

CHAPTER 5 The Exodus Affair

The consequences of the Exodus Affair from a public relations and political point of view went far beyond anything previously experienced in the confrontation with the British over illegal immigration. Unwillingly drawn into the human drama rapidly developing in Marseilles, the French Government found itself squeezed between its Zionist friends in France and Palestine and its former ally, the British. Both the Yishuv and Britain saw the Exodus Affair as a test of wills.

Bevin was determined to score on two accounts. Firstly to show the Yishuv that the easy option of internment in Cyprus was no longer available and that immigrants would be returned to their country of departure. Secondly to bring home to the French that they could no longer facilitate the transit of DPs across France to their ports of departure without repercussions. The new British policy, that of 'Refoulement' was to return to the point of departure all illegal immigrants captured at sea. It was hoped that the ensuing embarrassment and inconvenience of having to contend with thousands of unwanted immigrants would force the French authorities to curtail their covert assistance. The same policy was to be adopted for Italy, where illegal immigrant ships tended to be even more numerous.

The Exodus Affair, which began in July 1947, coincided with the launch of the Marshall Plan, a massive American injection of material and funds, devised by the American Secretary of State, George Marshall, to regenerate the European economies. For the sake of both countries, it was essential that Great Britain and France worked in concert and that no bilateral problems interfered with the understandings that Bidault had so assiduously built up with Bevin. In response to George Marshall's initiative a Foreign Ministers' conference had been called in Paris for 12th July, at which it was intended to formulate a comprehensive rehabilitation programme to meet Europe's needs. Bevin and Bidault were to be the joint sponsors of the conference. It was by no means an appropriate moment for a much less significant issue, such as the departure of the President Warfield, to cause political embarrassment.

In this epic saga the three contestants either increased their prestige to a greater or lesser extent or suffered ignominy. The French Government, rent by internal conflicts between Ministers, took no decisive steps, except to refuse any assistance to forcefully disembark the passengers from the three prison ships in the harbour of Port-de-Bouc. In the face of this impasse, the British kept the boats in the harbour for over three weeks, hoping that the conditions on board would finally convince the passengers to disembark peacefully, offering as the only alternative their return to Germany and internment. In Palestine, Ben-Gurion, anxious to reap as much public relations benefit as possible from the British discomfiture, used all his contacts in France to ensure that the Government would take no action because of British pressure to bring the stand-off to an end by a forced evacuation of the ships. There is no doubt however that, as a result of the rugged determination of the passengers to remain on board until they were safely landed in Palestine, politely refusing all offers by the French of asylum, the Exodus Affair, as a public relations exercise, was disastrous for the British, a qualified success for the French and a triumph for the Zionists.

5.1 The Exodus story

¹ Zertal, *Catastrophe*, 53.

In early June 1947, with UNSCOP in Palestine preparing for the meeting of the UN General Assembly in September, the temptation for the Mossad to score a public relations coup proved irresistible. It also responded to Yigal Allon's call to his men in Europe to expedite the movement of ships precisely during this period.²

Starting in late June 1947, over 4,000 DPs were transported from Germany to Southern France in one of the most ambitious and complex operations the Mossad had ever attempted.³ Prior to their departure it was necessary that transit visas be delivered by the French consular authorities. To avoid the preparation of individual visas, Marcel Pages, presumably at the request of his friend L'Abbe Glasberg, indicated that a collective transit visa would suffice for Ministry of the Interior purposes. Given the time constraints, members of the Mossad concocted overnight a fictitious list of 858 would-be immigrants and delivered it to Marcel Pages in early June. A fully authorized collective transit visa was then issued by the French vice-consul in the American Zone on 23rd June.

As it was in duplicate, the copy was also used, thus conferring transit rights on twice the original number.⁴ Once again the Ministry of Foreign Affairs's opposition to mass movements of this nature had been circumvented. The DPs were assembled and split into five groups. Three road convoys carried the majority of the DPs together with hastily arranged forged papers prepared by a fictitious Mossad entity called The Jewish Refugee Aid Society.⁵ They were provided with food and other essentials by the Haganah command in Germany, as they set off across the French Zone to the border with France.⁶ The other immigrants, using respectively the two copies of the authentic collective visa, boarded specially chartered trains near Munich. These included some DPs from Bergen-Belsen in the British Zone who had been secretly smuggled into the American Zone, the point of departure.⁸ The whole operation was carried out with military precision and was completed within eight days.

Information later gleaned by CID officers in Haifa from the immigrants who were being transferred from the Exodus to prison ships, indicated that many had originated from the Landsberg DP Camp in Germany and that they had come by train to Marseilles where they had been accommodated in a large number of private houses. They had remained indoors for a period of two weeks and then proceeded by night in ex-army trucks to Sète.⁹ At the moment of embarkation, it was anticipated that the French authorities would insist on inspecting the entry visas for the country of ultimate destination. To meet this need, the Mossad managed, for a price, to convince the Columbian Consul to furnish a load of blank visas and the necessary stamps. It only remained for photographs of the immigrants to be taken in the various transit camps. In the space of a few days, with the active cooperation of the street photographers of Marseilles and the Mossad's expert team of forgers in Lyon, the task was accomplished.¹⁰ Hadari himself was one of the team who stamped the visas in the washroom of his hotel.¹¹

² Zertal, *Catastrophe*, 56.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Halamish, 47.

⁵ Halamish, 57.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷ Ben David, 267.

⁸ Arieh Boaz, *Olam Vnochet Bechol: Hayech Shaul Avigur* (Tel Aviv, 2001), 212.

⁹ TNA, FO 537/2A00, CID to Chief Secretary Palestine Government, 21/7/47.

¹⁰ Zertal, *Catastrophe*, 67.

¹¹ Hadari, *HaMossad*, 21.

British surveillance of the President Warfield had been extensive from the moment it had left its American home. Originally a river steamer, which had seen service during WW2, it was acquired in the USA in 1946 by a Mossad-front company. After a call at Marseilles it arrived at La Spezia in Italy but because of British pressure on the authorities there it then left again, accompanied by an Italian torpedo boat, for French territorial waters. It arrived at Port-de-Bouc on 13th June. Here it was extensively refitted to carry passengers and took on board large amounts of fuel. It was thoroughly searched by RG agents and customs officers without finding anything illegal.¹² However there can be little doubt that these officials and indeed the workers in the port were well aware of the intended use and destination of the President Warfield. A few weeks later it was decided by the Mossad to move the boat to Sète in Jules Moch's constituency, where the likelihood of interference by the authorities was considered negligible. When the boat arrived on the night of 9th July however, British alarm bells began to ring. The following morning Captain Courtney of the SIS arranged for aerial photographs to be taken of the boat and the results were immediately sent to the British Embassy in Paris. London was informed and Bevin instructed the British Ambassador, Duff Cooper, to make urgent representations to the MAE to prevent or delay its sailing for as long as possible.¹³

At 4 am on 10th July the process of embarking the immigrants on the President Warfield was commenced. The passenger list comprised 1615 men, 1784 women, 170 youngsters and 685 children. These included, in addition to the DPs from Germany, over 150 immigrants from North Africa and France. The arrival of these 4,554 immigrants at the embarkation point had not been without some last minute hitches as the movement of the 178 lorries involved was temporarily blocked by a general strike covering the whole of France. A million franc donation to the strikers' fund by the Mossad enabled the CGT, the Communist-run union, to remove all obstacles.¹⁴ Embarkation was completed at 1pm under the supervision of the French police and the more covert surveillance of the SIS, just as a stage of the Tour de France (annual cycle race) swept through Sète.

The sudden activity of the SIS had not escaped the attention of Wybot's DST men in Marseilles. Wybot immediately warned the Mossad chief, Shaul Meirov, that the British Ambassador was about to inform the French Minister of Foreign Affairs of the impending departure of the President Warfield.¹⁵ To forestall Bidault's attempts to stop the sailing, Venya Pomerantz was immediately despatched to seek the help of his political contacts and friendly civil servants in the French administration, but he met with little success. Paul Ramadier, the Prime Minister on the eve of an important conference with the British, was no more inclined than Bidault to upset Bevin, due to arrive on the 12th. Even Léon Blum and Daniel Mayer counselled prudence.¹⁶ Bidault put pressure on Jules Moch, responsible as he was for maritime matters, to forbid the sailing on the basis that the ship was not equipped with sufficient lifeboats and the captain was unable to produce a certificate of seaworthiness. Concurrently at a more local level, the British Consul managed to convince the maritime authorities of these facts, and the captain was then forbidden to set sail. That same afternoon an attempt by the maritime authorities to remove a

¹² Archives Départementales des BDR, 150W163, RG du Port-de-Bouc à Chef des RG, 4.7.47.

¹³ Zertal, *Catastrophe*, 54.

¹⁴ Yoram Kaniuk, *Il Commanda l'Exodus*. (Paris, 2000), 173.

¹⁵ Boaz, 212.

