

[The S.S. Ben Hecht](#)

"The Mandate of Conscience"

By Judith Rice



Ben Hecht¹



S.S. Ben Hecht shadowed by the British Navy

She is the last ship afloat; the last man standing from the fight.

She was the ship of the outcasts, the rejected, the despised.

Jewish leadership, afraid to disturb, he cried out for the dying.

The Aliyah Bet veterans are almost all gone now, passing under the grey waves of lapping history and forgetfulness. Peter Bergson &

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Hecht

*Ben Hecht's struggle to save Jewish lives is still deliberately obscured,
to protect the ethos, the myths of Jewish/Zionist leadership.*

As the blackening blood colored clouds of the coming Holocaust gathered before 1939, Europe's Jews were desperate for refuge. No one wanted Jews, not even America. The famed words of the Jewish poetess Emma Lazarus² on the Statue of Liberty in New York's harbor, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" were meaningless. The American lamp was not lit for European Jewry. The door was tightly closed.

The only place that did want them was the promised Jewish national home in Palestine, the Palestine of the Balfour Declaration³. The League of Nations⁴ British Mandate for Palestine envisioned for possible Jewish settlement encompassed 43,000 square miles.

The size of the Jewish national home was massively reduced in 1922. Winston Churchill signed the severance of 32,500 square miles from the Palestine Mandate area. The British created Trans-Jordan from the newly severed Palestinian lands and entitled them to their newly recognized non-Palestinian rulers, the Hashemites^{5, 6}.

In 1923, again, the lands eligible for Jewish settlement were reduced by the British with removal of the Golan from British Mandate control. Without consideration of Jewish interests or recognition that the Golan, since the times of Joshua had belonged to the Jewish tribes of Dan and Manasseh, was transferred to the Syrian Druze and Arabs, under the French zone of control.

Lands for Jewish settlement were continually being reduced and reduced. By the 1948 UN partition agreement, the original land mass available for Jewish settlement had been reduced 88% to 5,500 square miles. The Jewish Agency for Palestine⁷ pragmatically acquiesced. Jewish power politics were weak and the lack of Jewish settlement population had to be taken into consideration.

² <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/lazarus.html>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balfour_Declaration_of_1917

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/League_of_Nations

⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hashemite>

⁶ <http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/hashemites.html>

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_Agency_for_Israel

Jewish acquiescence to British actions was not universal. A minority of Jews strongly opposed the abrogation of Jewish land and immigration rights. They were willing to fight the British to open the doors of unlimited immigration to Palestine, to save Jewish refugees from the Nazis. They were largely the followers of Vladimir Jabotinsky⁸; the *Revisionist Zionists*,^{9, 10} or *Revisionists*, as they came to be known. They were bitterly opposed by mainstream Zionists represented by Chaim Weizman¹¹ in Britain, David Ben Gurion¹² in Palestine and Rabbi Stephen Wise in America^{13, 14}.

Death was closing around the Jews of Europe in the late 1930's. British Mandate policy virtually sealed off Jewish refugee entry to Palestine with the MacDonald White Paper of 1939¹⁵. The British were no longer concerned with Jews only the prosecution of the coming war. It was a bitter blow to all Jews and especially the Zionists. David Ben Gurion, as representative of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, declared on the outbreak of War in September 1939 when the Germans invaded Poland, "We will fight the White Paper as if there is no war, and fight the war as if there is no White Paper."

The Jewish situation in Palestine weak, they needed British support. The Jewish Agency feared antagonizing the British and the Allies. They feared protesting too loudly. They feared stimulating pogroms and retribution against the Jews in Palestine and other countries. They felt it better to acquiesce. The same fears existed among the vast majority of American Jews. American Jews feared to act against the Roosevelt administration in their desire to help their fellow Jews. American Jews were advised to support the war effort, support Roosevelt, *do not rock the boat*. It could get bad for the Jews if they were not viewed as American patriots.

