

### The *Exodus* Affair

On 11 July 1947, one day before the opening of the International Conference on European Reconstruction called by Bevin and Bidault to discuss the plan proposed by U.S. secretary of state Marshall for European recovery, the *Exodus* slipped out of Sète with 4,530 passengers on board.<sup>42</sup> Not only had the French authorities received advance notice about the ship, but Bevin had personally asked Bidault to act with determination to prevent the ship's sailing, emphasizing that the arrival of the *Exodus* in Palestine would endanger the peace not only there but throughout the Middle East.<sup>43</sup> Stunned by this failure, Bevin addressed a sharp protest to Bidault, complaining that not only had the ship been allowed to depart from France, but the local authorities had also permitted four thousand illegal immigrants to board it even though the ship's license forbade it to take on passengers or to sail in bad weather. Moreover, the number of illegal immigrants was the largest ever to sail on such a vessel. He attacked movement organizers for exploiting the plight of the Jews for the sake of profit, accusing them of encouraging Jews throughout Europe to sell their property and pay exorbitant prices for tickets to sail to Palestine under conditions that endangered their lives. Bevin informed Bidault of the British intention to make an example of this ship and to force it to turn back to France with all on board. Bidault, who favored assisting the British in their campaign against the illegal sailings, gave his consent to the disembarking of the illegal immigrants onto French soil.<sup>44</sup> Bidault's immediate acceptance of Bevin's demand, without first receiving his government's approval, was directly related to the Conference on European Reconstruction and his desire to avoid a confrontation with Bevin under such sensitive circumstances. Bevin, however, wanted more than just Bidault's promise and thus complained to French premier Ramadier of the injustice of French behavior toward the British. Skeptical of French assurances, Bevin warned that "the indulgence shown to Jewish immigrants by French authorities might well have repercussions in French North Africa,"<sup>45</sup> a veiled threat of Britain's ability to harm French interests in Africa.

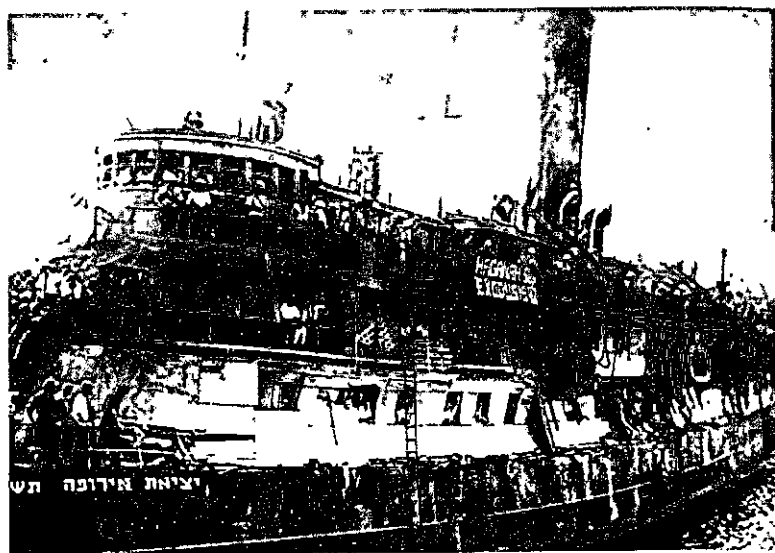
While the British Foreign Office believed that the French government would

accede to the British request, so as not to embarrass Bidault, who might otherwise resign, it was also aware of the possibility that Ramadier might oppose Bidault's commitment.<sup>46</sup> If this happened, the Foreign Office believed that Britain would be faced with a choice between two alternative courses of action. One would be to present the French with a *fait accompli* based on the oral commitment made by Bidault. Such a step, however, might dampen France's future willingness to cooperate in the struggle against the illegal embarkations. A second possibility would be to deport the illegal immigrants to Cyprus. The Foreign Office feared that such a course would be an admission of failure of the campaign against the illegal sailings and would put an end to the plan to return illegal immigrants to their ports of departure.<sup>47</sup>