¹⁶ Bernert, 158.

part of the ship's engine to immobilise her, was thwarted by the captain. In the evening he set off with a delegation to the Préfecture at Montpellier to plead for the ship's release, but to no avail.

It was left to Depreux, with Wybot's support, to give a surreptitious green light to Pomerantz for the ship to sail: "Go ahead but be quick or soon it will be too late."¹⁷ The captain of the *Warfield*, an American by the name of Ike Aronowicz, was however faced with a number of constraints. The authorities ensured that no maritime pilot or tug were available and police were on hand to ensure that the boat remained moored to the quay. At 7.15 pm Rudy Zameret received a radio message from Paris to dispense two or three million francs to facilitate the departure.¹⁸ However despite the promise of a massive fee to a local pilot, the latter failed to materialise.¹⁹

A while later the Palyam Commander on board, Yossi Harel came under intense pressure from the Mossad in Paris. According to Ze'ev Hadari he personally phoned Harel with the following message from Meirov:

I am informing you that all our efforts to enable the sailing of the vessel through negotiations with the central French authorities have failed. You must set out on your own. You must sail whatever happens. We have arranged for them to look the other way if you do this. Therefore you must sail and take whatever opportunities come your way. Do not argue, that is an order, understand?²⁰

This telephone message was reinforced by a radio message from Meirov himself (code name Ben Yehudah) at 9.15 pm, in which he intimated that costs were not a factor if this helped to have the boat released.²¹ A further radio message at midnight from Pomerantz reflected an increasing sense of desperation. He announced that if any port workers, who aided the departure of the ship, lost their jobs as a result, a fund of five million francs was available to compensate them.²² A decision was finally made and at 4.30 am on the morning of 11th July the mooring ropes were hacked off at the ship's end, and she slowly moved out of the harbour. Almost immediately she became stuck on a sandbank at the port entrance. After one and a half hours of risky manoeuvres, she was eventually extricated and set out for the open sea. The port authorities followed her progress through binoculars and then alerted the British Consulate in Marseilles.²³

In conversations much later with his biographer, Yossi Harel freely confessed that he persuaded the captain of the boat, Ike Aronowicz, to take the boat out of the port against his better judgement. When they were then stalled on the sand bank at the port entrance, Harel ordered the engines to be pushed beyond their safety limit, risking that the boilers would explode, in order to free the boat.²⁴

¹⁷ Derogy, *La Loi du Retour*, 146.

¹⁸ Hadari, *HaMossad*, Transmission taken from the Mossad's Operational log, 112.

¹⁹ Zertal, *Catastrophe*, 70.

²⁰ Hadari, *HaMossad*, 44.

²¹ Hadari, *HaMossad*, Transmission taken from the Mossad's Operational log, 112.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Archives Nationales. F7/16089, Telephone conversation between Ministère de l'Intérieur and Secrétaire Général of the Département du Hérault, giving chronological order of the events, 21.7.47.

²⁴ Kamuk, 180-182.

Shortly after the sailing, Ze'ev Hadari and L'Abbé Glasberg convinced François Armorin at Franc-Tireur to write an article sympathetic to the immigrants on board the President Warfield. The public relations exercise had already begun.²⁵

Bevin's outrage, when he arrived the following day in Paris to co-chair the economic conference with Bidault, is wonderfully encapsulated in a letter he sent to Bidault following a private meeting earlier that day. An extract from the original letter found in the files of the MAE is reproduced here in order to give the clearest illustration of Bevin's frustration and anger at what he regarded as France's continuing cavalier attitude towards illegal immigration.

Dear Mr. Bidault,

On numerous occasions in the past few months we have appealed to our French friends to help us in our difficult task in Palestine by taking all possible steps to stop the illicit Jewish traffic through France. The French Government have responded by giving assurances that among other things the validity of the visa would be closely scrutinised before they were allowed to leave France and that the provisions of the international conventions regarding the safety of life at sea would be rigorously applied to ships suspected of participating in the traffic.

As recently as 27th June I wrote to Your Excellency once again invoking your help and requesting in particular that a ship the President Warfield should be strictly controlled in accordance with the requests made to your Ministry by HM's Embassy.

As I told you this morning, I was dismayed to find on arriving in Paris that not only had the President Warfield escaped from France but that she had been permitted to embark some 4,000 illicit immigrants in spite of the fact that she possessed a clearance certificate valid for only one journey without passengers and in fine weather.

In the circumstances I must protest most strongly against the facilities which have been accorded to the President Warfield and I request that the French Government should readmit her to France with all the passengers on board as soon as arrangements can be made to cause the President Warfield to return.

I should also be grateful to learn that the necessary disciplinary measures have been taken as regards those who permitted her departure in contradiction with the assurances of the French Government.

I take this opportunity to remind you that among the suspect vessels in French ports are the Paducah and the Northlands which are at Bayonne and the Bruna and the Luciano and the Archangelos which are at Marseilles.

I shall be glad if, in view of the departure of the President Warfield, you will agree to maintain a warship in the vicinity of Marseilles with standing orders to stop any of these vessels which may leave port. You will realise that only a French vessel can take effective action to prevent clandestine embarkation of illegal immigrants in French territorial waters.

I am, Dear Mr. Bidault, yours sincerely

²⁵ Lucien Lazare, L'Abbé Glasberg, 93.

Ernest Bevin.²⁶

Bevin then pursued the matter with Paul Ramadier, the Prime Minister, and hinted darkly that France's benign attitude to illegal immigration from its ports could well have unfortunate repercussions for French interests in North Africa.²⁷

The British Embassy entered the fray by throwing doubt on the validity of the individual Columbian entry visas which had been presented. The response of the French was that they were not allowed to query their authenticity.²⁸ In fact the Government issued a press release indicating that it had never committed itself to the British Government to check individual, as opposed to collective, entry visas delivered by foreign consulates.²⁹

Marcel Pagès was later to assert that each person on the list carried an individual Columbian visa delivered by its consulate in Marseilles and a proper French exit visa delivered by the Préfecture of the Bouches-du-Rhône.³⁰ Another report stated that the Préfecture had acted in accordance with an authority from the Ministry of the Interior dated 26th June.³¹ All these affirmations were backed up by Renseignements Généraux whose agents had checked the documents of those who had embarked.³² This flurry of reports and Government statements issued after the escape of the President Warfield from Sète were, as it later turned out, carefully drafted and coordinated to reassure the Cabinet and Prime Minister that correct procedures had been adhered to at all times by the authorities concerned.³³

The Government of Columbia then intervened to assert that the visas were indeed fakes and that in any case they would have refused to accept the DPs.³⁴ This statement therefore disavows a note previously issued by the Columbian Consul in Marseilles, where he states categorically that he was prepared to deliver visas to immigrants from Germany, subject to exit visas being issued by the Préfecture.³⁵

From the moment the President Warfield left Sète, she was continuously shadowed by Royal Navy ships and Lancasters of the Royal Air Force. On 18th July she was rammed and forcibly boarded off the coast of Palestine. A report to the Chief Secretary at the Colonial Office indicated that very strong resistance had been offered during the boarding operation. Smoke bombs, oil fuel jets, steam jets as well as fireworks and tins of corned beef were amongst the weapons employed by the immigrants. Naval officers fired shots, in one case to stop a rating being decapitated with an axe and in another when an immigrant was seen wielding a rifle. No other case of the use of such lethal weapons by immigrants has been reported. Casualties suffered by crew and immigrants were two men dead and 28 immigrants taken to the Government hospital in Haifa, one of whom later died. Many other immigrants were

²⁶ MAE Archives, Immigration, File 376, 12.7.47.

²⁷ Kochavi, *Post-Holocaust Politics*, 266.

²⁸ Lazard, 82.

²⁹ Archives Nationales, F7/16089 Press release, 1.8.47.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Memo from Direction de la Réglementation to President du Conseil, 16.7.47.

³¹ Archives Nationales, Report on departure of President Warfield by M. Jutin, Secretary General of the Department of the Hérault, 12.7.47.

³² Haganah Archives, Blumel files 123/Blumel/2, RG Sète to Director of RG in Paris, 11.7.47.

³³ Zertal, *Catastrophe*, 72.

³⁴ *L'Aurore*, 25.7.47.

³⁵ Haganah Archives, Blumel files 123/Blumel/2, Note signed by General Jose Delano, Consul of the Republic of Columbia, Marseilles, 2.7.47.

injured but these were dealt with on the spot.³⁶ After the seriously injured and dead were removed, the rest of the passengers were then transferred to three prison ships, the *Ocean Vigour*, the *Runnymede*, *Park* and the *Empire Rival*. After sailing away, the passengers discovered that they were not headed for Cyprus, but for France.

