

ITALY CONTRARY MANEUVERS

More than half of the illegal immigrants who sailed for Palestine between the end of the war and May 1948 embarked from Mediterranean ports. Most of them had come from Eastern and Central European countries and had reached Italy and France either through the Allied occupation zones in Germany and Austria or through Yugoslavia. That a total of almost thirty-seven thousand Jewish refugees were able to depart from Italian and French ports relatively unhindered is one indication that Britain's diplomatic campaign against the *Ha'apala* movement was not much more successful here than in the Soviet bloc countries.

Italy was the main base for the illegal sailings after World War II. Of the fifty-six *Ha'apala* ships that sailed between the end of the war and the establishment of the State of Israel, thirty-four set out from Italy, carrying more than twenty-one thousand persons, or about 30 percent of the total. Britain's campaign to halt the movement was waged on two fronts: the first against the Jews infiltrating into Italy from the north, and the second against Jews who had made it into Italy and from there attempted to sail for Palestine. The Italians themselves were much more concerned about the Jewish influx of the Jews into the country than about their departures by sea.

Relations between Britain and Italy during the first two years after the war were characterized by mutual dislike, if not hostility. This may have been in part because Britain was not prepared to show much leniency toward Italy's wartime record. Italy had declared war on Britain and France on 10 June 1940 and eighteen months later had joined Germany in declaring war on the United States. On 8 September 1943 Italy surrendered unconditionally to the Allies

(about six weeks after Benito Mussolini's government had been overthrown), and on 13 October it declared war on Germany. After the war, the Big Three Allies were divided over how to treat Italy. Differences prevailed also between the two English-speaking powers. At the Potsdam Conference, Truman proposed that Italy be released from the restrictions placed on it after its surrender and that it be allowed to join the United Nations. In support of his suggestion, the U.S. president stated Italy's readiness to join the Allies in the war against Japan. Churchill was less conciliatory. Opposing Truman's proposal, he recalled Italy's attack on Britain at the time of the fall of France, the fierce North African campaign Italy had waged, and the heavy casualties the British fleet had suffered in battles against the Italian navy in the Mediterranean. It was eventually agreed at Potsdam that the peace treaty with Italy would be the first to be dealt with by the Council of Foreign Ministers that was to prepare the peace settlements with the former enemy countries. America's lenient attitude toward Italy was due in no small part to electoral considerations, that is, the president's wish to gain the Italian and Catholic vote in upcoming elections.

The first CFM, convened in London on 11 September 1945, dispersed after three weeks without reaching any agreement. The Western powers objected to Soviet demands that the USSR be awarded trusteeship over Tripolitania for a ten-year period, that the whole of Venezia Giulia, including the city of Trieste, be transferred to Yugoslavia, and that Italy pay heavy war reparations to the Soviet Union. Although the three Western powers were not in accord about the future boundary between Italy and Yugoslavia and the future of Italy's colonies, they all opposed the Soviet demands, in particular any arrangement that would give the Soviets a foothold in the Mediterranean region, the Middle East, or North Africa. The controversy over the terms of the Italian peace treaty remained unresolved during the first session of the CFM in Paris (25 April–16 May 1946). The Americans defended Italian interests. A compromise was reached at the second session of the CFM in Paris according to which Trieste would be internationalized and the decision about the future of the colonies would be postponed for one year while their administration would be left in British hands in the interim. For their part, the Soviets were to receive reparations of \$100 million.

The peace agreement that was signed in February 1947 forbade the Italians to possess tanks, submarines, and bombers. Italy's army was limited to 250,000 soldiers, including 65,000 *carabinieri*, and its navy and air force to 25,000 personnel each. Most Italian navy ships were to be divided between the United States, Britain, France, the Soviet Union, Greece, and Yugoslavia. Italy was to pay \$360 million in war damages. Britain received control over Tripolitania,

Eritrea, and Italian Somalia, while Albania and Ethiopia regained independence. In Europe, Italy was obliged to relinquish territory to Greece, France, and Yugoslavia. It was also compelled to demilitarize its frontiers and dismantle its fortifications. The Italian Constitutional Assembly approved the treaty on 31 July 1947.¹

Politically the postwar situation in Italy proved most problematic. In December 1945, Alcide de Gasperi, leader of the Christian Democrats, formed a coalition government in which the Communists participated. The first postwar elections were held six months later, in June 1946. The Christian Democrats received 35 percent of the votes, the Socialists 21 percent, and the Communists 19 percent. The Socialists and Communists established a united front. Following a plebiscite on 2 June the Italian monarchy was terminated; King Umberto abdicated and left the country. In January 1947 the Socialist Party split, and a majority of its members together with its leader, Pietro Nenni, joined the Communist Party. On 13 May 1947, de Gasperi formed his fourth government, this time without the Communists. Communist Party representatives participated in September in the founding congress of the Cominform. During the winter of 1947-48 Western leaders began to fear that the Italian Communists might exploit the difficult economic situation and the evacuation of the last British and American troops from Italy in December 1947 to sabotage the Marshall Plan, topple the government, and mount a Communist coup d'état by means of strikes and demonstrations. Thus the elections set for April 1948 were seen as a test of strength for de Gasperi's pro-Western orientation in light of the escalation of the Cold War. Both the United States and the Soviet Union tried to influence the choice of the Italian voters. De Gasperi's Christian Democrats secured about 48.5 percent of the votes compared with 31 percent for the Communists and Socialists. Holding 305 of the 574 seats in the Chamber, the Christian Democrats had been able to secure an absolute majority.²