Revisionists refused to accept the arbitrary British desiccation of the Jewish homeland, the Jewish safe haven, promised through the Balfour Declaration. They were territorial maximalists. But they also were realists. The Revisionists in Palestine, Britain and American understood there was no point wanting to settle all of Mandate Palestine if there were no Jews. Concerns for British Patriotism, American patriotism had no meaning when it came to saving Jewish lives. They would do what they had to.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ze'ev_Jabotinsky

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revisionist_zionism

¹⁰ http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Zionism/Revisionist_Zionism.html

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaim_Weizmann

¹² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Ben_Gurion

¹³ <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007309>

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Samuel_Wise

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MacDonald_White_Paper

“The Jewish Lehi (Fighters for the Freedom of Israel) and Irgun (National Military Organization) movements initiated violent uprisings against the British Mandate in 1940 and 1944 respectively. On 6 November 1944, Eliyahu Hakim and Eliyahu Bet Zuri (members of Lehi) assassinated Lord Moyne in Cairo. Moyne was the British Minister of State for the Middle East and the assassination is said by some to have turned British Prime Minister Winston Churchill against the Zionist cause. The ban on Jewish immigration continued. After the assassination of Lord Moyne, the Haganah kidnapped, interrogated, and turned over to the British many members of the Irgun (The Hunting Season). The Irgun ordered its members not to resist or retaliate with violence, so as to prevent a civil war.”¹⁶

Knowledge of the slaughter of the Jews within Nazi controlled Europe was well known to the Allies and the Jewish mainstream leadership in Palestine, Britain and America by 1940-1941. Their news was deliberately quieted, even suppressed, by the mainstream Jewish leadership. They called it extremist, Revisionist ranting.

The British had disgracefully dishonored the promise of the Balfour Declaration and the sanctuary of Palestine for European Jewry. Their motives were simple. The British made a basic mathematical calculation. The number of Muslims in the world was significantly greater than the number of Jews. The British vainly hoped to appease the Arabs. British fears of pro-Nazi Arab insurrections, the risk to the Suez Canal and anti-Semitism were strong contributing British factors.

The Aliyah Bet was the Palestinian Jewish response to the British Mandate government’s refusal to permit Jews to find shelter in Palestine. If the British and Arabs would not consider legal humanitarian refuge for the Jews, the Jews would exercise their promised rights “illegally.” They would smuggle, what the world viewed as detritus and refuse, Jewish men, women and children into Palestine in any way they could.

Aliyah Bet is a Hebrew acronym. It is a combination of the two first letters from the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph and Bet. It stands for Aliyah, to go up to the land, and Bet meaning the second wave. The word Aliyah itself is taken from the last word of the last book of the Jewish Bible, Chronicles II, 36:23. *“Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia (Iran), All the kingdoms of the earth hath the LORD God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The LORD his God be with him, **let him go up.**”*

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hunting_Season

Aliyah is a verb in Israel. It means to go home, to return to Israel from the Diaspora¹⁷, the Jewish historical dispersion. The Aliyah Aleph, or the first limited waves of immigration were the “legal” immigrations. The Aliyah Bet, or the second wave would be done “illegally”. The Aliyah Bet is also known by a Modern Hebrew term, the Ha’apala. It too means Aliyah. The refugees who participated in the Ha’apala are called Ma’apilim. They were willing to face hardships, detentions, deportations and even death to reach Palestine.

The Aliyah Bet was two distinct time periods. The first effort was from 1934 -1942. It was largely led and inspired by the Revisionists and other small Zionist groups. Five years after it began, 1939, the mainstream Jewish Agency for Palestine created the HaMossad LeAliyah Bet and assumed general control of the Aliyah Bet. It was headed by Shaul Avigur who reported directly to Ben Gurion. The first Aliyah Bet ended February 23, 1942 with the sinking of the Jewish refugee ship the Struma¹⁸.