As with previous intercepted boats, there remained a controversy over whether the *Exodus* had been boarded within the three mile limit. The British contended, despite indications to the contrary, that the interception complied with international law. This was because the Admiralty was aware that detaining vessels on the high seas was *prima facie* illegal and could be used as a defence in court to prevent confiscation of the boat and the detention of the crew. Nevertheless, practical considerations led many a naval captain to board and seize boats well outside the 3 mile limit in order to prevent a determined dash to beach the boat on the shore. As a rule of thumb, boarding and seizure had to be effected the same number of miles from the shore as the number of knots the ship was travelling. Thus at a speed of seven knots, the boarding party had to take control some seven miles from the shore. With bigger and faster ships, even an interception and boarding at some twelve miles from shore became quite common.³⁷

A letter from the Admiralty in 1947 to the Foreign Office, provides the clearest indication that both the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office were fully aware that ships were being boarded outside the three mile limit. The letter states

May you be forgiven for the last paragraph of your letter... of the 7th November to Higham [Colonial Office] about the relation between the territorial water and arrest at sea. I do not think you can really get away with the view that the Foreign Office have not been informed that ships are, in fact, being boarded outside territorial waters. I thought in any case that this was common knowledge between us and the whole purpose of the correspondence was to regularize the position. I trust that this complicated matter will not have to be pursued further in view of the imminence of our departure from Palestine.³⁸

The *Exodus* is unlikely to have been the exception to the rule and was therefore most likely boarded well outside the territorial waters of Palestine.

5.2 Public relations issues

To counter the adverse publicity in the world's press occasioned by acts of terrorism and other forms of armed action in Palestine against British rule, both the Jewish Agency and the Revisionists used propaganda tools to persuade world public opinion of the justice of the Zionist cause. In the post-war anti-colonial atmosphere in the United States this was put to good effect. In particular the newsreel pictures of blood-spattered and bandaged illegal immigrants being dragged along the quay in Haifa by soldiers to prison ships, caused immense harm to the British Government's image abroad. The stories of interception and boarding at sea, with graphic descriptions of the fights which ensued, were reported on at length. Whatever the true circumstances, the vision of white-helmeted sailors clubbing men, women and children, cast the illegal immigrant as the under-dog in an unfair fight. Clearly the

³⁶ TNA, CO 5372400, C.I.D. Jerusalem to Chief Secretary, 21.7.47.

³⁷ TNA, ADM123526, Assessment by the CIG Mediterranean, 31.3.47.

³⁸ TNA, ADM123526, Letter from G.C.B. Dodds of the Military Branch of the Admiralty to John Beith at the Foreign Office, 8.12.47.

Palyam escorts encouraged resistance for the publicity value, but only to a point which would not endanger their ship or the lives of the immigrants. The bigger the ship and the numbers who sailed, the greater the publicity value when the ship was intercepted.

It is not unreasonable to speculate whether plans to beach these larger ships on the shores of Palestine were ever a practical proposition, given the difficulty of disembarking and secreting away such a large number of passengers in the likely presence of British soldiers waiting on shore. It is noteworthy that those very few ships which successfully reached shore and disembarked their passengers out of sight of the British, were the smaller ships with only a few hundred illegal immigrants on board. Thus the question as to whether a ship of the size of the President Warfield was seriously intended to be beached is an intriguing one.

The Mossad was certainly aware that British surveillance had been continuous ever since she left the USA and that therefore there was no possibility of escaping detection by the Palestine Naval Patrol once she approached territorial waters. On the other hand, the ship had exceptionally powerful engines and, once in territorial waters could have attempted to out-distance the destroyers in a fast dash for the shore, where her flat bottom would have facilitated an easy beaching.

The question of the true intent of illegal immigration is addressed directly by Idith Zertal. In discussing the Exodus affair, Zertal develops a thesis that illegal immigration was both an exploitation of the immigrants and a carefully arranged propaganda stunt. She asserts that the attempt to break through the naval blockade off the coast of Palestine was "not even the main goal of illegal immigration"³⁹ and that furthermore "the Zionists had never intended to actually bring the 4,500 refugees onto the shores of Palestine, and such an effort had no chance of success since the Exodus was a show project from its inception."⁴⁰

Such a conclusion, if true, would reflect very negatively on Mossad. To encourage violent resistance when at the same time it counted on the Exodus, like most previous ships being intercepted and brought into Haifa would have been a cynical exercise indeed. To do so deliberately to obtain the full glare of world publicity in the presence of the UNSCOP team would be even more questionable. There is, according to Idith Zertal, strong evidence to suggest that the timing of the departure of the President Warfield was not fortuitous, but was linked to the presence in Palestine at the time of the UNSCOP enquiry team. Indeed a contemporary newspaper account reported that the Haganah had announced its determination to bring in a ship during UNSCOP's presence in Palestine. As it was, it arrived just days before their departure.⁴¹

As the Exodus approached the shores of Palestine, instructions had been transmitted by the Mossad in the Yishuv to the Palyam escorts, as to how to convey the plight of the immigrants to UNSCOP representatives on shore.⁴² In the event, the Jewish Agency managed to persuade Emil Sandstrom, the Swedish chairman of the committee, to at least watch the trans-shipment of the immigrants to prison ships in Haifa.⁴³

Most historical accounts speak of the determination by the American crew to keep the ship directed towards Palestine, despite being intercepted and rammed

³⁹ Zertal, *Catastrophe*, 170.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴¹ *New York Herald Tribune (European Edition)*, 18.7.47.

⁴² Zertal, *Catastrophe*, 56.

⁴³ *New York Herald Tribune (European Edition)*, 19.7.47.

continuously, fourteen miles outside the territorial water limits. Added to this, the fact that organised groups of immigrants and the crew constantly tried to prevent the British from gaining a toe-hold on the ship and from entering the wheelhouse makes it less than conceivable that all this was staged purely to meet the propaganda needs of the Mossad on shore. In addition there is the eye-witness report of John Stanley Grauer, correspondent of The Churchman, who was serving as a volunteer member of the crew. When interviewed, he stated that the intention had been to beach the boat in the early hours of the morning, but that at 3 am British destroyers came up and rammed the ship, making this task impossible.⁴⁴

The violent death of the American Second Mate, Bill Bernstein and two young immigrants, as well as more than 200 injured, attests to the level of sustained and violent resistance put up against the British sailors. Also, given the Palyam commander Yossi Harel's known consideration for the safety of his immigrant charges on board, it is equally illogical that he would have gone through such a dangerous charade, knowing full well that a successful beaching was out of the question. In any event, he had the example of the successful beaching of the Ulva near Haifa, a few months previously with one thousand immigrants on board, as an indication of what could be achieved. The fact that the Ulva's immigrants were all captured and transferred to Cyprus does not necessarily detract from the original intent of a quick dispersal of all those on board once a landing had been achieved.

In this instance, one feels that Zertal has overstated her thesis that illegal immigration was primarily a propaganda exercise mounted by a non-compassionate Ben Gurion and without regard for the safety or the real needs of the immigrants.⁴⁵ This unusually categorical assertion is well out of kilter with the otherwise analytical and insightful appreciation of the subject, which she constantly displays in her book.

In his own book, Zeev Mankovitz takes Zertal lightly to task by asserting that treating Holocaust survivors purely as victims of history, was misleading.⁴⁶ He strongly disagrees that, weakened by the privations they had endured, they did not have minds of their own, were unable alone to find their own way out of the DP camps and were therefore putty in the hands of Zionist emissaries. In his view this took no account of what these survivors had already achieved by their own efforts and it diminished their stature as human beings. To him illegal immigration was a shared burden between the Mossad's emissaries and the survivors. Without this merger of distinct but interlocking interests, the whole project of bringing the survivors to Palestine had no hope of success.⁴⁷

Such moderate criticism is overshadowed by a real broadside aimed at her by Elihu Bergman, who was involved with Aliyah Bet as a crew member on the Tirat Zvi in April 1948. In a review article on her book, Bergman's central issue is that Zertal, "by her own admission" was predisposed from the outset to find the Zionist establishment in the Yishuv guilty of exploiting the She'erit Hapletah as a means to Jewish statehood.⁴⁸ Clearly labelling Zertal among the "new historians" and "revisionist historians" who had in recent years emerged in Israel, he castigates her interpretation of the factual information and, more pedantically, disputes the accuracy of small points of detail, which in no way can be said to detract from Zertal's

⁴⁴ New York Herald Tribune (European Edition), 19.7.47

⁴⁵ Zertal, Catastrophe, 13 and 219.

⁴⁶ Mankovitz, 295/297.

⁴⁷ Mankovitz, 295/297.