The fragility of the political system stemmed partly from Italy's deteriorating economic situation. Italy had suffered greatly from the battles that had taken place in the country toward the end of the war; a large proportion of its industry, transportation infrastructure, schools, hospitals, and railroad stations had been destroyed. The Italian merchant fleet, which in 1938 had been the fourth largest in Europe, had shrunk from 3.5 million tons to only 450,000 tons. Agricultural production dwindled in 1945 to 60 percent of 1938 levels, and industrial production at the end of 1945 was one-quarter of what it had been during the period just before the war. The national debt at the end of the war was more than six times the amount it had been in 1939, and prices in 1945 were twenty times what they had been before the war and were still rising. Inflation

and unemployment reached astronomical proportions. As a result, between the time of Italy's surrender and the end of the war, the country was completely dependent on foreign assistance. The United States supplied it with most of its vital food provisions, and later UNRRA provided most of the foreign aid. The Americans, who financed about 75 percent of the organization's budget, played a central role in setting the scope and selecting the recipients of the UNRRA assistance. After UNRRA's activity was terminated at the end of June 1947, Washington extended assistance to Italy until Marshall Plan aid became available.³

British-Italian relations began to improve in the second half of 1947, at the time that tensions were increasing between the West and the USSR. The Italians felt resentment toward Britain following the British stand on the peace arrangements with Italy and the transfer of the Italian colonies to British control. The Italian Left was hostile toward the British for ideological reasons as well. Moreover, Italy was an occupied country under the supervision of the Anglo-American Commission, and the Italians were bitter because Britain objected to rescinding some of the restrictions that had been imposed. What caused Britain to change its approach were fears that Italy would fall into the Soviet sphere of influence. At the end of October 1947, Italian foreign minister Count Carlo Sforza was invited to London. This was the first visit to Britain of an Italian minister since the war. A communiqué at the end of the visit spoke of the renewal of friendship between the two countries and announced their intention to conclude a series of agreements dealing with commerce, shipping, air transport, and culture. A trade agreement was duly signed between the two countries in February 1948.⁴

The La Spezia Episode

With the conclusion of the war, Italy began attracting Holocaust survivors and Eastern and Central European Jews as soon as it became known that the Palestinian Jewish Brigade was stationed in that country. Brigade soldiers helped Jewish refugees who had managed to reach Italy in the migratory wave that swept Europe at the end of the war and also assisted in smuggling Jews across the Austrian border into Italy. Zionist sources estimated that about fifteen thousand Jewish refugees had entered Italy during the three summer months of 1945.⁵ With the coming of autumn and winter, the number of infiltrators into Italy declined markedly, mainly because of rumors about hunger and shortages in the camps. The arrival of huge numbers of refugees within a short time, the worsening economic situation in Italy, and the difficulties in receiving help from the IDC were some of the reasons why the situation in the

camps deteriorated so soon. Moreover, the Jewish Brigade was transferred at the end of July 1945 to Belgium. But the movement never came to a complete halt, and by early January 1946 Brichah emissaries had managed to transfer most of the refugees from the British zone in Austria to Italy. At the same time, limited movement continued from Rumania and Hungary to Italy via Yugoslavia.⁶

Allied authorities in Italy knew of the movement of Jewish refugees into Italy, but their attempts to stop the infiltration were unsuccessful. According to Philip Broad, the British resident minister in Caserta, the Allied military authorities believed that this movement was "part of a very large organization which aims at using Italy and Austria as a transit camp between Central Europe and Palestine." The British diplomat thought that stopping the migration would require the cooperation of the Allied occupation forces in Austria, especially of the French authorities, who had been allowing the movement of the Jews through their occupation zone to Italy. The possibility of returning the infiltrators to Austria should not even be considered since it would require the use of force, and the Allied Commission (which included the Americans) would not countenance such a move. Although Broad was doubtful whether the Jewish refugees were entitled to UNRRA assistance, he recommended that Britain assist them; otherwise, hunger would drive them into crime.⁷ British intelligence estimated the number of Jewish refugees in Italy in October 1945 at twenty thousand.⁸

The British embassy in Rome anticipated that the illegal movement via Italy would intensify by the end of January 1946, when most of the refugee camps would come under UNRRA supervision. UNRRA was already managing four camps in southern Italy, and according to Noel Charles, the British ambassador, the "organization within the camps is in the hands of Jewish committees which hold themselves responsible to the Palestine office in Bari [that is, the Zionists] rather than to their camp managers." Charles also told of "an elaborate organization throughout Italy which receives parties of illegal immigrants after they have crossed the northern frontiers, arranges for their despatch to camps in the heel and their illegal embarkation for Palestine." The ambassador recommended that Spurgeon M. Keeny, UNRRA director in Italy, be asked to refrain from extending assistance to the illegal Jewish movement and that Jewish Brigade personnel still posted in Italy be transferred to other places. He also thought that the Allied command should cooperate more closely with the Italian security authorities in controlling those entering Italy and that the Italian fleet should be allowed to patrol along the Italian coasts. This last recommendation stemmed from the Italians' claim that they were unable to control departures from the country because the navy was prohibited from patrolling the shores.⁹



Brichah: On the move (Courtesy Israel Ministry of Defense, Museums Unit)

Success in the struggle against illegal sailings depended in large part on the cooperation of the Italian authorities. But given Britain's general attitude toward postwar Italy, during the first months after the war various British officials in London had reservations about involving the Italians at all. London also feared that the Italians would predicate their assistance on a relaxation of the military restrictions that had been imposed, particularly on the fleet. Whitehall preferred to use British forces stationed in Italy to take preventive measures in the ports of embarkation. This proposal was countered by Britain's headquarters in Italy, which claimed that it was impossible to stop the illegal sailings to Palestine since most of the Italian ports were not under military control. They urged that the Italian government be asked to prevent vessels involved in the illegal movement from sailing from Italian ports.¹⁰ Following interdepartmental consultation in London in mid-October 1945, it was decided not to seek the cooperation of the Italian government for the time being, in part because doing so would require supplying them with information about ships involved in the illegal movement. Such information might well be leaked to those organizing the sailings, who then could use it to their own advantage.¹¹