The Struma was an old cargo ship in desperate sea condition. 769 even more desperate Jewish refugees fleeing the death of Europe hoped to reach Palestine from Rumania boarded the ship, December 12, 1941. The refugees had been survivors, witnesses, of the massacres of Jews in Bessarabia and Bukovina. The voyage was dangerous during war time but by hugging non-belligerent countries and ports they hoped to make it safely to Palestine. The first stop was Istanbul. The engines broke down. The Turks refused sanctuary to the Jews and the ship. February 23, in the dark of the early morning hours, the Turks towed the broken down ship with its trapped human cargo, with no water or food on board, into international waters, away from Turkey. The ship was left adrift. A few hours later, the Soviet submarine *Shch 213* torpedoed the Struma. Though within easy reach of Turkish help, all aboard her were killed or drowned except for one survivor. The Soviets had mistaken the Struma, they said, for a German freighter.

The second period of the Aliyah Bet began in 1945. It lasted until 1948 with the establishment of the State of Israel. With nowhere to go except for Palestine, the Holocaust’s survivors remained *legally* barred until the British White Paper of 1939 ended with Israel’s Independence.

“The Aliyah Bet was conducted in two ways: by sea, from ports and shores in Southern/Eastern Europe and North-Africa, and by land, through the northern border.

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_diaspora

¹⁸ http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206052.pdf

Between 1934 and the beginning of WW-II, about 15,000 ma'apilim arrived on board 43 vessels. Two additional vessels were turned away by the British, and two sunk. The vessels came close to the shores and the ma'apilim were taken quickly ashore to escape capture. During WW-II additional 15,000 ma'apilim arrived on board 21 vessels. The ma'apilim, who came from the Balkan countries, first arrived in Turkish ports and from there by land to Palestine (during the war Britain allowed Jews in Turkey to enter Palestine legally). Five more vessels sunk, resulting in 1,583 casualties.

The "Golden Age" of Aliya Bet was its post WW-II stage, during the three years between the end of WW-II in Europe in mid 1945 and the declaration of Israel as an independent state on May 14, 1948. During this stage, over 70,000 ma'apilim took part in 66 voyages, including the most famous voyage by far of the ship Exodus 1947. There were no major disasters (only two ships sunk, 8 ma'apilim drowned in one of them, the Rafiah), in contrast to the several horrifying disasters of the previous stages. Ten ma'apilim died as a result of clashes with the British forces.

The British reaction to Aliya Bet after WW-II was an impressive, and effective, blockade by their Navy of the Palestinian coast. Only 12 Aliya Bet vessels managed to run this blockade, with just 2,108 ma'apilim on board. The rest of the ma'apilim - 66,170 people (this number excludes 1,014 who were allowed to enter legally following the famous "La Spazia Affair"¹⁹ and 1,136 who arrived after May 14, 1948) - were caught and detained by the British. The vast majority of them was detained in special detention camps in Cyprus. Other detention places included the Atlit²⁰ detention camp south of Haifa, and 2 camps near Hamburg, Germany where the Exodus' ma'apilim were detained."²¹

"Hillel Kook²² was born in Lithuania in 1915, the son of Rabbi Dov Kook, the younger brother of Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the British Mandate in Palestine. In 1924, his family immigrated to Palestine, where his father became the first Chief Rabbi of Afula. Hillel Kook received a religious education in Afula and at the Religious Zionist Yeshiva Merkaz HaRav in Jerusalem and was an unregistered student of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University. While there, he became a member of *Sohba*,

¹⁹ <http://www.hagshama.org.il/en/resources/view.asp?id=828>

²⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlit_detainee_camp

²¹ <http://palyam.org/English/Hahapala/mainpage>

Text by - Tzvi Ben Tsur

²² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel_Kook

or "Comradeship", a group of students who would later become prominent in the Revisionist movement, including David Raziel and Avraham Stern.

Kook joined the pre-state Haganah militia in 1930 following widespread Arab riots. In 1931, Kook helped found the Irgun, a group of militant Haganah dissidents, and fought with them in Palestine through most of the 1930s. He served as a post commander in 1936, and eventually became a member of the Irgun General Headquarters.