⁴⁸ Elihu Bergman, "Israel: Born in Sin?" in Israel Affairs, Vol.7, No1, Autumn (London, 2000), 121.

scholarly treatment of the subject. However, he does comment favourably on her use of factual and archival material as an "impressive piece of historical writing."⁴⁹ Those compliments aside, the main thrust of his accusation against Zertal is that of bias against the Zionist establishment and the 'elite' represented by the kibbutz and labour movements, the Haganah, Palyam, Mossad, Ben Gurion, Yigal Allon, Shaul Meirov, etc. Another equally damning assertion by Bergman refers to Zertal's characterisation of the main players in illegal immigration as reflecting subjective judgements and that she substitutes name-calling for serious historical analysis.⁵⁰ He concluded "The Exodus account provides another example of how Zertal mixes bias with fact."⁵¹

In reality, Zertal argues that after 50 years it was time for different perspectives on the subject to be explored. In particular the necessity to strip Aliyah Bet of its Zionist mythology and to recognise that the campaign had other motives such as using the propaganda effect of violent resistance to advance the call for unlimited immigration. She also asserts that Ben Gurion saw the ultimate effect of the campaign as advancing Jewish sovereignty over Palestine and, in so doing, fortifying his own political base.⁵²

Given the body of evidence presented in previous chapters, one would find it difficult to disagree with Zertal's interpretation of the Realpolitik behind Aliyah Bet. The Zionist leaders in the Yishuv were pragmatic individuals who had to overcome their inherent powerlessness in the face of a colonial power. Neither Markowitz nor Bergman should have been all that surprised that inevitably there was also a more dispassionate or callous side which emerged in the course of the campaign.

Aviva Halamish repudiates the contention that, in the case of the President Warfield, many pregnant women and children were taken on board purely to increase the dramatic effect. In her view, the mixed bag of immigrants was due more to circumstances in the DP Camps than to a carefully thought out programme.⁵³ However in a report provided by a French member of the Haganah, special attention was drawn to the existence of hundreds of women well-advanced in their pregnancy, which he considered was an onerous responsibility for the escorts on board. He suggested applying better selectivity to such women before allowing them to leave Germany.⁵⁴

Tom Segev voiced scepticism about Halamish's views but also about illegal immigration in general. In his view its only inherent benefit lay in its actual existence as a strategic weapon to achieve the creation of a Jewish state. Taking a controversial, but nevertheless arguable, position he contended that "The illegal operation did not... bring the Yishuv many more people than would have come legally, from that point of view it was futile."⁵⁵

For Arieh Kochavi there were "no clear winners in the struggle over Jewish immigration." However he recognised that world-wide coverage of British actions against the ships kept international attention on the Jewish DP problem, which otherwise was in danger of waning. He makes the point that the fact that thousands of DPs attempted the journey to Palestine was in itself a considerable achievement.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵² Zertal, *Catastrophe*, 14.

⁵³ Halamish, 45.

⁵⁴ Yad Tabenkin Archives, Polonski files, Unsigned report dated 20th July 1947.

⁵⁵ Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million* (New York, 1991), 131/132.

World opinion was thus made aware how the DPs' predicament and the question of Palestine were inextricably interlinked.⁵⁶

These academic debates in Israel over the issue of Zionist propaganda indicate how illegal immigration moved in the historiography from its initial glorification to a more balanced view of its true purpose and achievement.

Turning now to the broader public relations dimension of the Exodus Affair, this clearly reached unprecedented levels, with each party in the conflict concerned to portray its image in the most favourable light. From the moment that the Exodus was intercepted outside Palestine territorial waters in July 1947 until the arrival of her passengers in Hamburg in September, both the Zionists and the British were aware of the importance attached to the presentational aspects of their respective viewpoints to the world's press.

After the trans-shipment of the Exodus passengers to the three British prison ships for their onward journey to France, Bevin saw an opportunity to counter the negative image for the British that newsreel film of the arrival of the Exodus in Haifa had created around the world. In a revealing memo to the Paris (Embassy) he wrote

The fact that Mr. Bidault personally agreed to return the passengers and we are actually returning them must not, repeat not, be disclosed until you receive further instructions. If the French Government refuses to accept them they may yet have to be returned back to Cyprus. You may however allow your press attachés to make use of the information in paras 2 and 3 above. They should stress the inhumanity of the Jewish organisers in their gross overcrowding of the President Warfield... If this incident provokes sufficient interest we shall make it an occasion for the maximum publicity possible by the BBC...⁵⁷

Unfortunately for Bevin, one negative image followed another, as the passengers on the prison ships refused, over a period of three weeks, to disembark in Port-de-Bouc and the French would not permit force to be used.

With regard to press comment on the Affair in France, it should first be noted that with the disappearance of extreme right wing newspapers after the war, public opinion was largely guided by papers created at the Liberation. Thus national papers like Combat, Franc-Tireur and Libération, imbued with the spirit of the resistance, all quickly espoused the Zionist cause.⁵⁸ Others such as Le Monde (Liberal) and L'Aurore (Virulently anti-Communist and Gaullist) were more measured, but nevertheless criticised British policy. The communist L'Humanité, taking the stance that the British presence in Palestine was an "imperialist" venture took its lead from the attitude of the USSR, which although initially opposed to Zionism, felt it was the lesser of two evils. It is also significant that many Jews in France were either active militants of the Communist Party or sympathisers.⁵⁹ Generally the press felt that British public opinion was too insular and that because, unlike the French, they had no experience of the suffering of the Jews or those in the Resistance, they could not empathise with the plight of thousands of DPs some two years after the end of the war.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Kochavi, Post-Holocaust Politics, 85.

⁵⁷ TNA, FO 188/595A, Swedish Legation files, Bevin to Paris Embassy, 19.7.47.

⁵⁸ Zertal, «Le Cinquième Côté du Triangle», 419.

⁵⁹ Jacques Daloz, La Création de l'Etat d'Israël: Vue par la Presse Française, Paris, 1993, 6.

⁶⁰ Le Monde, 26.8.47.

A reporter from L' Aurore who managed to hire a small boat to approach the Runnymede Park commented

As you approach you perceive something like a lobster-basket, from which hands appear to acknowledge our calls. Imagine under the blue sky of the Mediterranean, a narrow prison where lie 1,500 naked men and women, who wished to live in freedom in the land of their faith. Have the British understood this? The obstinacy of the Jews has clearly upset them. Are the immigrants going to be forced to disembark at the end of a bayonet? The problem is a delicate one for France, which above all wishes to show itself a hospitable country.⁶¹

The mouthpiece of the French Socialist Party (SFIO), Le Populaire, of which the former Prime Minister, Léon Blum, was the political director, no doubt expressed the unofficial views of the Socialist Ministers within the Cabinet. These, whilst opposed to the terrorist activities of the Irgun, regretted that the British had refused a request from UNSCOP to commute the death sentences on three young Jews who earlier had attacked the Acre prison.⁶²

When later in July the passengers of the Exodus were on their way back to France, the newspaper stated that despite the change in British tactics, France would not employ methods such as the use of force, which were contrary to all its traditions. France would welcome them, but would not force them to disembark. Reflecting the sentiments of other French newspapers, Le Populaire emphasised that the idea of again incarcerating the "Jewish survivors of Hitler" was pure anathema. Humane solutions had to be found to the problem of Palestine and of the Jewish DPs.⁶³

During the following month, Léon Blum himself was so moved by the plight of the Exodus passengers that he devoted three leading articles to the subject. He addressed himself directly to his friends in the Labour Government, calling on them to act with greater wisdom, to recognise that their policy in respect of the immigrants was "outraging the universal conscience." Such a spectacle was "unbearable, heart rending and intolerable." He begged his English friends to think again. They had come up against an unanimous and adverse public opinion. Everybody knew that the passengers would not disembark voluntarily. So did the British authorities. It was time for them to decide where they were to be taken. Then the boats could leave with their unfortunate and heroic cargo. It was also time for the United Nations to come to a decision.

To add to the embarrassment of the Labour Government, Harold Laski, then Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Labour Party, used the columns of Le Populaire to express his congratulations to the French Government for its courage in its noble refusal to force the Jewish refugees to disembark in Port-de-Bouc, despite the pressures from London. Having, as he put it, committed a grave error at the start of its new administration in dealing with the Palestine problem, Laski suggested that the [British] Socialist Government would be well advised to start off again by recognising its errors, rather than camouflaging the results and trying to make the French people an accomplice in its injustices.⁶⁴

⁶¹ L' Aurore, 29-30.7.47.

⁶² Le Populaire, 15.7.47.

⁶³ Le Populaire, 24.7.47.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 30.8.47.

In his third article, Blum took time off to answer the Manchester Guardian which, stung by his previous articles, had pointedly questioned his views on the matter of Palestine. In his reply he started off by disclaiming that he was in any way the spokesman of the Zionists and that he only spoke on behalf of the French Socialist Party. To make the point that his primary loyalty was to France, he further stated "I was a born Jew and have helped, to the best of my ability, to create the Jewish National Home in Palestine, and [yet] I have never thought to leave France." ⁶⁵ In this way he politely rejected any question of partisanship because of his Jewish origins.