Reservations, however, evaporated with the detention on 17 January 1946 of the *Enzio Sereni*, which had sailed from Italy with 911 Jewish refugees.¹² With the approaching visit of the Anglo-American Committee Bevin very much wanted the situation in Palestine to remain quiet. At the end of January 1946, the Ital-

ian government was asked by Britain to pass legislation that would prohibit its citizens from taking part in any acts connected to the illegal movement.¹³ Such legislation was problematic because of the opposition of the Italian left-wing coalition partners to British policy in Palestine. Ambassador Charles was doubtful whether Prime Minister de Gasperi, who had taken office in December 1945, could muster the necessary support for such legislation. But he also thought the Italian government would be unable to comply with the British request for fear of angering the Americans.¹⁴ Aware of the interest in the fate of the Jewish refugees exhibited by the White House, members of Congress, and the American press, the Italians indeed tried to avoid taking steps that would provoke adverse reactions among them. Italy was dependent on American economic assistance and American defense of its interests in the peace treaty deliberations. The Italians were also aware that the British were not making much headway in their efforts to enlist American cooperation against the illegal movement from Austria to Italy.¹⁵ Furthermore, Britain was very unpopular in Italy because of its adamant opposition to the French proposal that Cyrenaica and Tripoli be returned to Italy.

The first direct confrontation between British authorities in Italy and *Ha'apala* organizers and the illegal immigrants themselves occurred after the arrest on 3 April of twelve hundred Jews of "Polish extraction" by Italian police in La Spezia. According to the Allied forces headquarters in Italy, these Jews had all been brought to the port in British military vehicles and had with them food for ten days which had been taken from British army supplies. Headquarters also reported that Jewish soldiers serving in the Palestinian Transport Company of the British army had been involved and that three of them had been arrested.¹⁶ Charles was quick to conclude that the Italian government was ready to assist the British.¹⁷ What the ambassador could not yet have known was that the arrest of the illegal immigrants by the Italians had actually happened by mistake (see below). British Foreign Office officials preferred not to involve British forces stationed in Italy but to leave the issue to the Italian authorities. Very quickly, however, the incident developed into a serious crisis following an announcement by the detained illegal immigrants in La Spezia of a hunger strike and of their intention to sink the boat with all on board if an attempt were made to remove them forcibly to the shore. (The Jewish refugees earlier had been able to board the boat with the connivance of the Italians.)

Harold Laski, chairman of the British Labour Party and himself a Jew, who was then in Italy as the guest of the Twenty-fourth Congress of the Italian Socialist Party, managed to defuse the escalating tension between the British and the illegal immigrants. The latter were headed by Yehuda Arazi (head of the illegal

immigration activities in Italy), who pretended to be a refugee and was leading the struggle in La Spezia. On a visit to the ship on 19 April, Laski reached an agreement with Arazi that the hunger strike would be suspended and that the illegal immigrants would not do anything drastic until Laski had met with Bevin within ten days' time.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Colonial Secretary Hall rejected the Jewish Agency's request that a special immigration quota be granted to the illegal immigrants in La Spezia. He also refused the alternative suggestion that the illegal immigrants be given the November–December 1945 quota, which the Jewish Agency had not exploited at the time in protest against British policy. Hall warned Attlee that granting the illegal immigrants in La Spezia a special quota would constitute a breach of the assurance given to the Arabs that until the AAC's report, Jewish immigration to Palestine would be limited to fifteen hundred persons per month, including illegal immigrants. Hall, still unaware of the real circumstances behind the arrest of the illegal immigrants, argued that if they were allowed to sail, the Italians would no longer cooperate in the struggle against the illegal sailings. He considered the hunger strike announced by leaders of the Yishuv to be a political move intended to force the British to accede to their demands. Hall's analysis was accepted by the prime minister.¹⁹

As the British soon discovered, the real reason why the Jews were arrested by the Italian police was a case of mistaken identity. The police commander in La Spezia had been told that Italian fascists were planning to leave the country secretly. When his agents came upon the convoy of Jewish refugees, they believed they were arresting those Italian fascists. According to Charles, the police commander told a Jewish Agency representative that had he known they were Jewish refugees, he would not have interfered.²⁰ Charles, who feared the incident might end in bloodshed, called upon his government to decide between "the risk of violence and bad publicity, on the one hand, and some immediate further concession, on the other." He favored the second alternative. The ambassador did not dismiss the possibility that Italian naval authorities in La Spezia would allow the Jews to sail after all.²¹ Unhappy with the predicament they found themselves in, the Italians did not hide their fear of further incidents if the refugees remained in La Spezia.²² The Mandatory government in Palestine, which was also apprehensive over the refugees' threats to commit suicide in public if their departure for Palestine was not approved and over the agitation in Palestine, was in favor of allowing the illegal immigrants to enter Palestine as part of the monthly quota.²³

In the confrontation between the British authorities and the *Ha'apala* organizers and Jewish refugees in La Spezia, it was the latter who triumphed. On 8 May the *Dov Hoz* and *Eliahu Golumb* sailed with 1,014 illegal immigrants on

board. The event and the timing were significant. For the British, success in their struggle against the illegal sailings depended largely on preventive measures in the ports of embarkation with the cooperation of the local authorities. In La Spezia the British lost the opportunity to establish a precedent. The incident, which took more than four weeks (from 3 April to 8 May 1946), brought home to the Italians and to other governments what was in store for them if they complied with British demands to prevent *Ha'apala* vessels from departing. Moreover, the wide and sympathetic coverage in the Italian and world media of the struggle of the Jewish refugees trying at all costs to reach Palestine served the propaganda needs of the Zionists (the report of the AAC had been published only a few days before the final resolution of the La Spezia incident). The way the British dealt with the La Spezia incident was influenced not only by the sensitive relations with the Italian authorities but also by the fact that illegal sailings were as yet limited in number and stopping them less urgent because the British at this stage were still hopeful of reaching an agreement with the Americans over the Palestine question.