Ambassador Cooper warned against the removal by force of what he called "these miserable creatures" in France. Such a step, he stressed, "is likely to provide anti-British propaganda to which French public opinion may well be receptive in view of memories of German persecution of Jews under occupation." The man in the street, Cooper argued, "is totally ignorant of Palestine problems and sees only in these illicit immigrants survivors of a persecuted race seeking refuge in their national home."<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the French prime minister and many of his fellow cabinet ministers were not in accord with British policy on this matter. The ambassador pointed out that Foreign Minister Bidault was the only one exhibiting a willingness to help Britain, and this was because of his desire to strengthen the friendship between the two countries. But even Bidault's support, Cooper concluded, was uncertain because of difficulties in Germany and his standing in the government.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, on the morning of 18 July British soldiers boarded the *Exodus*, which had reached Palestinian waters, while British destroyers continuously rammed the ship. After a bloody struggle that cost the lives of three Jews and in which about two hundred others were wounded, seventy of them seriously, the *Exodus* illegal immigrants were transferred onto three other ships for deportation. The following day, this convoy of three vessels with the *Exodus* illegal immigrants on board sailed from Haifa. Cooper was asked to inform the French of the departure of the vessels for France, based on the understanding reached with Bidault. The ambassador was told that a final decision as to the destination of the ships, either Cyprus or France, would be made at a later stage and that in any case the French were not to be given an inkling that a possibility of taking the illegal immigrants to Cyprus was being considered. This, of course, was intended to force the French to make their position clear.<sup>50</sup>

Eventually, on 21 July, the director of administrative affairs in the French Foreign Ministry announced that it had been decided to allow the ships to drop



Exodus 1947 after surrender (Courtesy Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Sifriat Poalim, Tel Aviv)

anchor in Villefranche. Because the immigrants had sailed from France and possessed personal passports and valid visas for Colombia, however, the British government was asked to organize the continuation of their trip to Colombia in the deportation vessels. In other words, France would serve only as a transit point. British minister Clarke rejected this idea on the grounds that the deportation vessels were not suitable for crossing the ocean and that they were needed in Palestine. He asked Bousquet to see whether the French government would be willing to transport the refugees to Colombia.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, very quickly it was found that the Colombian visas were forged and that the Colombian government had no intention of absorbing the refugees.<sup>52</sup>

The French government, under heavy pressure from the British, decided at its meeting on 23 July to permit the illegal immigrants to disembark in France and to supply all their needs. But the government made it clear that it was unequivocally opposed to the use of force to offload the illegal immigrants.<sup>53</sup> This decision was a compromise between Bidault, who felt that France must respond to the British request, and the Socialist minister of the interior Edouard Depreux, who made it clear that he would refuse to make the refugees disembark by force. Although the French cabinet in general and Depreux in particular were motivated first and foremost by humanitarian reasons, it can be assumed that the decision was also influenced by the government's concern over pos-

sible bloodshed, as had occurred during the transfer of the illegal immigrants from the *Exodus* to the deportation vessels. The French, dependent on American economic assistance, were aware of Washington's sensitivity to the situation of the Jewish DPs. For his part, Bidault, mainly concerned with relations with Britain, thought that his government was making a mistake by obstructing the British on this issue when much more important matters were on the agenda. The French foreign minister did not hide his views from the British and pointed an accusing finger at the Socialist ministers, especially Depreux and Jules Moch, the transport minister, whom Bidault claimed were subject to the influence of Léon Blum.<sup>54</sup> Blum, who had laid the foundations for the Dunkirk treaty of "alliance and mutual assistance" signed by the two nations in March 1947, was among the sharpest critics of British behavior during the *Exodus* affair.<sup>55</sup>