The local regional newspaper La Marseillaise (Communist) also fell within the category of those newspapers which totally disapproved of the British action. Interspersed with reports from Palestine of the hanging of the three young members of the Irgun and of the subsequent reprisal culminating in the hanging of two British sergeants, the paper's reporter concentrated his venom on the British. Under the headline "I saw human beings kept like animals aboard the Runnymede Park", he characterised the ship as a "Floating Auschwitz". This followed a boat trip out into the harbour to view conditions on board from some distance away. Referring to the children, women and old men he could see through the wire of the cages he commented that all right-thinking people would be revolted by such a spectacle. ⁶⁶

The bad press that the British Government was receiving in French and American newspapers over the Affair was sufficiently exasperating for Creech Jones to complain in the House of Commons that "malicious vilifications... had not made their [i.e. the Government's] task any easier." ⁶⁷ This was followed up by a meeting between the British Ambassador and the Secretary General of the MAE, in which Duff Cooper asked for his intervention so that British intentions were not "systematically misconstrued in the French press." ⁶⁸

The British Government aware that it risked losing the public relations battle, made a last effort to explain its position to the world at large. In a press statement issued on 21st August 1947 it warned that, failing any change, the immigrants were about to be taken to the British zone in Germany where they could safely be disembarked. It sought to justify its actions on a number of counts:

1. That the French Government had originally agreed to the return of the immigrants to France.
2. That the immigrants had boarded with false papers and that the Exodus had left port without authorisation.
3. That the Jewish Agency could have used its influence to encourage the immigrants to land in France but chose to act otherwise.
4. That pending a decision of the United Nations on the future of Palestine, nothing should be done to prejudice the outcome. In particular the question of immigration was a major issue and HM Government could not vary the present entry quota of 1,500 per month.
5. The practice of transferring illegal immigrants to Cyprus only encouraged the organisers of the illegal traffic.

⁶⁵ Le-Populaire, 31.8.47

⁶⁶ La Marseillaise, 1947.

⁶⁷ New York Herald Tribune, (European Edition), 12.8.47.

⁶⁸ Lazard, 92.

6. There were still in Germany thousands of Jews who could have been admitted legally to Palestine, were it not for the flow of illegal immigration.⁶⁹

The effect of the British decision on the Yishuv was one of extreme shock. It was felt that this could only increase the sense of humiliation, not to say impotence, of the more moderate elements. Most of the Hebrew press joined in sharp attacks on Bevin's ultimatum. Even Ha' Aretz, Dr. Weizmann's mouthpiece, decried "the crime which will remain engraved in the memory of mankind, the return of the survivors of Nazi massacres to the slaughterhouse itself."

Fearing an extremist backlash, one moderate Jewish leader remarked, with a certain irony: "Mr. Bevin has asked for trouble and the dissidents [Irgun and Stern Group] who easily match Mr. Bevin in lunacy and stubbornness, will certainly not disappoint him". Even in the Palestine government, which was not involved in the events at Port-de-Bouc, a number of officials considered Bevin's step a major political blunder.⁷⁰

The Affair was possibly the event which brought Britain's public image in relation to Palestine and illegal immigration to its lowest point. Within weeks, however, attention moved to the United Nations Assembly where Britain's role in Palestine was speedily to be brought to an ignominious end.

Before the actual date when the partition of Palestine was overwhelmingly approved by the Assembly of the United Nations, the British Embassy in Palestine wrote a lengthy report to the Foreign Office on American attitudes, both governmental and public, towards recent British economic and Foreign policy. Needless to say the subject of the Exodus occupied a certain amount of space. Essentially the decision to send the passengers back to France enabled the "Zionist propaganda machine" the opportunity to use the whole of its resources in defamation of the British action". However the writer consoled himself that, at least at that point, other than for New York and Los Angeles where the "Jewish element" were influential, there were other reasons for the deterioration in British prestige in the USA, namely the British withdrawal from Greece and the suspension of the convertibility of Sterling, despite previous commitments. However when in August 1947, the decision was taken to return the passengers to Germany, the public repercussions were far more extensive. "The sympathy which it aroused for the Jews and the consequent indignation against the British decision, spread to almost all sections of the American public and was not confined merely to Zionist supporters."⁷¹ Only in the aftermath of the partition vote did the American State Department convince President Truman as to the complexities involved in creating a separate Jewish State and he then moved to propose a trusteeship as an alternative solution. However when on 14th May 1948, Ben-Gurion announced the creation of the State of Israel, Truman ordered the State Department to grant de facto recognition.

This further example of the strength of American public opinion, in regard to the Zionist cause, is one which the British Government was constantly aware of in the propaganda battle they were waging with the Jewish Agency, the Irgun and the Stern Group, all of whom had their supporters in the USA. Only in the aftermath of

⁶⁹ Haganah Archives, Blumel files, 123/BOUC/3. Text in French of press statement released in London by British Government on 21.8.47.

⁷⁰ New York Herald Tribune (European Edition), 22.8.47.

⁷¹ TNA, FO 953/43, Letter from W.P.N. Edwards, British Embassy, Washington to I.A. Kirkpatrick, Foreign Office, 5.11.47

the partition vote did the American State Department convince President Truman as to the complexities involved in creating a separate Jewish State and he then moved to propose a trusteeship as an alternative solution.⁷² But once Ben-Gurion declared the creation of the State of Israel on 14th May 1948, Truman ordered the State Department, notwithstanding the opposition of the Secretary of State, George Marshall, to extend de facto recognition.

In France, the glare of publicity created by the Exodus Affair had its downside. Firstly it compromised the Mossad's clandestine network and its connections with the highest levels of government.⁷³ Secondly, the Mossad had to keep a very low profile, so as not to embarrass the French Government any further.⁷⁴ There are, however, indications that the ensuing moratorium on immigration activities was also exercised because of the discussions on partition then proceeding at the United Nations.⁷⁵

One could also surmise that the level of injuries and fatalities on the Exodus also caused the Palyam Commander on board, Yoşsi Harel, to reflect seriously whether the results of violent resistance to the Royal Navy served any purpose. He had already expressed his misgivings to a gathering of Zionist leaders in November 1946, following the seizure of another boat which had been under his command. He stated that in view of the fatality and dozens of injured which occurred on the Knesset Israel, the overall safety of the ship's passengers must always be considered paramount. In Harel's own words "We are not fighting to kill the British but to save Jews."⁷⁶ If the Palmach wished to confront the British then the place to do so was on the shores of Palestine, rather than using well motivated but ill-equipped immigrants in dangerous confrontations at sea. In addition Harel complained that whilst the immigrants were battling the British on board the Knesset Israel, then docked in Haifa, there was no demonstration or intervention by the Yishuv to prevent the transshipment of the immigrants onto boats for Cyprus.⁷⁷ Furthermore, on board ship, he was often faced with contradictory and confusing instructions transmitted by both the Mossad and the Palmach headquarters.⁷⁸ Such sentiments and criticisms, however, did not necessarily provoke a positive response from his chiefs in Palestine.

A definition of the Mossad's and the Palmach's respective responsibilities for Aliyah Bet is not easily achieved given their overlapping functions and their uneasy political relationship. In simple terms, however, whereas the Mossad involved itself in providing the ships, refurbishing them, stocking them with supplies and selecting the ports of departure, the Palmach escorted the immigrants on board, allocated their berths and looked after their needs during the journey. They were also responsible for discipline on board and training the teams who would be called upon to resist the British Navy when an attempted boarding took place. On land as well as at sea they provided the radio operators who maintained contact with the Mossad headquarters in Paris and Tel Aviv. Once at sea, the primary responsibility for bringing the ship to Palestine lay with a Mossad-appointed overall commander to whom both the ship's captain and the Palmach commander reported.

⁷² Archives Nationales, Fonds Georges Bidault, 457AP3, Telegramme from Parodi to MAE regarding Press Conference given by President Truman, 25.3.48

⁷³ Frédérique Schillo, *La France et la Création de l'Etat d'Israël : 18 février 1947-11 mai 1949* (Paris, 1997), 50.

⁷⁴ Hadari, *Second Exodus*, 158.

⁷⁵ Hadari, *Voyage to Freedom*, 79.

⁷⁶ Kamiuk, 68.

⁷⁷ Kamiuk, 149.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

It is misleading to imply, as Liebreich unfortunately does, that because of the different backgrounds of the Mossad and Palmach people and their different political affiliations (the Palmach's patrons were the Mapam party, whilst those of the Mossad were from Mapai) that their approach to Aliyah Bet was different.⁷⁹ It is equally gratuitous to assert that, because the Palmach escorts were generally young, born in Palestine and militarily trained, that they had more of a propensity to confront the British than the Mossad emissaries, with their European backgrounds, who allegedly had more of a tendency towards conspiracy, moderation and an abhorrence of violence.⁸⁰

The basic reality is that both partners in the Aliyah Bet enterprise shared the dual objective of getting Jews to Palestine, whilst at the same time seeking to obtain the most publicity out of the event. They believed there was no better way to influence world public opinion than the distressing sight of immigrants being hauled off illegal ships, which bore all the signs of a fierce battle at sea before their arrival in Haifa. That said, it is acknowledged that there was continuous and sometimes acrimonious debate on the best methods to be adopted. As to the question of the level of resistance to be offered, Liebreich is correct in asserting that this was left to the discretion of the Mossad commander, as the case of the Pan ships will demonstrate.⁸¹

The sailing of the Pan-ships from Burgas, Bulgaria, in December 1947 was preceded by weeks of debate within the Mossad and between the Mossad and the Jewish Agency as to whether the time and the political environment were ripe for the ships to sail to Palestine with over 15,000 illegal immigrants on board.⁸² In addition, Harel, now having experienced the fatalities and injuries among the immigrants on both the Knesset Israel and the Exodus, decided to confront Shaul Meirov in order to establish the rules of engagement. In the case of the Exodus, as the ultimate commander on board, he had relied on his own assessment of the situation. He had brought confrontation with the British to an end when he considered that further ramming by the destroyers would imperil the ship and that the level of injuries sustained was too high. For this he later had to suffer the recriminations of his colleagues in the Mossad and elsewhere.⁸³ If he was to encourage the immigrants to resist British boarding parties again, he wanted a clear and unambiguous order from the Mossad. In his own heart he felt that such an order would be a mistake. Harel's own words, as later related to Kaniuk, express vividly the conflict he faced as between carrying out orders as a soldier and his overriding responsibility for the lives of the immigrants in his charge.