In 1937 Kook began his career as an international spokesperson for the Irgun and Revisionist Zionism. He first went to Poland, where he was involved in fundraising and establishing Irgun cells in Eastern Europe. It was there that he met the founder of the Revisionist movement, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, and became friends with his son Ari. At the founders' request, Kook traveled to the United States with Jabotinsky in 1940, where he soon served as the head of the Irgun and Revisionist mission in America, following the elder's sudden death in August. This assignment was clandestine, and Kook publicly denied he was affiliated with the Irgun many times while in America.

While in America, Kook led a group of Irgun activists under the pseudonym "Peter Bergson", supposedly to avoid embarrassing his family (particularly his famous uncle Abraham Isaac) with his political activities. The name "Bergson Group" or "Bergsonites" eventually became used to refer to all the members of Kook's immediate circle. The Bergson Group was composed of a hard-core cadre of ten Irgun activists from Europe, America and Palestine, including Aryeh Ben-Eliezer, Yitzhak Ben-Ami, Alexander Rafeali, Shmuel Merlin, and Ari Jabotinsky. The Bergson Group was closely involved with various Jewish and Zionist advocacy groups, such as the American Friends for a Jewish Palestine and the Organizing Committee of Illegal Immigration. The group also founded some separate initiatives of its own, specifically the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews, whose goal was the formation of an Allied fighting force of stateless and Palestinian Jews. Some credit the later formation of the Jewish Brigade, a British unit of Palestinian Jews, with Kook's activism. Two American members of the Bergson Group were author and screenwriter Ben Hecht and cartoonist and graphic artist Arthur Szyk."²³

Hecht wrote in his autobiography how he became a member of the Bergson group.

"It is as a Jewish John Doe under indictment as one of the helpers of the Palestinian 'Terrorists,' who proudly called themselves the Irgun Zvai Leumi that I now speak up. All the other witnesses have had their say-the Jewish Zionists, Hebrew statesmen, authors and journalists and the British Empire. I offer my evidence neither as Jew nor

²³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel_Kook#Early_life

propagandist but as an honest writer who was walking down the street one day when he bumped into history.

I had no notion on that April day in 1941 that any such collision was taking place. All that was evident was that I was buying drinks for a pair of male strangers in the Twenty One Club.

One was a tall, sunburned fellow in a sort of naval uniform. He was Captain Jeremiah Helpern, (pseudonym) who had recently created a Hebrew Navy for the non-existing Hebrew Republic of Palestine. The navy had consisted of a lone training ship that had run aground in the Mediterranean a few months before and been put out of service. Captain "Irma" Helpern had come to the U.S. in search of some Maecenas to buy him a new navy.

My other companion was a man in his thirties, of medium height. With a small blond mustache, an English accent and a voice inclined to squeak under excitement. He was Peter Bergson of Warsaw, London and Jerusalem.

I ordered a third round of drinks for my guests, unaware that neither had eaten that day. They kept their eyes firmly averted from the platters of fine food moving to and fro under their noses-for they were Hebrew heroes trained in self-discipline. They praised me for one of my "Thousand and One Afternoons" columns appearing daily in the scrappy newspaper, P.M. The column had discussed the attitudes of American Jews toward the new German anti-Semite, Hitler. I had deplored the fact that America's important social, political and literary Jews: were reluctant to speak out as Jews under attack and preferred to conduct themselves as neutral Americans.

Bergson admired my point of view rather extravagantly and told me of the fine Jewish renaissance begun by a man named Vladimir Jabotinsky, of whom I had never heard. Being allied with the creator of a Jewish renaissance made me nervous, for I had no such dreams in me. But Bergson spoke the name Jabotinsky with such pride that I asked to meet him and learned he had died recently in New York.