The French cabinet decision again aroused Cooper's fears of the possible repercussions if British soldiers were to attempt to remove the illegal immigrants by force. In an effort to prevent a confrontation, Cooper suggested to his government that the refugees be offered two alternatives: either to disembark and enjoy the protection of the French government or else to put out again to open sea.<sup>56</sup> The second alternative was not acceptable to the Foreign Office because it meant simply offloading the illegal immigrants in Cyprus, whereas Britain wanted to use the *Exodus* to set an example. Cooper was asked to inform the French that Britain presumed that French agreement to allow the return of illegal immigrants to France also entailed consent to have them offloaded by force if that should prove necessary. If the French rejected this argument, the ambassador was to state instead that Britain's right to demand that the illegal immigrants be allowed to disembark in France followed naturally from its right to return them to France.<sup>57</sup> Cooper, who was looking for ways to prevent confrontation in case the illegal immigrants refused to disembark, came up against the obdurate stand of the British Foreign Office, which insisted on offloading the illegal immigrants on French soil.<sup>58</sup>

The three deportation vessels reached Port de Bouc on 29 July. Efforts to convince the illegal immigrants to disembark of their own free will had little effect. All in all, during the three weeks that the ships were anchored at Port de Bouc, no more than 130 refugees disembarked, most of them sick and old people or pregnant women about to give birth. The British consulate in Marseilles informed London that without the cooperation of the French authorities and in light of the hostility of the local population, it would not be possible to use force to offload the illegal immigrants. But local French port authorities refused to help the British bring the illegal immigrants ashore while French newspapers of all political leanings leveled scathing criticism at Britain.<sup>59</sup> Differ-

ences of opinion continued between Bevin and Cooper over how to handle the situation. While Cooper, aware of the resolute opposition of the Socialist ministers, including the premier, to disembarking the illegal immigrants forcibly, thought that there was no point in appealing to them, Bevin unequivocally rejected the ambassador's suggestion that the deportation vessels withdraw from French waters as soon as possible. He instructed him to tell the French authorities in no uncertain terms that Britain attached great importance to seeing Bidault's commitment to take back the illegal immigrants honored.<sup>60</sup>

About three weeks after the *Exodus* had sailed from Sète and two days after the deportation vessels arrived at Port de Bouc, Bevin began to recognize that the move he had initiated was wrong. On 31 July, he reported to the cabinet on the impasse in France and on his intention to deport the illegal immigrants to one of the British colonies or to the British occupation zone in Germany. In any case, Bevin emphasized, they would not be taken to either Cyprus or Palestine.<sup>61</sup> This stance, if not inspired by a feeling of spite, may have been Bevin's way of reducing the extent of his failure. At the same time he remained hopeful that the difficult situation on the deportation ships and the prospect of enjoying French hospitality might break the illegal immigrants' will. Obsessed with subduing the organizers of the illegal sailings, Bevin paid little attention to the damage caused to Britain in the international arena and world public opinion. In contrast, Ambassador Cooper was keenly aware of and greatly concerned about the harm events were causing to relations between the two countries and to Britain's status in French public opinion in light of their recent reconciliation. He desperately wanted to bring the incident to an end as quickly as possible and suggested on 11 August that the illegal immigrants be informed of a final deportation destination and given a limited amount of time to make a decision.<sup>62</sup>

So far, however, no decision had been made on where the deportees would be taken. The Colonial Office made it clear that it would be impossible at such short notice to absorb a large number of Jews in any of the colonies and that their deportation to a distant destination would be interpreted as a total failure to put the principle of deportation back to ports of embarkation into practice. Under the circumstances, the Colonial Office thought that Germany "has the advantage that accommodation exists and, provided the French authorities maintain their offer of hospitality, we should have a chance of returning the Jews to France through the British zone [in Germany]." Moreover, this would achieve the objective of deportation to the country from which the illegal immigrants had sailed. Following the advice of Ambassador Cooper, it was decided to inform the illegal immigrants of the intent to deport them forcibly to Ham-

burg and to give them forty-eight hours to disembark voluntarily in France. The Jewish Agency was also to be informed of the British plan so as to enlist its cooperation in convincing the illegal immigrants to disembark.<sup>63</sup> On 21 August, approximately six weeks after the *Exodus* had sailed from Sète, the illegal immigrants on the deportation vessels were informed that if they persisted in their refusal to disembark, they would be deported to Germany.<sup>64</sup>