Meanwhile, the British were working to prevent infiltration of Jews into Italy. Most of the frontier between Austria and Italy passed through the British and French occupation zones but also, for a short stretch, through the American zone. An April 1946 report of British intelligence in Austria noted that since the British maintained rigorous border controls, Jewish refugees from northeastern Europe refrained from entering the British zone of Austria. Rather, from Vienna they moved via the American and Soviet occupation zones to Bavaria and from there to northern Italy via the French zone. This route was chosen because conditions in the American zone were more amenable to the movement of Jewish DPs.²⁴ The British embassy in Rome was unhappy over the laxity the Italians displayed in their control of the mountain passes, even though in some instances Italian border patrols had prevented the entry of groups of Jews whose laissez-passer documents were found to be unsatisfactory.²⁵ An inspection carried out by the British at the beginning of July 1946 in the Resia Pass showed that Italian border authorities had no idea who was permitted to enter the country and who not; they did not even know what authority they had in this matter and what documents Allied military personnel needed in order to cross the border. Any person wearing a uniform of one of the Allied powers and presenting some document that appeared to be official was allowed to cross the border. Similarly, any civilian showing the Italian border guards some document signed by a British or American officer was also allowed to enter.²⁶ That this was no exaggeration is shown by the way Brichah emissaries transferred refugees into Italy with forged laissez-passer documents while disguising them

as Allied soldiers or members of the various relief organizations; the Zionist activists clearly took advantage of the large number of military units in Italy, which were allowed to issue travel permits, as well as the numerous relief organizations whose members frequently crossed international frontiers.²⁷

The Italians rejected British criticism. The Italian Ministry of the Interior maintained that until April 1946 the border passage had been under the control of Allied soldiers; thus it was they who should have prevented Jewish refugees from entering the country. Furthermore, even after control was transferred to them, the Italians argued, they were unable to stop the infiltration because authority to permit entry and exit remained in Allied hands. The plethora of official and quasi-official Allied bodies allowed to grant travel permits made it difficult for Italian border authorities to fulfill their duties.²⁸ The Italians tried to take advantage of the importance the British clearly attached to the struggle against the Jewish infiltrators in order to pressure London into partially restoring their sovereignty—by allowing them to monitor their own frontiers even before the peace agreements were signed—but also to let the British help them by transferring foreign refugees to other countries. As far as the Italians were concerned, the Jewish refugees were not the main problem. Of the approximately 158,000 refugees and DPs in Italy at the end of 1946, only an estimated 20,000 were Jewish.²⁹

Even more disturbing from the British point of view was the Italians' ineffective control of the country's ports. Charles was of the opinion that the Italian port authorities did nothing to prevent illegal vessels from sailing and that the security police, because they were anxious to be rid of foreign refugees, would never try to confirm the validity of the travel documents embarking passengers were carrying. The British Foreign Office again consulted with the ambassador about how advisable it would be to ask the Italians to pass legislation forbidding any involvement of their citizens in the illegal movement. Charles thought the Italian government probably would not be willing to enact legislation against the illegal Jewish emigration and suggested that it not be pressed on this matter.³⁰ It was at that time that the Italians became aware of the conditions of their peace agreement and were particularly angered by the decision of the CFM (at the end of June and beginning of July) to postpone for one year the determination of the future of the Italian colonies and until then leave them under British control.³¹

Differences of opinion soon arose between Charles and London over the best way to deal with the illegal sailings from Italy. He disagreed with the suggestion of the chiefs of staff to the cabinet that pressure be exerted on the Italian government and instead advocated reinforcing the British security field units

in Italy, allowing them to arrest suspects, and increasing the frequency of Royal Navy patrols along the Italian coast. Charles was aware that his recommendations would "look particularly retrograde as regards Anglo-Italian relations."³² The Foreign Office had reservations about the ambassador's suggestion of expanding the authority of British security field units—it might be thought that Britain was still acting as though Italy were an occupied enemy country. The office also feared the effect such a step would have on the Americans, their partners in supervising the Italians, who wanted to relax Allied control and grant maximum freedom of action to the Italians.³³

By this time, the British had changed their policy in Palestine and no longer had reservations about deporting illegal immigrants to detention camps in Cyprus. On 18 August 1946, 1,391 illegal immigrants who had been arrested on the shores of Palestine were transferred to Cyprus. These were all illegal immigrants who had sailed from Italy and the first to be so deported. In a memorandum he sent to the Italian Foreign Ministry immediately following the deportation, Charles stressed that intensifying control over the Italian land frontiers would make it easier for the authorities to prevent the illegal sailings. The ambassador underscored Britain's desire to help the Italian government deal with the infiltrators and noted that instructions had been given to British authorities in Germany and Austria to increase surveillance in the British occupation zones.³⁴ London preferred to avoid submitting a sharp protest in light of the growing Italian bitterness toward Britain. The steps taken by the British in their occupation zones were of very marginal importance because the movement was taking place for the most part through the American and French occupation zones. British overtures to the Italian authorities did not bring the desired results, and *Ha'apala* ships continued to set sail from Italian ports. Between mid-August and the end of October 1946, six *Ha'apala* vessels arrived in short succession on the shores of Palestine, all having set sail from Italy. Except for the small *Amirun Shohat*, they were all intercepted and their passengers deported to Cyprus.

UNRRA and the JDC

Among the British targets in the campaign against the illegal movement of Jews into and out of Italy were the UNRRA and JDC welfare organizations, some of whose personnel were assisting *Brichah* and *Ha'apala* organizers. The British were concerned about the lack of Italian control of the UNRRA camps housing Jewish refugees who had infiltrated into Italy, since it was clear to them that those in the DP camps and in the *Hachsharot* (vocational training) farms run by the JDC constituted the reservoir of illegal immigrants for the sailings.³⁵ Lon-

don wanted the Jews to leave the camps because Whitehall believed that as long as UNRRA continued to feed and house them there, the infiltration would continue. Therefore, the British Foreign Office wished UNRRA to end assistance to them. At a meeting of the Committee of the Council for Europe, UNRRA, in mid-December 1946, British representative George Rendel protested that only 22 percent of the assistance dispensed by UNRRA to refugees in Italy was given to non-Jews even though the Jews constituted only a small percentage of the DPs and refugees in Italy.³⁶ In his view, "it looked as though UNRRA had been very much concentrating on relief of Jewish refugees to the exclusion of non-Jewish refugees." Since it was not to be expected that the Jews in Italy would return to the countries from which they had come, they should be classified as "non-repatriables." UNRRA policy stipulated that assistance to that category was to be limited in time, and therefore, Rendel seemed to be implying, aid to such Jews should be stopped. He warned of the danger that the camps would become bases for illegal sailings to Palestine and emphasized the importance of avoiding suspicion that the organization was abetting or encouraging the illegal movement.³⁷ But Rendel's attempts to end UNRRA assistance failed.