Bergson then spoke of matters in Palestine. I told him that as a Jew I had no interest in Palestine and I felt that its problems confused the issue. In my mind the issue was the cowardly silence of America's influential Jews toward the massacre of Jews started in Europe. Both men smiled politely at my irritation with their Palestine talk, and their sudden silence on the subject impressed me as something more than good manners.

I noted that my guests were a bit mysterious about answering any direct questions I put to them such as, "Where are you living now?" or, "What are you doing in the United

States?" I was impressed, also, by a pride in them, as if these two stray "fans" who had sought to meet me were somehow men of importance. They left after asking permission to call on me at my hotel. Rose was writing movies in Hollywood, and I was living at the Algonquin.

I ate my dinner alone, unaware that another Sinbad had entered my life, he of the blond mustache and somewhat squeaky voice—a Sinbad bringing greater riches than any of the diamond-mine peddlers who had preceded him....

My meeting with Peter Bergson was the result of my having turned into a Jew in 1939. I had before then been only related to Jews. In that year I became a Jew and looked on the world with Jewish eyes. The German mass murder of the Jews, recently begun, had brought my Jewishness to the surface. I felt no grief or vicarious pain. I felt only a violence toward the German killers. I saw the Germans as murderers with red hands. Their fat necks and round, boneless faces became the visages of beasts. Their descent from humanity was as vivid in my eyes as if they had grown four legs and a snout.

I was too old to enlist in the battle in Europe. But I was not too old for anger. I went through the days holding my anger like a hot stove in my arms. There seemed nothing to do with it but carry it and suffer its heat. .

The anger led me to join an organization for the first time in my life. It was called "Fight for Freedom" and was dedicated to bringing the U.S.A. into the war against the Germans. Herbert Agar, a handsome and eloquent fellow, was at its head. My work in the organization consisted of writing war propaganda speeches and a pageant called "Fun To Be Free," which MacArthur collaborated on and Billy Rose put on in Madison Square Garden. I wrote and staged other similar shows for the Red Cross and the War Bond Drive.

I was aware that I was doing all these things as a Jew. My eloquence in behalf of democracy was inspired chiefly by my Jewish anger. I had been no partisan of democracy in my earlier years. Its sins had seemed to me more prominent than its virtues. But now that it was the potential enemy of the new German Police State I was its un-carping disciple. Thus, oddly, in addition to becoming a Jew in 1939 I became also an American—and remained one.....

Another bitter thought was in my head—how could the Jews whose butchery was going on before an indifferent world ever be a people of dignity again?

I knew, and wrote, that the Germans would be beaten in battle if the U.S. joined against them, and I was certain their miserable megalomania would be knocked out of them—for

another few decades. But I felt there would be no victory for Jews in this. As I walked the street, a million Jewish men, women and children had been butchered and four million more were yet to be fed to the lime kilns and bonfires. Yet there was no voice of importance anywhere, Jewish or non-Jewish, protesting this foulest of history's crimes."

²⁴

"Initially the Bergson Group limited its activities to Irgun fundraising and various propaganda campaigns. The outbreak of World War II saw a dramatic transformation in the group's focus. As information about the Holocaust began to reach the United States, Kook and his fellow activists became more involved in trying to raise awareness about the fate of the Jews in Europe."²⁵

Ben Hecht's powerful pen and his biting aggressive writing ability scornfully screamed about the murder of European Jewry to America and Britain. The Bergson Group, though self appointed, were the unknown and unwanted Sirens calling to America, to mute American and British Jewry and especially mainstream Jewish leadership, about the Holocaust. They quickly became hated by the mainstream Jewish leadership. The mainstream was in fact being co-opted by Bergson's group because of their inactivity, their passivity, their silence. Mainstream Jewish leadership decided not to join with the Bergson Group in common purpose of saving Jewish lives. To maintain their positions, they spitefully decided to destroy Peter Bergson (Hillel Kook) and Ben Hecht's pen. They decided to use their access to the media, the press, and political power to brand the Bergson Group as extremists.