British hopes of negotiating a compromise were unsuccessful. The position of the Jewish Agency was conveyed to the British by Léon Blum one day after the illegal immigrants learned of the deportation destination. The former French premier told Cooper that if the British government were to commit itself to allowing the illegal immigrants at Port de Bouc to enter Palestine within a definite period of time, the Jewish Agency would advise them to disembark. When Cooper asked whether that meant a period of three or four years, Blum replied that the agency was thinking of two or three months. Marc Jarblum, a leader of the Fédération des Sociétés Juives, the organization of Jews of Eastern European origin in France, and a prominent member of the Socialist Party, suggested to Cooper that the *Exodus* passengers be allotted half of the monthly immigration quota to Palestine (750 certificates) for a period of six months. He may have had in mind the arrangement made earlier in the La Spezia incident. Knowing of Bevin's determination on this issue, Cooper proposed permitting the people who voluntarily disembarked to apply for permission to enter Palestine, with the *Exodus* sailing not being held against them. The ambassador explained to Jarblum that this was his own private suggestion and would need London's approval. Jarblum rejected the proposal out of hand.<sup>65</sup>

When he learned of the decision to deport the illegal immigrants to Germany, the high commissioner in Palestine, Alan Cunningham, urged the government to look for another solution because he was greatly worried about the repercussions of such a step on the security situation in Palestine. On the very same day the three deportation vessels had reached Port de Bouc, three members of the Irgun caught by the British during the break-in at Acre prison in Palestine (Avshalom Haviv, Yaakov Weiss, and Meir Nakar) had been hanged there. When, in response, the Irgun had hanged two British sergeants it had been holding as hostages, British soldiers and police had run amok in the streets of Tel Aviv with the result that five Jews had been killed and twenty-four injured.<sup>66</sup> While appreciating the high commissioner's difficulties, both the Colonial and Foreign Offices were willing to give the refugees on board the deportation vessels, which had already sailed from Port de Bouc on 22 August, another opportunity to disembark in France.<sup>67</sup>

After it became clear that the illegal immigrants refused to disembark, the

Foreign Office hoped it would be possible to return them from the British zone in Germany to France. The French made their agreement to accept the *Exodus* passengers conditional on the latter's voluntary return. The Foreign Office debated whether to try also to return illegal immigrants who refused to go willingly.<sup>68</sup> Cooper strongly opposed any attempt to force the illegal immigrants to return to France, warning that the entire operation would fail if it were discovered that the British were not acting in keeping with French conditions.<sup>69</sup> On 8 September, the illegal immigrants were taken ashore at the port of Hamburg. British attempts to return the *Exodus* illegal immigrants to France were again thwarted, this time by the condition the French placed on accepting the refugees. The illegal immigrants preferred to wait in the DP camps in Germany until they could go to Palestine rather than accept the French offer.