Our war is to bring them [the immigrants] to the country [Palestine], not to turn them into soldiers in a lost battle. We do not have the right to turn them into the elite forces of the State-to-be, because this State-to-be is precisely the home which they need.

They no longer believe in anything, they are exhausted by years of trailing around and of betrayal. We do not have the right... Once the 15,000 [from the Pan ships] will have crossed the Mediterranean, we can say that they

⁷⁹ Liebreich, 249.

⁸⁰ Liebreich, 181.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Hadari, *Voyage to Freedom*, 3.

⁸³ Alar Tyler, "The Exodus still makes waves" in *Manna: The Voice of Modern Judaism* (London, Spring, 1998), 5.

have forced the blockade. The crossing will itself be the guarantee that they are on their way to the country [even if this lay via Cyprus], and that will be our victory. This is what our war is all about. Each Jew that survives intact will be our reward.

Meirov, reflecting on his own share of responsibility for the sinking of the *Patria* back in 1940 with the loss of 267 lives,⁸⁴ tacitly acknowledged that the immigrants should never be exposed to unnecessary risks.⁸⁵ Nevertheless after the sinking of the *Patria* he did not feel remorse. He commented to one of his subordinates at the time "People like us had no other way to operate. Despite all the terrible, fierce pain over the victims, our political, moral right was drawn from our absolute recognition that we had no other way of fighting the war of immigration and freedom... not that we were happy about these methods... The responsibility falls on the enemy regime [i.e. the British]."⁸⁶

Another ongoing issue revolved around the size of boats to be used. Harel and Meirov were in favour of using large boats in order to save the largest possible number of immigrants in the shortest possible time.⁸⁷ Others such as Yemda Arazi, of La Spezia fame, and even Ben-Gurion were more in favour of a continuous stream of small boats which were more likely to evade British surveillance and make successful landings because of their sheer numbers. In the end the proponents for the large boats won the day.⁸⁷

5.3 The political dimensions of the Affair

It would appear that, in applying *Refoulement*, Bevin was relying on verbal assurances given to him by Bidault that if the immigrants were returned to France they would be disembarked and returned to Germany. However, Bevin remained sceptical as to whether Bidault would be able to carry the French Cabinet with him and indeed whether the "refoulement policy" would indeed work.⁸⁸

A Foreign Office spokesman announced on 21st July, very prematurely as it turned out, that France had agreed to the return of the immigrants. He indicated that there were two reasons for choosing France rather than Cyprus. Firstly Cyprus was overcrowded. Secondly the more vigorous policy was to put future illegal immigrants on notice that they could no longer rely on being sent to Cyprus and from there being slowly filtered into Palestine. In Jerusalem however this news was kept from the local population and a dusk to dawn curfew imposed to prevent violence when it eventually filtered through. A curfew was also imposed on Haifa, after the Haganah attacked two naval radar stations on Mount Carmel in order to prevent further interceptions at sea.⁸⁹ The following day, Creech-Jones told the House of Commons that Great Britain was not concerned with what happened to the 4,500 Exodus immigrants. It was, he declared, a matter entirely for the French authorities.⁹⁰

The political objectives sought in the Exodus Affair were reflected in the extensive efforts of both the Mossad and Zionist groups in France to exercise their presence at Port-de-Bouc when the three prison ships dropped anchor in the bay. The

⁸⁴ Kaniuk, 76; Hadari, *Voyage to Freedom*, 85. In order to prevent its use by the British in deporting Jews to Mauritius, Meirov had ordered that the boat be disabled by explosives.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁸⁶ Zertal, *Catastrophe*, 181.

⁸⁷ Kaniuk, 155; Hadari, *Voyage to Freedom*, 78.

⁸⁸ TNA, FO 188/595A, Memo from Bevin to Paris Embassy, 19.7.47.

⁸⁹ *New York Herald Tribune (European Edition)*, 21.7.47

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.7.47.

first task was to get into contact with the Palyam leadership on board so as to bolster the resolve of the DPs not to disembark voluntarily on French soil. This gambit with the risks to health which it involved was intended to call the British bluff and force a return to Palestine or, at worse, Cyprus. The Mossad worked with both the Minister of the Interior, Edouard Depreux and its own operatives to arrive at this goal.

Depreux, who had secretly encouraged the departure of the President Warfield some 12 days before, now convinced the Cabinet at a meeting held on 23rd July 1947 at Rambouillet, the Prime Minister's summer residence, of the firm line to be taken with the British when their prison ships arrived off Pott-de-Bouc. Bidault, aware that the British would press for the return to France of the passengers, had already taken the unusual step of asking Duff Cooper to meet him in Rambouillet for a discussion prior to the deliberations on the topic by the Cabinet.

Duff Cooper reported later that day to the Foreign Office that Bidault, having come out of the Cabinet meeting especially to meet him, had felt that it was the height of madness for the French Government to give the British so much trouble over this matter when so many things of greater importance were being considered. He attributed the attitude of his Socialist colleagues, especially that of the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Transport to the influence of Mr. Blum.

Bidault had effectively found a pretext to disguise his own inability to meet his commitment to Bevin by placing the blame squarely on the Socialist faction within the coalition. At a later appearance before the Foreign Affairs Commission of the National Assembly, Bidault declared: "It is clear that in this affair [of the Exodus], I say it frankly, French generosity has gone too far. I am not in a position to give any explanations as to the surveillance of the ports. This is outside of my control".⁹²

Within the confines of the MAE, the Secretary General, Chauvel, also vented his frustration at the turn of events. Besides neither satisfying the Jews nor the Arabs, he foresaw a major diplomatic incident with the British at a time when France needed them to resolve its major issues concerning Germany. In his view the only way to make amends for the "scandalous" default of allowing the embarkation of the immigrants in the first place, was for France to permit their return to French soil. He was amazed that certain people in positions of authority were "as stupid" as to maintain a contrary position, in the face of the law and France's international obligations. He characterised the Zionist sympathies of certain members of the government [obviously referring to Depreux and Moch] as sabotaging French policy at a time when major issues were at stake.⁹³ It is suggested that, as ever, the Quai d'Orsay, anxious to maintain smooth relations with its British partner, whilst also keeping its Arab partner on side, chose to ignore public opinion.⁹⁴

Two Cabinet meetings were held to discuss the Government's attitude to the return of the Exodus immigrants. Bousquet on behalf of the MAE stated that 4,500 individual visas, alleged to have been issued by the Columbian Consul General in Marseilles, were forgeries issued by one or other Jewish organisation. Equally the letter of the Consul General, previously referred to, was a forgery. Consequently, as the Government had to take responsibility, it would have to respond favourably to the British request for the immigrants to be readmitted into France. Boursicot, the head of the Sûreté, representing Depreux, responded that without using force, the police would be unable to return the 4,500 immigrants to Germany and Austria.

⁹¹ TNA, CO 537 Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 23.7.47.

⁹² Moine. This refers to the session of the Commission on 9.8.47.