If extreme efforts to save Jewish lives was considered extremist, the Bergson Group wore the title proudly. Their fight was a "Mandate of Conscience."

"Hillel Kook had much opposition during the war which continues today. Noted Israeli Holocaust historian Professor Yehuda Bauer exclaimed "Hillel Kook didn't save anyone!"

Kook and his followers were widely opposed by large sections of the American public, particularly by many prominent American Zionist organizations. In December 1943, the American Jewish Conference launched a public attack against the Bergsonites in an attempt to derail support for the resolution.

The British embassy and several American Zionist groups, including the American Jewish Committee and other political opponents sought to have Kook deported or drafted. They encouraged the IRS

²⁴ Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1954

²⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Bergson

to investigate the Bergson Group's finances in an attempt to discredit them, hoping to find misappropriation, or at least careless bookkeeping, of the large amount of funds the groups handled. The IRS found no financial irregularities, Included in those trying to stop the Bergson Group's rescue activities were Steven Wise, Nahum Goldmann and Congressman Blum of New York. A State Department protocol shows Nahum Goldmann telling the State Department that Hillel Kook doesn't represent organized Jewry and suggested either deporting him or drafting him for the war effort.

Neither the U.S. Holocaust Museum nor Yad Vashem present the Bergson Group's activism, the intensity of opposition and its consequences and surrounding controversies.”²⁶

Hecht clarified his views of American establishment Jewry in his autobiography.

“The unassimilated Jews-the Yiddish Jews-were speaking their horror in the Jewish newspapers. In the synagogues the Jews were weeping and praying. In thousands of homes where Yiddish was spoken the German murderers and their deeds were cursed. But these were the locked-away Jews who had only the useless ear of other Jews and, possibly, of God.

The Americanized Jews who ran newspapers and movie studios, who wrote plays and novels, who were high in government and powerful in the financial, industrial and even social life of the nation, were silent.”²⁷

At a private cocktail party in New York for the elites of society Hecht shocked everyone with his revelations of Nazi barbarity. Edna Ferber²⁸, the famed Jewish American writer and Pulitzer Prize winner blisteringly told Hecht:

“Who is paying you to do this wretched propaganda,” she demanded, “Mister Hitler? Or is it Mister Goebbels?”²⁹

Hecht broke the story of the massacre of European Jewry to the American public in February, 1943. *The Reader's Digest*, America's largest selling magazine, published his

²⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Bergson

²⁷ Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1954

²⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edna_Ferber

²⁹ Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1954

“March 9, 1943, ‘out of frustration over American policy and outrage at Hollywood's fear of offending its European markets,’ he organized and wrote a pageant, *We Will Never Die*, which was produced by Billy Rose and Ernst Lubitsch and with the help of composer Kurt Weill and staging by Moss Hart. The pageant was performed at Madison Square Garden for two shows in front of 40,000 people in March, 1943. It then traveled nationwide, including a performance at the Hollywood Bowl.”³¹



We will Never Die

“The performance was dedicated to the 2,000,000 European Jews who had already been murdered. Forty thousand people saw the pageant that first night. It went on to play in five other major cities. When the drama came to Washington, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, six Supreme Court Justices and some 300 senators and congressmen watched it.

Despite the number of people who saw the pageant, it failed to make any difference to U.S. policy. At the end of April it became clear that the closed-door Bermuda Conference, called to consider the plight of Jews in Europe, had failed to adopt any concrete measures to help the primary victims of Nazi atrocities. In response, and in complete disregard of the advice of more mainstream Jewish activists, the Bergson group took out a full-page advertisement in the "New York Times" calling the conference a "cruel mockery" of the millions of Jews caught in the "Nazi death trap." The U.S. government's continuing inaction convinced the group that they needed to step up both their propaganda campaign and their lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill. In July of 1943 they co-sponsored a six-day conference that took place in New York City. Fifteen hundred people took part, some of them influential non-Jews like New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia. At the conclusion of the meeting, participants formed the Emergency Committee which was charged with launching a national publicity campaign and lobbying Congress to create an independent agency devoted to saving Jews.