The Italians were careful not to assert their authority over the camps for fear of losing UNRRA aid and angering the American Jewish community.³⁸ London believed that only an appeal from the United States could persuade the Italian authorities to act energetically. When Irgun members bombed the British embassy in Rome (31 October 1946), it provided Bevin with the excuse he needed to ask Byrnes to urge the Italian government to exercise its authority in the camps. Bevin argued that the UNRRA camps in southern Italy "virtually represent an extreme Zionist enclave on Italian territory; the inmates are known to be drawing excessive quantities of rations and clothing from UNRRA which provide them via the black market with large supplies of Italian money; and the camps are believed to be full of hidden arms." Bevin maintained that no one knew how many Jews were staying in them but that there was no doubt that the camps were serving as illegal immigration training sites.³⁹ At the beginning of January 1947 the British and Americans separately appealed to the Italian government to take charge of UNRRA camps in which the Jewish refugees were concentrated.⁴⁰ In its note, the U.S. government expressed concern at reports that DP camps in Italy "may be in use as centers and screens for perpetrators of acts of terrorism." The Italian government was asked to increase its efforts to control DP camps and the movements of DPs in Italy, "so as to prevent irregularities which might contribute in any way to further acts of terrorism."⁴¹

Instead of responding, the Italian Foreign Ministry complained to the Allies about the latter's lack of supervision of the UNRRA camps in Germany and

Austria and about the involvement of Allied authorities in the Jewish infiltration into Italy. The ministry warned that no improvement would take place "if the Allied authorities do not prevent their subordinate authorities from interfering with the action taken by Italian authorities, particularly as regards the entry into Italy of foreigners, whether Jewish or not, and if they do not facilitate the general removal of the refugees who in the past have entered Italy."⁴² Still, the Italian Foreign Ministry realized that some action was needed to assuage the British. Accordingly, toward the end of March 1947, the Italians informed the British embassy that the infiltration of Jewish refugees into Italy had not stopped and that with improved weather conditions it could be expected to expand. The number of DPs in Italy who were receiving aid from UNRRA had increased since November 1946 by approximately six thousand. Despite more frequent patrols, the Italian police force was having difficulty in guarding the border because of its length, because of insufficient resources, and because of the assistance the infiltrators were receiving from people affiliated with UNRRA and the JDC and sometimes even from Allied soldiers. These illegal immigrants were not really DPs since they had abandoned their homelands of their own free will and thus were not entitled to UNRRA assistance. Moreover, such aid "contributes indirectly to encourage further clandestine immigration into Palestine." The Italian Foreign Ministry reported that it had instructed its embassy in London to urge the European headquarters of UNRRA to deny assistance in Italy to those who had suddenly abandoned the DP camps in Austria or Germany or to those who had willingly left their homelands and to take measures in the UNRRA camps in Germany and Austria to make it impossible for the refugees to infiltrate into Italy. The Italians further announced that they would start concentrating the infiltrators in special camps until a decision was reached about their future. Britain was asked to support the Italian demands submitted to UNRRA.⁴³

Charles welcomed the Italian initiative and especially the willingness of the Italian government to declare in an official letter that UNRRA was aiding the illegal Jewish movement. The ambassador advised his government to give its wholehearted support to the protest the Italian government had made to UNRRA. He also urged the British Foreign Office to prepare for the transfer of authority from UNRRA to IRO to prevent the new organization from serving as a cover for organizers of the illegal movement. The ambassador's suspicions in that direction had been aroused when he heard that the top leadership of UNRRA in Italy was due to move to IRO.⁴⁴

UNRRA was only part of the British problem in Italy. According to Ambassador Charles, most of the illegal Jewish activity in Italy was occurring under the

auspices of the JDC, which was using most of its budget to finance infiltration into Italy and subsequent illegal sailings. Charles stressed that, given the decisive role the JDC played in the illegal movement, everything possible should be done to curb its power. He was aware of the sensitive nature of the matter for Anglo-American relations and of the apprehension that a British attack on the JDC would be represented as an attempt on the part of the British to prevent aid and assistance to persecuted Jews. Therefore, he advocated preventing the JDC from taking part in IRO as it had in UNRRA.⁴⁵

Italy's readiness to protest to the European headquarters of UNRRA about the assistance the latter's personnel were rendering the illegal Jewish movement probably was motivated by its efforts to reenter the international community following the signing of the peace treaty — the Italians were well aware of Britain's ability to obstruct their acceptance in various international organizations. The fact that UNRRA was to end its work within a few weeks and disband also had some influence. At that point Rome no longer had to worry that attacking the organization might harm the country's interests. Moreover, complaining to UNRRA was the easiest and most elegant way to dissociate itself from what was happening in the camps and to avoid the risk of incidents with Jewish DPs.