⁹³ Archives Nationales, Fonds Georges Bidault, 457AP124, Note du Secrétariat Général MAE, 22.7.47

⁹⁴ Jacques Dalloz, *La Création de l'Etat d'Israël*, 5

In the present circumstances the Ministry of the Interior was not prepared to take on such a responsibility. Having checked with one of the Jewish welfare organisations, the OSE, it appeared that the immigrants would refuse to leave the British boats. On the basis of this revelation, Depreux, later in the day, officially confirmed that he would not allow a [forced] disembarkation from the three English boats.⁹⁵ Depreux, as the Minister in Charge, then gave precise instructions to the Préfet of the Bouches-du-Rhône that the liberty of choice of the DPs was to be respected. In other words no forced disembarkation would be allowed. Port-de-Bouc was chosen in preference to the better amenities in Marseilles, specifically to isolate any incidents that might occur after the arrival of the ships.⁹⁶

In view of André Blumel's close relationship with the police and Jewish circles, he was specifically appointed by Depreux to establish contact with the DPs and the various Jewish organisations. He was to be part of a commission constituted by the Government and made up of officials from the MAE, the Interior Ministry and the Public Works Ministry, who would board each one of the three ships.⁹⁷ By placing the MAE in a junior position, Depreux clearly intended to ensure that his officials as well as those of Jules Moch, maintained complete control of the situation vis a vis the British and thwarted any possibility of disembarkation by force. On 25th July, Nahum Goldman of the Jewish Agency Executive and Marc Jarblum, President of the French Zionist Organisation called on Edouard Depreux, to thank him for the position taken by the Government and asked him to do everything possible to prevent the British from forcibly disembarking the Jews on French soil.⁹⁸

A few years after the creation of the State of Israel and in belated response to an invitation from Israel's representative, Maurice Fischer, issued in May 1948, Edouard Depreux and his wife visited Israel as guests of the Government. On his return to Paris he related his views of the country to an invited audience. In referring to the Exodus Affair he commented that he refused Bevin's demand to land the immigrants by force on French territory. He also remarked that, faced with the MAE's pleas for action, he adopted their own renowned reputation for procrastination and only responded when the matter was virtually over.⁹⁹ Later in his memoirs, Depreux stated: "The police service that was under my authority facilitated the departure of the President Warfield. In my view we had neither to force its departure nor to forbid it. It was for the immigrants to make the decision, whilst taking into account the risks they ran."¹⁰⁰

In addition to delegating André Blumel to meet the immigrants, members of the Mossad such as Venya Pomerantz and L'Abbé Glasberg, were provided by the Interior Ministry with letters of introduction to the local authorities in Marseilles. It appointed both of them to the Government's welcoming committee and specifically designated Pomerantz as a Yiddish and Hebrew interpreter.¹⁰¹ According to Hadari, besides himself another Mossad operative, Chanan Zurnorn, also acting as an

⁹⁵ Archives Nationales, Fonds Georges Bidault, 457AP124, Note de la Direction Générale des Affaires Administratives et Sociales, re: Président Warfield, 22.7.47.

⁹⁶ New York Herald Tribune (European Edition), 29.7.47.

⁹⁷ Depreux, 301.

⁹⁸ New York Herald Tribune (European Edition), 26.7.47.

⁹⁹ Archives of Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, Fonds Cletta et Daniel Mayer, 1.23 MIA, Impressions d'Israël, Conférence au Club Echos, 27.1.55.

¹⁰⁰ Depreux, 298.

¹⁰¹ Archives Nationales, F7/16089, Letters of introduction from la Direction de la Réglementation et des Etrangers, 25.7.47.

interpreter managed to join the French delegation permitted by the British to board the prison ships a few days later.¹⁰²

On 28th July 1947, the Mossad itself mobilised both its own operatives and those of Polonski's AI to travel post haste to Marseilles and organise overt and covert actions. The overt actions were to take the form of mass demonstrations against the British by a contingent of Zionist youth in the presence of the French and international press. They were also to take food to the boats and, if necessary, resist any attempt by the British at forced disembarkation on to French soil.¹⁰³ The purpose of covert action was to extricate the Palestinian escorts and crew of the Exodus, whilst at the same time emboldening the other passengers in their refusal to disembark.

A description of the scene at Port-de-Bouc on 29th July 1947, is encapsulated in the following newspaper report

In Port-de-Bouc, the population of this little town has doubled as France prepares to welcome the deportees. About 1,000 young French Jews, most of them wearing short trousers, rucksacks and blanket rolls have arrived since dawn to lend their moral and, if needed, physical support. The old maple-shaped esplanade bordering the inlet where the Jews were expected to have been landed was lined with waiting trucks and ambulances. Two companies of blue-uniformed Republican Guards held the crowds back with wire-rope cordons and wooden barriers. White smocked doctors and nurses scurried around. A girls school had been converted into an emergency hospital and feeding station.

The report also stated that statistics on the number of passengers in the three prison ships were provided by the Public Health Director of the Port of Marseilles. They indicated a total passenger list of 4,389 made up of 1,832 men, 1,602 women and 955 children. Of these some 40 were ill.¹⁰⁴ Compared to the 4,554 immigrants who originally left from Sète on 11th July, one can assume that the difference was accounted for by the deaths on board and those remaining in Haifa, because of their injuries.

On 30th July, the French National Assembly voted unanimously a resolution asking Britain to solve urgently and humanely the "tragic affair" of the 4,500 who had refused to land in France. The resolution congratulated Paul Ramadier and his Ministers for their liberal action in refusing to enforce the disembarkation of the homeless Jews.¹⁰⁵ A few days later, following a lead given by Marcel Pagès, Depreux wrote to Bidault describing conditions on board the ships and stating that the presence of the British in French territorial waters might have a detrimental effect on French public opinion. He therefore discreetly suggested that the British be encouraged to bring their controversial exercise to a speedy conclusion.¹⁰⁶

Bidault's reply concentrated on the serious effect that, according to the French Ambassador in London, the stand-off at Port-de-Bouc, was having on Anglo-French diplomatic relations. Bidault was alarmed that The Times' accusation of

¹⁰² Hadari, HaMossad, 46.

¹⁰³ Yad Tabenkin Archives, Polonski files, Box no2, Report by Arthur Epstein, Toulouse Group 17.8.47.

¹⁰⁴ New York Herald Tribune (European Edition), 30.7.47.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.7.47.

¹⁰⁶ Zertal, Catastrophe, 87.

French bad faith was being supported by ministers in the Foreign Office. In the circumstances, Bidault felt it unwise to put pressure on the British, especially as, in their view, the few immigrants who had already disembarked would lead to a greater movement in the days ahead.¹⁰⁷

Vincent Auriol, the French President, indicated that because of this cooling-off in Anglo-French relations, Georges Bidault decided not to attend in London at the ceremonies ratifying the Franco-British Alliance, previously signed in Dunkirk in February of that year. Instead diplomatic channels were utilised.¹⁰⁸

The major British complaint, as expressed to L'Aurore's London correspondent, was that France had made certain commitments in April to the British Government regarding controls on suspected illegal immigrants which it then failed to carry out. Specifically in the case of the Exodus, the British had given the French early warning of its intended destination and still it had been permitted to depart. In addition, France were now renegeing on Bidault's commitment to Bevin that there was no problem with the return of the immigrants to France. In effect it was Edouard Depreux who was in the firing line but Bidault, considered Bevin's most trustworthy ally, had badly let him down and embarrassed him. The crisis was all the more serious because even those British political circles, which normally condemned government policy in Palestine, were outraged by the French stance, which it deemed to be in bad faith.¹⁰⁹

Not prepared to allow these British recriminations to go unanswered, a political commentator wrote to L'Aurore expressing, "to his British friends" the thoughts of a great number of Frenchmen, whose admiration for Britain's wartime policies were now diminished by her current policies in Palestine. In one of his more telling jibes, he remarked

We suggest that our former allies bring to mind that since the Liberation they had for their part, given us cause for more disappointment than enthusiasm... The brutal fashion in which, as holders of the Mandate in Palestine, they brought to an end our own Mandate over Syria, and their weak occupation procedures in Germany... are not matters, that would strengthen an 'Entente' that they needed as much as we do.¹¹⁰

This moral lecture would indicate that many Frenchmen were still smarting from the alleged British involvement in France's ejection from Lebanon and Syria and the differences of opinion over post-war Germany.

Georges Loinger, now working in Paris for the Mossad, was deputised to drive the eminent priest, L'Abbé Glasberg, down to Port-de-Bouc. One of his tasks was to present the Zionist case to the press. Given the intense heat, Glasberg resorted to giving interviews in his hotel room from the comfort of a cold bath. Loinger, together with Venya Pomerantz and André Blumel, were allowed by the British to board one of the ships and speak to the passengers. Ironically it was Glasberg, the former Jew, who best translated the Yiddish of the passengers for the benefit of the other two. They were all present when the Secretary General of the Préfecture, Collaveri, read

¹⁰⁷ Archives Nationales F7/16089, Letter from G. Bidault to Minister of the Interior, 5.8.47.

¹⁰⁸ Vincent Auriol, Journal du Septennat, 6.8.47, 385.

¹⁰⁹ L'Aurore, 5.8.47.