The "Bergson Boys" were successful in drumming up the support of some influential public

³¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Hecht#cite_note-23

figures. Press baron William Randolph Hearst, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, and Democratic Congressman Will Rogers, Jr. were among those who got behind their campaign. The group's efforts culminated on November 9, 1943 with the presentation in the House and Senate of two identical resolutions that urged the president to set up a rescue commission. After the measure went through particularly difficult hearings in the House, the Emergency Committee kept the issue in the public eye with provocative large newspaper advertisements under headlines such as "HOW WELL ARE YOU SLEEPING?," "ONE VICTORY FOR HITLER?" and "TIME RACES DEATH."

In January 1944, before Congress could vote on the resolution, President Roosevelt made it irrelevant by establishing the War Refugee Board, an agency charged with rescuing the victims of Nazi oppression. He did so in part because the Treasury Department had just presented him with a searing indictment of the State Department's continuous obstruction of all rescue efforts. But the mounting pressure the Bergsonites had helped create on Capitol Hill for an independent rescue agency produced a political climate that also encouraged him to act."³²

President Roosevelt never would have acted independently if it had not been for the considerable public pressure brought upon him by the Bergson Group. His tacit O.K. for the State Department's anti-Semitic views about Jewish immigration were clearly evidenced by his support for his close personal friend Breckenridge Long³³. Long's anti-Semitic views were well known. Until Long's efforts denying immigration visas to Jewish refugees became public and it threatened Roosevelt politically, he did nothing to interfere in Long's control of the visa sections of the Department of State. Respected Democratic supporters and presidential confidants, such as Bernard Baruch, appealed to Roosevelt with no results. Baruch told Hecht, "I have had a two-hour talk with President Roosevelt about the Jews and the Jewish problem. I have spoken also to Governor Dewey on the same subject. I can only tell you as a result of these talks that, despite my having been a lifelong Democrat, I would rather trust my American Jewishness in Mr. Dewey's hands than in Mr. Roosevelt's."³⁴

Many people credit Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt as being the force behind the scenes finally forcing Franklin Roosevelt to do the right thing. Tellingly, the modern State of Israel has a postage stamp honoring Eleanor Roosevelt and none for President Franklin Roosevelt.

The growing success and effectiveness of the Bergson Group did not stop the efforts of establishment Jewry to denigrate and defame them. A major article in the New York Post, May 19, 1944, banner headline read:

³² <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/holocaust/peopleevents/pandeAMEX88.html>

³³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breckinridge_Long

³⁴ Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1954

New Palestine Group Formed - Zionist Chiefs Oppose it

“An announcement by a group of seven Palestinian Jews that they have organized as the “Hebrew Committee of national Liberation and intend to seek recognition of the United Nations today was met by a storm of protest by Zionist leaders.

Chairman of the new committee is Peter H. Bergson, a thirty four year old Palestine national who previously has been active in organizing the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine, the Committee for a Jewish Army, and the Emergency committee to save the Jewish People of Europe.

Bergson disclosed the formation of the “Hebrew Committee of National Liberation” at a press conference in a newly acquired building on Washington’s Embassy Row, which Bergson referred to as the Committee’s embassy. A Jewish and an American flag flew over the entrance of the building which is as yet unfurnished.

Seek Place at Peace Table

Bergeson said his committee would seek recognition from the allied governments as spokesmen for the Hebrew nation and that it would request membership on the war crimes commission the United Nations relief and rehabilitation administration and other United Nations bodies as well as a seat eventually at the peace table.

Dr. Leon Feuer, Washington director of the American Zionist emergency council which is jointly headed by Dr. Stephen Wise of New York and Dr. Abba Hillel Silver of Cleveland and speaks for all major Zionist groups in the U.S. promptly denounced the new Bergson venture as “a brazen fraud.” And said the committee, consisted “half a dozen adventurers from Palestine with no standing, no credentials, no mandate from anyone.”