Charles's satisfaction with the Italian government's gesture of goodwill, however, was short-lived. The hiatus in *Ha'apala* sailings from Italy lasted four months and ended in March 1947 with the embarkation of two vessels, the *Shabtai Lujinsky* and the *Moledet* (Hebrew: Homeland). This time the British embassy in Rome firmly warned the Italian Foreign Ministry that if any more illegal immigrants were to sail from Italy, the British government would demand that they be returned to Italy. Charles pointed out that according to information available to the British, the organizers of the illegal sailings intended to send a large number of Jews to Palestine during the next two or three months.⁴⁶ Britain's recently announced decision to transfer the Palestine question to the United Nations was coupled with fears of an inundation of illegal immigrants into Palestine. London was also furious with the Italians over rumors that Prime Minister de Gasperi had acceded to the request of Rafael Kantoni, head of the united Jewish community in Italy, to allow ten thousand Jews to enter the country.⁴⁷

It fell to Francesco Fransoni, secretary general of the Italian Foreign Ministry, to respond. The Italian government, he claimed, was just as interested as the British government in ending the exploitation of its country and preventing Jews from infiltrating via its northern frontiers, but it could not act to that end because of the armistice and peace agreements, which forbade Italy to maintain a sufficiently large military and police force. It was not the fault of the

Italian government that the military authorities of the United States and France in Germany and Austria were encouraging the illegal movement of Jews to Italy. When the Jews reached Italy, Fransoni continued, they were received immediately in the UNRRA camps, where the standard of living was much higher than that of the local Italian population. Their preferred status made it easier for them to sail from Italian shores while the shortage of police personnel was preventing the authorities from adequately monitoring the country's shoreline.⁴⁸ The Italians did not conceal from the British the fact that because of increased infiltration into Italy, prevention of the illegal sailings would be against Italy's interests, since there were no alternative routes of departure and the number of Jewish refugees in the country was rising steadily. They repeated their appeal to the British to support the Italian request vis-à-vis UNRRA and to grant preference to Jews presently in Italy in Palestine immigration quotas.⁴⁹

Despite Fransoni's critical tone, the British embassy in Rome was encouraged by the Italian reaction. Charles believed that the Italian authorities, including the prime minister and the foreign minister, were now interested in accommodating Britain. Until then, he maintained, the Italian government had demonstrated "extreme reluctance" to stop Jewish refugees from leaving Italy. British satisfaction derived in part from the instructions issued by the head of the Division of Public Safety and General Affairs at the Ministry of Interior, Dr. Giuseppe Migliore, to the police department to do all it could to prevent infiltration from Austria, including permission to shoot to kill if necessary. Migliore even suggested to the British that all infiltrators entering Italy starting from a certain date be concentrated on the island of Ustica and kept there until it became possible to return them to their own countries or to transfer them somewhere else. The plan was intended to prevent new infiltrators, whose arrival was expected with the advent of summer, from intermingling with groups of refugees already in the camps. Migliore thought that the plan would facilitate monitoring of the movement of refugees in Italy. He emphasized that there would be room on the island for six thousand persons and that therefore it would be necessary to remove refugees from the island on a regular basis.⁵⁰

Confounding British Strategies

The British embassy was also optimistic because the Italians had instructed the port authorities throughout the country to monitor and report on vessels suspected of being involved in illegal sailings and to delay supplying them with fuel. The ambassador was present when Fransoni appealed to the naval chief of staff as well as the minister of the merchant navy to make every effort to

delay the departure of the *President Warfield* (later known as the *Exodus*), then anchored in Portovenere near La Spezia. Bevin explained to Sforza, the Italian foreign minister, that he considered it to be of the utmost importance to prevent the ship from sailing to Palestine. While appreciating the importance the British ascribed to this ship, the Italians were willing to delay the sailing only for several days.⁵¹ This was not enough for London, and Charles made it clear to the Italians that if the *President Warfield* were eventually to sail for Palestine, Britain would demand that the Italian government take back the passengers once they were intercepted. The ambassador also hinted that relations between the two countries could be harmed.⁵² British pressure caused the Italian authorities to delay the boat's departure for several weeks and to prevent anyone from going on board.⁵³ Eventually, on 12 June 1947, the authorities allowed the *President Warfield* to sail, without Jewish refugees, accompanied by an Italian warship until it had entered French territorial waters.⁵⁴

The *President Warfield* was not the only source of difficulties. At the beginning of May, the British embassy in Rome learned that local authorities in Palermo had provided coal to an illegal immigration ship (the *Anal*) although only a few weeks earlier the British had asked the Italians to prevent fuel from being supplied to vessels involved in illegal sailings.⁵⁵ In response to British protests, the secretary general of the Italian Foreign Ministry argued that international law obliged them to furnish the ship with at least as much fuel as was needed to reach the nearest port. Frasoni, however, also admitted that the Italian government had been eager to be rid of the ship and its unwanted passengers.⁵⁶ On 13 May 1947, the *Anal*, renamed the *Yehuda Halevi*, was detained on the shores of Palestine. The vessel, which had set out from Algeria, had been anchored for three days at Palermo. The coal provided there, Charles protested to the Italian Foreign Ministry, had enabled the vessel to complete its journey to Palestine.⁵⁷

By spring of 1947 London had decided to start deporting illegal immigrants detained on Palestinian shores back to their ports of embarkation. The Foreign Office was inclined to activate this policy first toward Italy and then broaden its application to other countries.⁵⁸ Implementation, however, necessitated obtaining the agreement of the Italian government. London knew of Italian concern over the expected American reactions, especially by the influential Jewish community there, if Italy were to help Britain in the struggle against the illegal sailings. The Italian government, Charles stated, "is terrified of doing anything which would annoy the Government or public opinion in the United States upon whom Italy depends so much in a material sense for its food, fuel, etc."⁵⁹ In an effort to soften Italy's opposition, Bevin called Sforza's attention to the

announcement Truman had made on 5 June 1947 calling on the American public to act in accordance with the decision taken by the United Nations on 15 May 1947 and to avoid any moves that might hurt efforts to resolve the Palestine issue. He also warned the Italians, who wished to join the UN, not to ignore the memorandum sent by UN general secretary Trygve Lie asking countries to take stringent measures to prevent the passage or embarkation of Jews attempting to enter Palestine illegally.⁶⁰

With summer approaching, British fears increased concerning the infiltration of large numbers of Rumanian Jews into Italy seeking to sail from there to Palestine. At the beginning of June, Charles informed Sforza that most of the infiltrations into Italy occurred in the Bolzano region, from the French occupation zone. Noting Italian ineffectiveness, Charles expressed concern over the success of relatively large groups in entering the country despite intensified monitoring of the borders and the daily deportation of Jewish groups back to Austria. He warned that if drastic action were not taken, organized mass infiltration could be expected. Charles promised Sforza British support for any appeal about controlling the movement of the Jews that the Italian government might address to the neighboring countries.⁶¹

