizations included all of the major and minor American Zionist groups with the exception of the small right-wing Revisionist organization, which still refused to accept the authority of the world Zionist movement and was considered a pariah by most American Jewish nationalists.

The delegates who gathered at the Biltmore Hotel in May 1942 knew that they were meeting at a time of grave danger, yet one that also held the possibility of great promise. It was clear that the goal of Jewish statehood would be the major topic at the Biltmore Conference. Naturally, delegates also devoted much discussion to the Jewish refugee problem, which had rejuvenated and strengthened the Zionist movement during the decade preceding Biltmore and was expected to reach crisis proportions after the war. The six hundred Zionists in the New York hotel could not know that Adolf Hitler had already begun his “final solution” to the refugee problem. When German troops crossed the Soviet Union's borders in June 1941, select units of the SS followed, executing Jews, gypsies, and Communist party leaders in Nazi-occupied Russia. Shortly after the invasion of Russia, the Nazis also began to build huge extermination centers in Poland where they could efficiently and quickly gas Jews to death. By the end of 1942, trains packed with Jews were arriving at Auschwitz, Sobibor, Treblinka, and other extermination camps, where most of the passengers were immediately executed.

Jewish leaders in the United States did not learn about the Nazi plan to systematically murder all of European Jewry until three months after the Biltmore Conference. However, Chaim Weizmann and his compatriots did know that Nazi rule subjected European Jewry to starvation, persecution, and murder. Weizmann was deeply troubled by the suffering of the European Jews and at Biltmore he identified himself with their suffering by declaring: “Like all of you, I am a deeply wounded Jew.” Jews were the first targets of Hitler and while many other people were caught in the grip of the German oppressor, Weizmann believed that “our tragedy is both in quality and quantity, different from that of the world around us.” The “father” of the Balfour Declaration mournfully predicted that 25 percent of East European Jewry would perish as a result of Nazi brutality and atrocities. Those Jews who survived the war would “float” between heaven and hell and as many as four million would be homeless. Much of the world would experience a period of great economic dislocation after the war, and Weizmann believed that
the United States and other nations would be unable to absorb many of the Jewish survivors. Palestine was the only practical solution to this dilemma and he argued that “the very weight of the tragedy and the lack of a rational solution except through Palestine, will . . . focus and force the attention of the world to this solution.” The Biltmore audience enthusiastically responded to Weizmann’s declaration: “I would like to relieve the non-Jewish world of the trouble of settling our problems. We can do it ourselves. We can do it ourselves, and with God’s help, we shall do it ourselves.”

David Ben-Gurion, who was still battling Weizmann for control of the Zionist movement, agreed with his competitor’s assessment of the Jewish situation. He told the Biltmore delegates that Jewish suffering in World War II was greater than it had been in World War I and that the condition of European Jewry after Hitler’s defeat would be much worse than it had been in 1919. Zionists, Ben-Gurion proclaimed, demand that the Allies unequivocally reaffirm the Balfour Declaration and agree to the postwar reestablishment of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine. Until the commonwealth could be established, Ben-Gurion continued, the Jewish Agency should be given sole responsibility for the colonization and immigration policies of Palestine.

American Zionists, like Ben-Gurion, also emphasized the need to create a Jewish homeland in order to solve an anticipated postwar refugee problem. According to Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, most Americans understood that large numbers of Jewish refugees would have to go to Palestine after the war, but, he lamented, most of these people were also unsympathetic to the goals of political Zionism. They favored massive Jewish immigration to Palestine, but could not comprehend why it was necessary for the Zionists to create a Jewish state. They failed to understand that political Zionism was the only possible solution to the postwar Jewish refugees’ plight. It was impossible to argue for Jewish immigration to Palestine on “philanthropic” grounds. The Holy Land had already absorbed a huge number of refugees, and the British could legitimately claim that Palestine had done its part in the humanitarian solution of European Jewish homelessness. Silver explained: “Unless we have our political claim to Palestine, our historic claim to Palestine, . . . internationally reaffirmed, that Jews have a right to Palestine in the same self sense as Englishmen have a right to England, then we won’t have a leg to stand on at the Peace Conference after the war.” Only the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine would insure the right of all Jews to emigrate to that land. The American public, Silver concluded, had to be taught that the “distinction between political Zionist and philanthropic, humanitarian action for Jews in Palestine is an unreal, a spurious and a dangerous distinction.”