¹¹⁰ L'Aurore, Letter from Pierre Loewel to L'Aurore, 6.8.47.

out a declaration to the passengers inviting them to disembark if they so wished.¹¹¹ Printed copies of the declaration in French, Yiddish and Hebrew were then distributed.¹¹²

According to Loinger, the immigrants were told, by messages slipped on board by Haganah members, that if they disembarked the creation of a Jewish state was at risk. Whilst admitting that they were certainly exploited, Loinger pointed out that the immigrants' stoicism and desire to go to Palestine at all costs was the true motivation for their resistance. The presence of large numbers of pregnant women was, he conceded, certainly planned for its publicity effect. "It was a political matter. Everything is fair in love and war. They [The Mossad] contrived a great scoop!"¹¹³

In recognition of Blumel's efforts on behalf of the Exodus immigrants, Shaul Meirov, in a departure from his usual and secretive habits, sent him a short note on 9th August 1947. It read: "It is my pleasure to transmit to you today the congratulations and thanks of the headquarters of the Haganah in Palestine, for your courageous and intrepid activities in respect of the Exodus Affair." In a covering note, also in French, Meirov explained that for understandable reasons, he signed the thank-you letter only with his initials. Despite this precaution, this separate letter was unaccountably signed in full: "S. Méyerov".¹¹⁴

The stand-off between the British and the immigrants on board the three prison ships lasted for over three weeks in the blazing heat of summer. Only some 130 immigrants were taken ashore, 77 of them for reasons of ill-health.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless the British officer in charge of the three ships, a Colonel Gregson, was optimistic in the early days that the small trickle of Jews disembarking would grow into a flood.¹¹⁶

He was to be sorely disappointed in this and blamed the failure on both the Zionist propaganda efforts and the complicity of the French authorities who, he alleged, hardened the immigrants into refusing all blandishments. His assessment was largely supported by the RG, who referred to messages concealed in food taken on board, the intervention of Jewish helpers, the presence of Jewish interpreters on French police launches and the use of a loud-speaker mounted on a fishing boat. They also singled out the representatives of the FSJF as being opposed to disembarkation. Finally they listed 19 members of the Haganah identified at Port-de-Bouc.¹¹⁷

That the Palyam members on board used strong-arm tactics to discourage immigrants from volunteering for disembarkation is referred to in the report of a British naval officer.¹¹⁸ Also Renseignements Généraux reported a fight among the immigrants on the Empire-Rival.¹¹⁹ Clearly on the question of disembarkation there was never 100% solidarity.

The announcement on 22nd August that the immigrants had one last opportunity to disembark voluntarily in France or face shipment to Hamburg met, except for six volunteers, with a negative response. According to Renseignements Généraux, the leaders on board as well as the local Jewish leaders in France saw

¹¹¹ Interview with Georges Loinger, 10.11.02.

¹¹² Yad Tabenkin Archives, Polonski files Box no2, Undated notice.

¹¹³ Interview with Georges Loinger, 10.11.02.

¹¹⁴ Haganah Archives, Blumel Files, 123/Blumel/2 Letters from Meirov to Blumel, 9.8.47.

¹¹⁵ Kochavi, *Post-Holocaust Politics*, 269.

¹¹⁶ Archives Départementales des BDR, 148W185, Préfet BDR to Minister of the Interior, 1.8.47.

¹¹⁷ Archives Départementales des BDR, 148W185, Report on immigrants of the Exodus submitted to the Director of the RG, 8.9.47.

¹¹⁸ TNA, ADM1 20684, 2.9.47.

¹¹⁹ Archives Départementales des BDR, 148W185, report on situation at Port-de-Bouc by Renseignements Généraux, 18.8.47.

some benefits in the immigrants being taken to the British Zone in Germany. Firstly as conditions in Germany would be worse than they could expect in France, the immigrants would be motivated to insist on their removal to Palestine. Secondly, communications in Germany being easier, the immigrants had a better chance of receiving Entry Certificates into Palestine.¹²⁰

Before the ships departed, Pomerantz accompanied the representative of the MAE on board the ships. Whilst the latter attempted to encourage the immigrants to disembark, Pomerantz, during his translation, secretly intimated that the Yishuv would endeavour to facilitate their Aliyah as soon as possible.¹²¹

On 21st August Duff Cooper had a meeting with Bidault. In his subsequent report to the Foreign Office he indicated that he had previously sent Bidault extracts from a captured diary (presumably from one of the Exodus passengers) which proved the assistance the immigrants had received from the French authorities. Bidault responded that he was not prepared in any way to defend or excuse the actions of the French Government. At the same time he did not wish to provoke a ministerial crisis as in any event, in his opinion, the present Government would survive only until October. He indicated that he would then, most probably, become Prime Minister.¹²² It turned out that he was wrong in that assessment.

The following day Duff Cooper had a call from Léon Blum indicating that if the British Government would guarantee that the immigrants at Port-de-Bouc would be allowed to land in Palestine within two to three months, the Jewish Agency would advise them to disembark. Faced with a negative response, Blum then asked him to receive Marc Jarblum on behalf of the French Zionist Federation, which he agreed to do. At a meeting a quarter of an hour later Jarblum mentioned to Bidault the case of the ships in La Spezia (1946 incident) where the British had made a special gesture by allowing over 1000 illegal immigrants to land in Palestine within the monthly quota. He suggested a similar arrangement could be made now for the Exodus immigrants. Duff Cooper, however, had never heard of that agreement and in any event as it was now nearly 5.30 pm, and the ships were about to sail to Germany, he indicated that it was definitely too late. He would nevertheless report the suggestion to his superiors as he was anxious to find a solution.¹²³

The day following the departure of the three prison ships towards Germany, the British Embassy handed a note to Raymond Bousquet, requesting that the French Government welcome back onto its territory the immigrants from the Exodus if and when they were moved out from the British Zone. The response recommended by Bousquet, after a long analysis of the history of the Affair, was that France should only accept those who came voluntarily to France and that this should not be considered a precedent. Whatever the numbers of those who volunteered to re-enter France, they would be treated as part of the existing transit arrangements¹²⁴ (i.e. within the revised quota of 19,000). That this request was open knowledge in Zionist circles is suggested by a letter sent by Marc Jarblum to the Interior Minister, Edouard Depreux. The informality of the letter also attests to the degree of close consultation existing at this level between French Zionists and senior Government officials.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, RG report, 22.8.47.

¹²¹ Hadari, *HaMossad*, 47.

¹²² TNA, FO 371/61823, Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 21.8.47.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, Duff Cooper to Foreign Office, 22.8.47, 6.55PM. The prison ships set sail for Hamburg at 6 pm on that day.

¹²⁴ Haganah Archives, Blumel files, 123/Blumel/2. Note prepared by Direction Générale des Affaires Administratives et Sociales, 25.8.47.

I am leaving tomorrow morning for Zurich to attend a meeting of the Directors of the Jewish Agency for Palestine. At the last moment I'm hurrying to ask of you the following: to accept the British demand to receive [back] in France the refugees from the Exodus that the British would send to Hamburg, under the following conditions:

1. It must concern only those who would come voluntarily.
2. To receive them on a temporary basis like other refugees in transit.
3. The British Government commits to giving these refugees a certain monthly number of certificates for Palestine, out of the present quota, (let us say: 700 to 1,000).

It seems to me that these conditions are justified and not exaggerated. France has been wonderful in this affair and you personally, my dear Minister, have really reflected the sentiments of the people of France with a rare nobility.

Thank you,
Your devoted M. Jarblum.¹²⁵

Depreux answered Jarblum by simply indicating that he had written to the MAE, expressing views similar to those of Jarblum.¹²⁶

The MAE appeared to have taken up the suggestion, for in early September there were reports of a new French initiative being discussed with the Foreign Office in London. Specifically the French had recently increased the quota of Jewish DPs permitted to transit through France from 8,000 to 19,000, which easily accommodated a return by the Exodus passengers, should they volunteer to do so. The French Government made one essential proviso however and that was that the British guarantee to provide every month thereafter, a certain number of certificates for Palestine.¹²⁷

That an attempt was then made by the British to encourage those who had been taken to the Poppendorf and Amstau internment camps in the British Zone of Germany to volunteer for repatriation to France is clear from Foreign Office records. However by 28th September the British had to recognise that the attempt, except for three volunteers, had failed dismally.¹²⁸ The new French initiative was consequently still-born.

5.4 Prologue

In July 1982, a metal plaque was attached to the sea wall at Sète at the point of embarkation of the Exodus passengers. It reads "On 11th July 1947, 4,530 clandestine, resistant immigrants facing the British naval blockade, embarked here on the Exodus '47 assisted by the people of Sète and the regional authorities, in order to build a new life in their ancestral home in Israel."¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Archives Nationales, F7/16089, Jarblum to Edouard Depreux, Sunday [undated but clearly in August 1947].

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, Edouard Depreux to Jarblum, 25.8.47.

¹²⁷ *Le Monde*, 7.9.47.

¹²⁸ TNA, CO 537/3953, From Lubbecke to Foreign Office, 30.9.47.

¹²⁹ As recorded on a visit by the author to Sète in August 2003.

At the plaque's unveiling ceremony, delegations from Israel and former members of the French administration were present. Hadari interviewed Stanislas Mangin, previously of the DST and asked him why they had assisted the Mossad. He replied:

The French were ashamed of what they had done to the Jews during the Vichy Regime. Above all, we had not forgotten that the British had thrown us out of Syria and Lebanon. I remember receiving clear instructions from the appropriate ministers that we had to help the Haganah, both with arms and ammunition and by getting illegal immigrants to Palestine.¹³⁰

Could there be any better corroboration of French Government complicity in Aliyah Bet than this statement by the Deputy Director of the counter-espionage agency?

¹³⁰ Hadari, *Second Exodus*, 198, 199.



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ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION TO PALESTINE 1945-1948:
THE FRENCH CONNECTION

11/20/05