British embassy officials, however, were skeptical about the willingness and ability of the Italian authorities to stop the infiltration via the northern border and to supervise the Jewish refugees in the country. The whole Italian administration, Charles maintained, "is chaotic and corrupt by our standards and their police force is inadequate." Moreover, the Communist and other elements in the Italian administration were "most glad to see the Allies embarrassed in this way." Migliore's plan to concentrate the infiltrators on the island of Ustica, it was maintained, appeared impractical because the chances that the United Nations or the British government would agree to guarantee the removal of infiltrators from Italy seemed meager. Embassy personnel believed that public opinion, especially in the United States, would not allow the Italians "to establish a concentration camp for Jews administered with the degree of severity necessary to prevent escapes." The inevitable conclusion was that until the American and French occupation authorities cooperated, the Italians would not attempt to close their frontiers.⁶²

Charles's skepticism was not misplaced. Although the Italians agreed to enlist the help of an English expert in the struggle against Jewish infiltration, they made it clear that intensified steps to monitor the frontier would be of no use as long as the French were allowing refugees detained at the Italian border to enter the country by another route. Migliore suggested to the British ambassador "that all illegal Jewish entrants in the Austrian frontier zone should be

handed over to the authorities of the British zone who could keep them in properly supervised camps and, where possible, return them to refugee camps in Germany from which they originated.⁶⁰ The message was clear: since Britain was not able to convince the French and the Americans to take back the Jewish infiltrators, Britain should shoulder the burden if it wanted the cooperation of the Italians. Charles, aware of the implications of Migliore's proposal, was of the opinion that in view of the illegal mass emigration from Rumania and the anticipated increase in pressure on the Italian borders, perhaps it was advisable for Britain to accept refugees who had been infiltrated into Italy into the British zone in Austria in order to gain the cooperation of the Italians.⁶¹ British military authorities in Austria strongly opposed this suggestion, arguing that since the French and the Americans were allowing Jews to leave, the burden that could be expected to fall on the British zone would be very heavy. W. H. B. Mack, the advisory British political representative in Austria, observed that since June 1946 the illegal immigration of Jews via the British zone had stopped almost completely and that there were now only eighteen hundred persons in Admont Camp.⁶⁴

Although infiltration into Italy continued during the summer of 1947, the feeling in the British embassy in Rome at the beginning of August was that the Italian Foreign Ministry was keen to display goodwill and a readiness to cooperate.⁶⁵ Zionist sources indicated that the heavy pressure exerted by the British on the Italian authorities had begun to have an effect by spring 1947. Both national and local authorities stopped aiding organizers of the movement, which meant that they were forced again to act clandestinely, as they had done during the first year after the war.⁶⁶ That the Italians had joined the British and French initiative following Marshall's speech at Harvard and wanted to avoid unnecessary confrontations with Britain also played a part. The British, however, realized that willingness of the Italians to act decisively against infiltrators into the country was one aspect of the problem; the other was their ability to do so. A British expert, sent to check out the Italians' method of monitoring their border with Austria, asserted that the Italian border police were not equipped to cope with the organized Jewish movement, especially as movement organizers had different and much greater means at their disposal than did the border police.⁶⁷

News of the impending sailing of an alleged seventeen thousand illegal immigrants from the Black Sea (the *Pan* vessels) meant that the capacity of the camps on Cyprus would soon be overstretched. Britain braced itself for an all-out attempt to prevent additional embarkations from other places. Italy was considered to contain the highest risk, since the number of potential illegal im-

migrants there was estimated at twenty-eight thousand, and the seven vessels then anchored in Italian ports and suspected of involvement in the illegal sailings had a capacity of about thirteen thousand places.⁶⁸ The British Foreign Office and the British embassy in Italy decided to take advantage of Sforza's planned visit to Britain at the end of October to ensure Italian help in preventing the illegal sailings. G. J. Ward, the British chargé d'affaires, told Sforza of Bevin's personal interest in the illegal sailings and warned that any serious incident could put a damper on his visit. According to him, as long as a large number of illegal vessels were anchored in Italian ports, the threat of such an incident persisted.⁶⁹

Vittorio Zopi, the director of political affairs in the Italian Foreign Ministry, asserted that the Italian government had no legal authority to detain suspicious ships for an unlimited period of time when it was clear that they did not intend to violate the law by taking on board Jews from inside Italy. Zopi referred to the *Exodus* affair. Ward responded that the Italian government had enabled the Jews to transform Italy into a "workshop for fitting out" illegal ships. This policy, he stressed, was tantamount to allowing the Jews to sail from Italian shores. As the circumstances were sensitive, Zopi eventually promised to take action to delay the controversial vessels in the ports but emphasized the difficulty in detaining ships that were flying foreign flags.⁷⁰ It was clear to the British Foreign Office that to encourage the Italians to check the illegal embarkations, it would be necessary to prevent more Jews from entering Italy.⁷¹ Subsequent efforts were directed at the American and French military authorities in Austria to convince them to take action to halt the infiltration of Jews into Italy.⁷²

Despite the success of Sforza's visit to London and the tokens of goodwill on the part of the British, Italian willingness to assist the British in their struggle against the illegal movement did not markedly increase. British intelligence reported that after a period of limited activities during September, the illegal movement had reached the worrisome number of about a thousand border crossings during October 1947 and that if not for the dearth of space in the IRO camps in Italy, the Jewish organizations would have accelerated the infiltration. It was presumed that the rate of infiltration was dependent on the number of departures and that therefore the Jewish organizations were doing all they could to increase the frequency of the sailings.⁷³ Zionist sources confirmed this assessment. At the beginning of November a *Ha'apala* emissary reported, "Entry to Benjamin [Italy] continues. In October about 1,800 persons entered. The situation in the camps is terrible beyond description. Still, the slow stream continues. The fact that the exit is not progressing makes the situation unbearable."⁷⁴ In mid-November, Jacob L. Trobe, director of the JDC in Italy,

put the number of Jews who had entered Italy during the previous half year at ten thousand. The JDC itself set up a camp for Jewish infiltrators at Chiari near Milan.⁷⁵