Palestine’s importance to the solution of a postwar refugee problem, as outlined by Ben-Gurion and Silver, became the primary basis for pro-Zionist agitation and diplomacy during the years following the Biltmore Conference. While many
American Jews would be drawn to Zionism because of their concern about postwar Jewish refugees, the delegates at the Biltmore Hotel knew that their own support of Jewish statehood rested on other rationales. Most of them had been Zionists long before Hitler came to power in Germany, and their commitment to Jewish nationalism went beyond any desire to solve an immediate Jewish refugee crisis. They were fully convinced that Zionism would solve, once and for all, the 2,000-year-old problem of anti-Semitism.

David Ben-Gurion addressed this issue when he warned the Biltmore assembly to “beware of the dangerous illusion that the destruction of Hitlerism alone will free the world from all ills and the Jewish people from its misery.” There was something fundamentally wrong with a world that consistently singled Jews out for extreme punishment and persecution. The task of Zionism was to remake Jewish history by reestablishing a political entity that would end the long nightmare of Jewish homelessness. In the style of a biblical prophet, Ben-Gurion foresaw that “a Jewish Palestine will arise. It will redeem forever our sufferings and do justice to our national genius. It will be the pride of every Jew in the diaspora and command the respect of every people on earth.”

According to Robert Szold, Zionists were trying to do more than create a refugee haven or a “cultural outpost”; they were struggling to change the fate of all the Jewish people. Leon Gellman of Mizrachi supported Szold’s position and added that “Palestine is not just a place to send refugees.” Louis Segal, a member of Poale Zion, a socialist and secular Zionist organization, essentially agreed with the ultra-religious Gellman and the capitalist Szold, asserting: “If Zionism can only answer the momentary tragedy that happens to a few Jewish people, then it’s of no importance. It must give an answer to the national folk beliefs and folk traditions.” Nahum Goldmann joined his colleagues in distinguishing between Zionist and non-Zionist supporters of Jewish immigration to Palestine. The Biltmore audience responded loudly and proudly as Goldmann defined a non-Zionist as a Jew who wants to develop Palestine for those who “need” it. However, a Zionist, according to Goldmann, wanted to settle Palestine for the “Jewish people” of which he was a “living part.”

Of all the Zionists at the Biltmore, Abba Hillel Silver most clearly articulated the belief that Jewish statehood was not merely a practical solution to the Nazi persecution of European Jewry. For Silver, like many Jews, Jewish history for two thousand years seemed to be one long chain of persecution and tragedy. Silver could see nothing unique about the experience of Jews in Nazi-occupied territories. Their plight was no different than that of their ancestors who had endured forced conversions, expulsions, inquisitions, and pogroms. Anti-Semitism predated Hitler and the defeat of the Nazis would not be the final cure to this affliction. “We Jews,” Silver said, “stand to come out of the war, even after an Allied victory, defeated, unrequited and betrayed.” An American and British victory would do nothing to
solve the cause of all Jewish suffering—national homelessness. As a Zionist, Silver believed that the entire course of Jewish history could be changed by the bold act of reestablishing the Jewish state destroyed two millennia before by the Roman Empire. The American people, he said, had to understand:

what has been the basic fact in Jewish tragedy right through the ages, the fact of our national homelessness, of our abnormal political status in the world, and that now, after a second World War, in which Jews by the millions are already casualties . . . in a war in which Jews suffer doubly and trebly in relation to every other people, that . . . the ultimate solution of the Jewish problem must finally be sounded, and the ultimate solution is the establishment of a Jewish Nation in Palestine.90

Following Silver's address, the conference overwhelmingly voted to ratify a declaration making the creation of a Jewish commonwealth the immediate and major goal of the American Zionist movement. The conference called on Great Britain to give the Jewish Agency full control of Palestine's immigration and colonization policies.