Along with the contacts concerning the *Exodus* illegal immigrants, the British continued to alert the French to suspected illegal departures being planned by vessels anchored in French ports. In a memorandum to Bidault on 12 July, Bevin called attention to five ships, two of which, the *Bruna* and the *Luciano*, were about to sail that same day. Bidault was asked to take all necessary measures to prevent their departure. Four days later, the *Shivat Zion* (as the *Luciano* was now called) sailed from Algeria with 411 passengers and the *Yad Hallelai Geshet Haziv* (formerly the *Bruna*) from Italy with 685 passengers. In the same memorandum Bevin mentioned two more suspicious vessels, the *Paducah* and the *Northland* (under the Panamanian flag). Only a few days later the embassy discovered that both ships had been refueled. Following heavy pressure exerted by the British embassy, the French authorities informed their captains that they would not receive permits to transport passengers. The local authorities then allowed the *Paducah* to sail without passengers. Feeling hoodwinked, the British sent a sharply worded protest to Quai d'Orsay. The note emphasized that a delay in the departure of the *Northland* until the Panamanian government reached a decision about cancellation of the ship's license would be seen as proof of French readiness to help Britain in its struggle against the illegal sailings.<sup>70</sup>

Several days after he had received the sharply worded note, Bidault explained to Cooper that he had no intention of defending or making excuses for his government's actions. He also did not view the sailing of the *Exodus* as serious enough to create a government crisis over, as in any case the government would not survive until October 1947 and he himself (Bidault) would then be appointed premier.<sup>71</sup> Given the deep crisis in the political system in France at this time, the British realized that despite Quai d'Orsay's support of their de-

mands, its ability to influence government policy on the matter of Jewish illegal immigrants was limited.

As it happened, Bidault did not become the prime minister and illegal sailings continued. On 26 September 1947, two *Ha'apala* boats, the *Geula* (the renamed *Paducah*) and the *Medinat Hayehudim* (the renamed *Northland*), sailed from Bulgaria, carrying over four thousand passengers between them.<sup>72</sup> Those two ships were not the last to refuel in France and sail from Bulgaria with Rumanian illegal immigrants. At the beginning of October, S. E. Kay, the consul general in Marseilles, reported that the local authorities had allowed the *Pan York* to refuel and take on 148 tons of food in spite of British requests to the contrary. The consul emphasized to his embassy in Paris that because the illegal sailings had now shifted to the Communist bloc countries, allowing the ships to refuel and take on supplies meant assisting the movement.<sup>73</sup> This was highlighted when, on 26 December 1947, the *Pan York* sailed from Bulgaria with 7,557 illegal immigrants on board.

During this entire period Jewish refugees continued to infiltrate into France and Italy through the French zone in Austria. The Italians complained to the British that the French military authorities were making it difficult to return illegal immigrants detained in Italy. Even when the French were prepared to take back those apprehended, it was of no use because they did nothing to prevent the same people from infiltrating again by another route.<sup>74</sup> The French did not deny the facts, but they blamed the Americans.<sup>75</sup> At a joint meeting of the Western Allies in Austria in mid-November 1947, called to discuss the Jewish infiltration, the French representative stressed the difficulty of monitoring the borders of the French zone, which were over a thousand kilometers long, with only eight hundred guards. Participants in the meeting were told that the main route from Austria to Italy passed through the American zone to the French zone and from there to Italy via the Brenner and Resia Passes. The movement into France went from the American zone in Austria to the American zone in Germany and from there to France. The French representative clearly stated that if the movement were to be halted, the commander in the American zone in Germany had to cooperate.<sup>76</sup> In other words, if London wanted to put an end to this movement, it ought to negotiate with the Americans and not with the French authorities. By then, there were approximately forty thousand Jewish refugees in France who had arrived there since the end of the war.<sup>77</sup>

Summing up, most of the sixteen thousand illegal immigrants who sailed from French ports had reached France from DP camps. Such a massive movement

could not have happened without the concurrence of the French authorities. The British knew that some officials, including government ministers, especially among the Socialists, were allowing the Jewish refugees to enter the country and sail from France to Palestine. British arguments that the illegal sailings were primarily a political maneuver as part of the Zionist struggle and that the Zionists were cynically exploiting innocent people found no receptive ears. Memories of the Holocaust were still fresh, especially among those Socialist leaders who had fought against the Nazis and had suffered at their hands. Socialist policies appear to have been contradictory, since while Socialist government officials were aiding the Jewish refugees in reaching Palestine, party leaders like Blum and Ramadier were working for an accord with Britain and toward improved relations between the two countries. The Socialists could live with the paradox of rapprochement with Britain, on the one hand, and helping the Jewish refugees, on the other, because the Jewish DP issue was a marginal factor in overall Anglo-French relations.