During the winter of 1947-48, Victor A. Mallet, the new British ambassador in Rome, had to report that the Italian authorities refused to stop ships if there was no legal basis to do so and that they might well oppose the return of illegal immigrants who had sailed from Italy and been deported from Palestine.⁷⁶ At the beginning of December 1947, Mallet protested to the Italian Foreign Ministry for having allowed one of the ships, the *Giovanni Maria*, on the list of vessels suspected of involvement in the illegal immigration submitted to Zopi about two months previously, to set sail, though admittedly without passengers.⁷⁷ At the end of the month, the *Giovanni Maria*, now called the *Kaf-Tet Benovember* (Hebrew: 29 November, the day the UN passed its partition resolution), carrying 680 passengers, was intercepted along the shores of Palestine after having sailed from Corsica. Only five days previously another ship, the *Lo Tafhidunu* (Hebrew: You Can't Intimidate Us), that also had sailed from Italy, had been detained carrying 884 passengers.

In its reply to the British protest, the Italian Foreign Ministry argued that the ability of the Jewish immigrants to evade Italian control and to set sail for Palestine was not all that surprising since these were people "who have already succeeded in eluding the vigilance of the public of other states in Central Europe and the Allied military occupation authorities themselves in Germany and Austria and since not infrequently these elements succeeded in landing in Palestine without even the British Forces being able to prevent them."⁷⁸ Franson maintained that the success of a few ships in sailing from Italian ports should not be interpreted to mean that the Italian government lacked good intentions or that it had not taken a clear decision to prevent such sailings. Rather, it was due to the extensive resources at the disposal of the Jewish organizations, on the one hand, and the lack of policemen and resources in Italy, on the other.⁷⁹

In their contacts with the British, the Italians kept referring to the power and sophistication of the Jewish "organization" responsible for the illegal movement. Mallet reported to London that the vice-director of political affairs in the Italian Foreign Ministry, for example, was doubtful as to "the success of any attack on such a powerful organization, and whether any legal or other action which could be taken against the organizers would achieve more than a momentary interference with their plan."⁸⁰ As the Italian authorities, including Foreign Ministry officials, maintained some connections with *Ha'apala* organizers in Italy (particularly with Ada Sereni, who since April 1947 was responsible for the *Ha'apala* in Italy), this description may well have been a deliberate

exaggeration intended to explain the Italians' lack of success and their unwillingness actually to prevent the sailings.⁸¹

In any case, from the end of 1947 until the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948, Italy was again the main embarkation base, in terms of the number of vessels leaving from its ports. In mid-February 1948, disappointed by the continuing infiltration into the country, the British informed the Italians of their decision to recall the British liaison officer who had been sent to advise them in their struggle against the infiltration of Jewish refugees. The British government, the ambassador noted, had reached the conclusion that the hopes it had placed on the appointment of the liaison officer had not been realized, through no fault of the person himself.⁸²

Summing up, from the end of World War II until the establishment of the State of Israel, close to fifty thousand Jewish refugees clandestinely entered Italy, and of these twenty-one thousand sailed for Palestine. The British very quickly grasped the connection between infiltration into Italy and the illegal embarkations, and securing the northern border became a central link in the campaign against the illegal sailings from Italy. As most of the countries from or through which the illegal movement was being conducted were within the Soviet sphere of influence, Britain was physically cut off from the arena of events. Italy was under semi-British control and tens of thousands of British soldiers were stationed there, yet this was not enough to prevent the infiltration of Jewish refugees and the illegal sailings. Not only were the British unable to activate British soldiers against the illegal movement, since this would have been interpreted as an infringement of Italian sovereignty, but they could not ignore the positions of the Americans, their partners in supervising Italy. Moreover, British hints of potential harm to the relations between the two countries were not enough to make the Italians invest more than minimal efforts in preventing the movement.

While the Italian authorities were interested in preventing Jewish refugees from entering the country, they attached only secondary importance to the struggle against such infiltration because the burden of supporting the refugees did not have to fall on their shaky economy. Also, it was clear to them that the Jews entering Italy intended to continue to Palestine. It was precisely the *Ha'apala* embarkations from Italian shores that meant they could expect the Jewish refugees to leave the country again. The Italians also feared further incidents such as that of La Spezia which could adversely affect their standing with the United States. The British understood that among the prime factors influencing Rome's position were the extensive political power that the Italians

attributed to the Jewish community in the United States and the dependence of the Italian government on American political and economic assistance. The Italian authorities were well aware that UNRRA, which was furnishing Italy with large amounts of provisions, was headed by political figures whose main field of activity was New York and who did not hide their sympathy for the Jewish refugees.

Washington's position in the matter is made clear by the British failure to convince the Americans to prevent the refugee movement via their occupation zones and by the American objections to accepting back Jewish infiltrators who had been arrested in Italy or in the French zone. American policy not only made it easier for Jewish DPs to continue on their way; it also gave legitimization to French willingness to allow them to continue on to Italy through the French zone in Austria and to refuse to accept back those who were detained there. Sympathy for the Jewish refugees, bitterness toward the British occupation authorities in Italy, and indignation over London's attitude toward Italy even though it had joined the Allied side in 1943 also influenced the willingness of some important Italian officials and of the "man in the street" to help the Jewish infiltrators and the *Ha'apala*. To this should be added the opposition of various circles in Italy, especially among the Left, to what they saw as Britain's imperialist policies in Palestine.⁸³ The continuing decline in British power, especially during 1947, as evident in the serious economic crisis and the gradual disintegration of the empire, undoubtedly made it easier for the Italians to ignore London's demands. When relations improved between the two countries, it had only a limited effect on the Italians' treatment of the Jewish refugees.

100461 U

3/02

POST- HOLOCAUST POLITICS

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

ARIEH J. KOHAVI

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS

CHAPEL HILL AND LONDON

2001