Zionists articulated two sets of ideas to justify and explain this historic act. In the propaganda they prepared for Christian consumption, Zionists generally argued that only a Palestinian Jewish nation could solve the postwar refugee problem. However, the radical Zionist promise to solve the "Jewish problem" and to put an end to Jewish persecution was especially effective in winning the support of the American Jewish masses who were grieving for their suffering European brethren. As American Jews became more aware of the magnitude of Nazi murder and destruction, the Zionist plan to revolutionize Jewish existence became almost irresistibly attractive.

HIDDEN SCHISMS: THE TRUE MEANING OF BILTMORE

The Biltmore platform's endorsement of a radical Zionist solution to the Jewish problem was carefully and soberly worded. The conference deliberately decided to use the term "commonwealth" instead of state, although many Zionists at the hotel used the two words interchangeably in their addresses. This strategy was partially dictated by a desire not to alienate non-Zionist organizations like the American Jewish Committee, which had traditionally supported the settlement of Palestine while opposing the concepts of Jewish nationality and statehood.91 Zionist leaders also seized on the ambiguous term "commonwealth" as a tool to link together the many organizations that met at the Biltmore. The Biltmore Conference, organized by the AECZA to celebrate Jewish nationalist unity, in fact revealed just how different Zionist dreams could be. The various organizations that made up
the Jewish nationalist community in the United States were committed to radically
different visions of a reestablished Jewish homeland.

Even the two most prestigious foreign dignitaries at Biltmore found it difficult
to reach common ground. Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion had both been
attracted to the Peel Commission partition plan of 1937, but by 1942 issues of
both policy and style divided the leaders. Weizmann, by now the elder statesman
of the Zionist movement, remembered the successful negotiations of 1917, which
had led to Britain's endorsement of Zionism in the famous Balfour Declaration.
In May 1942, his faith in Britain's moral superiority and tradition of tolerance,
for which his son Michael, an RAF pilot, had died three months earlier, remained
strong.92 Even after three years of harsh British immigration policies, Weizmann
could still express optimism about soon-to-be-improved relations with the
Colonial Office. Weizmann called the MacDonald White Paper an aberration of traditional
British goodwill, which would soon pass.93 When he uttered the slogan "Jewish
commonwealth," he looked forward to some distant date when Jews would have
political sovereignty in at least some part of Palestine, which might even be linked
constitutionally to the British Commonwealth.

Ben-Gurion's faith in British virtue was much weaker than Weizmann's. The
Palestinian leader told his American audience that British colonial administrators
had been trained to deal with "primitive peoples," not the progressive Jewish com-

munity they encountered in the Holy Land. Naturally, the officials felt more at
ease with Palestine's Arabs, "where they could indulge their colonial habits of main-
ing [sic] the status quo." Ben-Gurion found Weizmann's approach to London too
passive and understanding, and he advocated a Zionist policy that recognized that
Jewish and British interests were not necessarily identical. He instructed the
delegates that "reviewing the history of the past twenty years, and taking into ac-
count the needs facing us in the future after the war, our first conclusion is that
the Mandate must be entrusted to the Jewish people themselves." When Ben-Gurion
called for the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth, he visualized an independ-
ent Palestinian state that Zionists could create quickly if they launched a powerful
political offensive to win support in the free countries of the West.94