The considerable improvement in relations between the two countries in the course of 1947 and increased British pressure on the French authorities did produce a decline in the scope of the illegal sailings from French shores for several months. Increased tension between the West and the Soviet Union in light of the failure of the CFM in Moscow (March–April 1947) and the challenge that Marshall had set before the nations of Western Europe brought about closer relations between Britain and France, who took it upon themselves to organize and lead this bloc. These circumstances made it difficult for the French authorities to ignore British pressure. The *Exodus* incident, which caused tension between the two countries at a most sensitive time, impelled the French to bring about a lull in departures from French ports. Reports from Zionist sources reveal that after the *Exodus* sailed, the increased pressure on *Ha'apala* organizers from French government officials made it necessary to turn to clandestine operations.<sup>78</sup>

Still, the change in French policy was not drastic and certainly did not halt the illegal sailings. Between the signing of the Dunkirk treaty and the establishment of the State of Israel, more than 10,000 illegal immigrants sailed in eight vessels from French ports, in comparison with 5,800 in seven ships previously. Moreover, during the first six months of Schuman's government, four ships with a total of 2,720 passengers managed to sail. The interior minister at the time was the Socialist Jules Moch, who in his previous position as transport minister had proffered much assistance to the illegal departures. Throughout 1947, furthermore, the French authorities permitted ships suspected of involve-

ment in illegal sailings to refuel, take on provisions, and sail, albeit without passengers, despite British demands.

There was considerable similarity in the positions of the French and Italian authorities in their contacts with the British, despite the difference in their international status. Officials in the governments of the two nations had analogous feelings toward both the British and the Jewish DPs. Britain's difficulties in Palestine did not make Paris and Rome unhappy. The French and the Italians were careful to deny any responsibility for the infiltration of Jews into their countries and instead put the blame on the Americans, challenging the British to influence American policy. Both France and Italy conditioned their help against the infiltration on a British willingness to take into the British occupation zone Jewish refugees who had been arrested, even if the latter had come from the American zone (as was the case for most of those fleeing via that route) and on an increase in the quota of certificates for Jewish DPs in their own territory. The two countries also demanded a quid pro quo which had no real connection with the illegal immigration, the French asking that German labor be sent to France and the Italians seeking the deportation of non-Jewish refugees who had infiltrated into the country.

London did not retaliate against the French and Italians but made do with sending sharp protests from time to time and threatening possible harm to bilateral relations. Although annoyed by the illegal sailings, Britain preferred not to impair its relations with France and Italy, especially in 1947. Britain was aiming at closer cooperation among the nations of Western Europe, in view of increasing tension with the Soviet Union and its satellites. France had a central role to play in the Western camp. At the end of his talk with Ramadier (22 September 1947, two weeks after the *Exodus* illegal immigrants had been forced ashore in Hamburg), Bevin announced: "We've made the union of Britain and France this morning."<sup>79</sup> Nor were the British interested in placing further obstacles in front of the French and Italian authorities who were forced to deal with an internal Communist challenge (the Communist Parties of both countries had participated in the founding conference of the Cominform in September). Furthermore, the British were aware of the decline in their international standing and their deterrent ability since the end of the war, especially during the course of 1947. They thus had no alternative but to accept the fact that even unremitting pressure on the French and Italian authorities would bring them only sporadic success. Under the circumstances, the fight against the illegal immigrants remained theirs alone.

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# POST- HOLOCAUST POLITICS

BRITAIN, THE UNITED STATES,  
& JEWISH REFUGEES, 1945-1948

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