Several Zionist delegates at Biltmore even found themselves in the position of
having to oppose the creation of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine. B. C. Sher-
man confessed in Yiddish: "I know I will not get your approbation if I tell you
that I disagree with Mr. Ben-Gurion, that I don't think we can make a Jewish world
in Palestine, . . . in spite of the unity that Professor Weizmann spoke of last night."95
Sherman and other members of the left-wing faction of Poale Zion were parti-
cularly committed to the socialist ideals of international brotherhood and coopera-
tion, and they feared that the establishment of an autonomous Jewish political
entity in Palestine was both impractical and dangerous because it ignored the Arab
question. Sherman warned that "even in liberal movements there is less understand-
The creation of a Jewish commonwealth would not meet with Arab support, and Zionist campaigns for its creation would win no new friends in the democratic world. He appealed to Zionist leaders to try and work with the Arab working class in Palestine, whose interests coincided with those of the majority of the Yishuv. Moshe Furmansky reinforced Sherman's position and advocated that the Zionists join with Arabs in order to create a binational state in Palestine.

In a binational state political power would be shared by Jews and Arabs. Proponents of this strategy acknowledged that the Jewish claim to Palestine did not supersede that of the country's Moslem and Christian populations. While only a minority of Palestinian Jewry supported binationalism, several outstanding celebrities championed it, among them Martin Buber, the prominent German-Jewish philosopher; Judah Magnes, the American-born rabbi and chancellor of Hebrew University; and Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah and the director of the Youth Aliyah program of the thirties.

Although the concept of binationalism had few supporters at Biltmore, several delegates worried about the consequences of Jewish statehood for Palestine's Arab population. Hayim Greenberg, an influential socialist Zionist journalist and thinker, argued that "no one can say that there isn't an Arab-Jewish problem in the world." He frankly admitted that there had been times when he had believed that "it would be better to enter upon great compromises, and to reserve to ourselves the hope of expansion later." After serious thought, Greenberg continued, he decided that "there is no possibility in our time that we will be able to agree with Arab factions in Palestine." Since in his view no Arab leader was willing to negotiate with moderate Zionists, Greenberg concluded that any Jewish attempt to compromise would be suicidal.

Louis Segal of Poale Zion had even less patience for binationalists than his fellow socialist Greenberg. Asserting that there was too much concentration on the Arab problem, he declared: "Jews want to come to Palestine to establish a Jewish Homeland. If the Arabs understand that, then there will be peace; if they should refuse to understand it then we cannot make peace with them. That is all."

Hadassah delegates, perhaps influenced by the position of their "patron saint" Henrietta Szold, were less willing than Segal to condemn the binationalists. Rose Jacobs reminded Zionists that there would be grave consequences if no solution to the Arab-Jewish problem could be found. She could offer no formulas for peace except "that of recommending investigation and inquiry that may ultimately lead to action based on judgement."

Bernard Rosenblatt, a retired New York State judge who had been active in Zionist affairs for almost thirty years, worried about the fate of Palestine's Arab majority. He warned the Biltmore audience that demanding the immediate creation of a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan River would "run counter to
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all precedents based upon the liberal philosophy of democracy, with its implicit faith in 'the rights' of the majority of a population." While he supported the creation of a Jewish commonwealth, Rosenblatt's blueprint for the future Jewish homeland radically differed from those of either Ben-Gurion or Weizmann. For almost a decade Rosenblatt had been advocating the creation of a federated Palestine, which would consist of a Jewish commonwealth and an Arab sister state. The federated Arab and Jewish entities would each exercise control over immigration to their respective sectors. He believed that his solution to the problem of conflicting Arab and Jewish claims to Palestine was based on the American precedent of federalism, which had brought peace and justice to "peoples" of diverse "race" and "cultures."\(^{102}\)

While Rosenblatt and some members of Hadassah might be willing to accept a Jewish commonwealth in only part of Palestine, others at the Biltmore Conference were appalled by such a possibility. The representatives of Mizrachi, the organization of Orthodox religious Zionists, adamantly objected to any compromise plan that involved making concessions to Palestinian Arabs. Leon Gellman of Mizrachi warned that his organization would tolerate "no deviation from the original plans for Palestine, even in the name of Peace." He urged the Biltmore delegates publicly to declare that the one and only objective of their movement was the establishment of a "Jewish world" in "all" of Palestine.\(^{103}\) Another Mizrachi leader angrily reminded the delegates that all of Palestine belonged to the Jewish people by "tradition" and by "right."\(^{104}\) Rabbi Wolf Gold, a representative of Mizrachi's international leadership, pledged that his organization would never accept the partition of Palestine.\(^{105}\)

Many members of the Zionist Organization of America also continued to oppose the principle of partition. They all remembered the long conflict over the Peel Commission's partition proposal. Some, including Stephen Wise, now supported the goal of Jewish statehood, but the New York rabbi pointedly remarked that Jews could not be diverted away from the "high purpose of building a national home for themselves and their children within the borders of undivided and unpartitioned Palestine."\(^{106}\) Robert Szold, another veteran of the anti-partition struggle of the late thirties, expressed his support for the Biltmore resolution, but he argued against any concessions by Zionist leaders that would whittle down Jewish rights in Palestine. Plans for binationalism, federalism, and partition were impractical and would condemn Jews to a permanent minority status in Palestine.\(^{107}\) Dr. Israel Goldstein, chairman of the American branch of the Jewish National Fund and another old opponent of partition, stated that the Jewish acquisition of the maximum amount of land possible in Palestine was a "non-debatable" issue within the Zionist movement.\(^{108}\)

By endorsing the establishment of a Palestinian Jewish commonwealth, the Biltmore delegates skillfully avoided the question of exactly how much of Palestine's
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territory Jews would control. While most American Zionists were willing to work
for the creation of some politically autonomous Jewish entity, no consensus existed
on the vital issue of boundaries. Any Jewish nationalist attempting to draw the
future Jewish state’s borders would have to confront two contradictory positions
within the American Zionist body politic. One powerful faction, consisting of the
Mizrachi and a sizable number of ZOA members, refused to accept any territorial
concessions. For them, religion and tradition dictated that all of Palestine by right
belonged to the Jews and that any territorial concession to the Arabs would be
comparable to Esau’s sale of his birthright. On the other side of the spectrum,
several moderate and left-wing Zionists saw some legitimacy in the Arab’s claim
to Palestine. In return for peace with the Arabs, these Zionists were willing to cre-
te their Jewish state in only part of Palestine. Any Zionist attempt to establish
Jewish sovereignty over the entire Holy Land, they feared, would ignite a long,
bloody, and perhaps suicidal conflict with the more numerous non-Jewish popula-
tion of the area. United Zionist action in 1942 clearly required that nothing be
done that would bring these mutually contradictory positions to the surface and
into conflict.109

ON THE EVE OF TRAGEDY

Fortunately for American Zionists, the radical and idealistic spirit eloquently ex-
pressed at the Biltmore Hotel survived the conference’s closing. Five months after
the Extraordinary Conference, the annual convention of the Zionist Organization
of America heard Morris Rothenberg say that “either Zionism will now offer a
comprehensive solution for the problem of Jewish misery and Jewish homelessness,
or it will disappear as an answer to the Jewish question. It will take its place as
a brave, interesting, but abortive attempt to solve the Jewish problem.”110 Robert
Szold, who had often disagreed with Rothenberg in the past, now sided with him,
saying, “Zionists feel that now there must be a complete, clear, and unequivocal
and permanent solution.”111

During the months that followed American Jewish espousal of Jewish political
sovereignty, Zionist spokesmen continued to formulate arguments designed to at-
tract broad public support in the United States. As they had done at Biltmore,
Zionists continued to predict that a major Jewish refugee problem would plague
the postwar world and that a Jewish state in Palestine was the only practical solu-
tion to this anticipated crisis.112 Jewish nationalist leaders also understood that
they had to link Zionist goals to the postwar interests and ideals of the Allied pow-
ers.113 During World War I, Zionists and other ethnic nationalist groups used Wood-
row Wilson’s support of self-determination to legitimize their national demands.
Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism

Robert Szold believed that the Zionist rhetoric of World War I could not be used in the struggle against Hitler. He suggested that “postwar solutions may not be again based primarily in territorial lines with emphasis on self-determination of nationalities.” Instead, the Allied powers would be most concerned with the social and economic measures necessary to facilitate the postwar reconstruction of the world. Szold asked Zionist spokesmen to emphasize the vital role Jews could play in the development of Middle Eastern resources so that Jewish nationalism would be in accord with progressive thought.  

The practical work necessary to achieve the goal of Jewish autonomy also continued after the closing of the Biltmore Conference. Emanuel Neumann in late 1942 observed that the United States government was becoming more involved in Middle Eastern affairs, and he remembered that many Zionists had expected Washington to automatically assume a pro-Zionist stance because they reasoned that it was “our America.” Unfortunately, the American adoption of Zionism could not be accomplished so easily because, as Neumann said, “there are people in official and unofficial life who are constantly watching out, seeking the weakest spots in our armor, looking for signs of disunity, trying to discover Jewish groups who are not Zionists or who may be prepared to fight Zionism.” Politics in the United States, according to Neumann, was also a battle between minorities. In wartime America, there were pro-Zionist and anti-Zionist minorities, while the majority of the public was uninformed and without an opinion. If Zionists were to win their struggle for American support they would have to proceed methodically with a powerful, well-organized political and propaganda campaign. Zionists, Neumann was pleased to announce, had already taken the first step in the campaign at the Biltmore, where there had been “substantial progress” in the development of a common Zionist ideology. Consensus among American Zionists was a precondition for the success of Neumann’s second objective, the uniting of American Jews around a pro-Zionist platform. Zionist leaders, Neumann reported, had already begun preliminary discussions with non-Zionist American Jewish organizations. A staunchly pro-Zionist American Jewish community, Neumann confidently predicted, would facilitate winning support from American public and political figures and from important government agencies. Neumann’s formula for Zionist victory was endorsed by Chaim Weizmann who told American Jewish nationalists: “Your task is to close the ranks of American Zionism, to win the support of American Jewry and to enlighten American public opinion on the justice and high moral significance of our social cause.”

By the end of 1942, Zionist organizations were giving special priority to the task of winning broad American support. The Zionist Organization of America convention in October devoted an entire Thursday afternoon session to a symposium on public relations programs that could be carried out by local ZOA branches. Delegates listened closely as the rabbi of a Pottsville, Pennsylvania, congrega-
tion explained how his flock had decided to enroll en masse as ZOA members. The new Zionist recruits had also amended the constitution of their congregation and now required every new member of the synagogue to also enlist in the ZOA.117

Zionists hoped that the ideological and propaganda weapons they were refining would allow them to “conquer” the American Jewish community. Hitler’s persecution of European Jewry facilitated the task of nationalizing American Jewry, who, as Morris Rothenberg observed, believed that they had a responsibility and an opportunity to “serve” their “bruised” and “lacerated” European cousins.118 Zionism offered a radical solution to the Jewish problem. A Jewish commonwealth in Palestine would provide postwar refugees with a home, and it would also revolutionize Jewish existence. If Zionists were successful, they would be able to guarantee that there would never again be another Jewish problem in Europe. A Jewish state would permanently solve the crisis of anti-Semitism, which Zionists believed was caused by Jewish homelessness. No other Jewish group in the United States could match the scope and promise of the proposed Zionist solution to the Jewish problem. ZOA President Levinthal insightfully remarked: “every Jew in the country must rally to the support of our cause, and I believe the Jews who are not ashamed of their Jewish identity and who have faith in the Jewish future will come to our support because there is no other alternative.”119