Sponsors of the committee he declared have thrived on publicity tricks in their earlier organizations which he asserted have had one common feature, a persistent request for contributions.

Dr. Nahum Goldmann, Washington representative at the Jewish Agency for Palestine and of the world Zionist organization said; “the attempt of a few persons who have come from Palestine without any authority without having been delegated by any group in Palestine, having played no role whatever in Jewish life in Palestine, to proclaim themselves as the trustees of the Hebrew Nations interests is an act which I am sure will be rejected by all sections of the Jewish people.”

Fear Harmful Result

His statement included a warning to “well meaning friends” among non-Jewish groups not to

be fooled by the claims of the new committee. Any aide extended to it Dr. Goldmann said would weaken the prestige and influence of the Jewish organizations "charged with the complex and responsible task of building the Jewish homeland, And would result in doing harm instead of good to the Jewish people'.

The new organization was similarly denounced by the administrative committee of the American Jewish conference which said that the leaders of the Hebrew committee of National Liberation were linked with an extremist clique which had been outlawed in Palestine because of its anti-democratic and terroristic tactics.

The new organization's program the statement said was intended to divide and disrupt the Jewish people and to destroy existing agencies for establishment of a national home in Palestine. Co chairman of the AJC interim committee are Israel Goldstein, Rabbi Wise and Henry Monsky of Omaha.

Plans to Sell Bonds

The Committee hopes to finance its activities by selling interest bearing "free Palestine bonds" as an obligation of the Hebrew nation he said, mentioning one million dollars as the desired amount for the first issue. Asked whether the treasury department had given permission for sale of such bonds, he replied, "not yet". Bergson added that the committee had paid \$65,000 for its quote embassy which was formerly occupied by the Iranian government. The money was contributed by "friends."

Members of the national liberation committee in addition to Bergson are Arieh Ben Elizer, Theodore Bennahum, Pincas Delougaz, Jeremiah Helpern, Ari Jabotinsky, and Samuel Merlin, Jabotinsky is the son of Valdimir Jabotinsky one of the early pioneers of Zionsim."

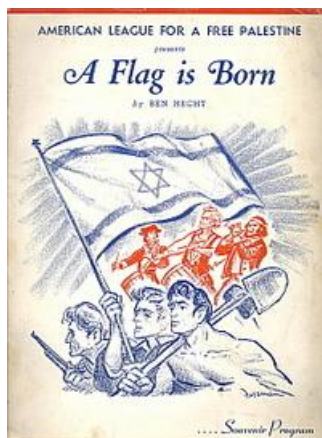
V.E. Day, Victory in Europe day, came none to soon and much too late for 6,000,000 European Jews murdered by the Nazis. The guns stopped firing in May, 1945 with the absolute surrender of the Germans and their allies. The unbelievable, almost incomprehensible horror of the Holocaust slowly emerged. Pogroms re-occurred as some Jews attempted to return to their pre-war homes. It became very clear, their former homes, their old communities were gone forever. Most of the survivors existed, dazed, homeless and unwanted languishing in Western European and German Displaced Persons camps. The choices of where to go were almost nil except for – Palestine. But Palestine was barred by the British to the Jewish refugees. Britain had not changed. It was still trying to appease the Arabs, protect British access to oil, protect the Suez Canal and remained shamefully anti-Semitic, even after the Holocaust. The Balfour Declaration was dead to all except the Jews.

World War II over, the Bergson Group operating under one of many cover names they created, such as the American League for a Free Palestine, (ALFB) continued to function. Their work was not complete. The *Jewish Question* had not been resolved. The nature of the work had changed. How to help the survivors of the Holocaust reach Palestine? How to help the survivors who wished to return to their ancient homeland and create a new homeland and new lives?

Starting late in 1945, the Jewish Agency and the Haganah energetically reactivated the Aliyah Bet. If the British would not permit legal immigration to Palestine of Jewish refugees, then *illegal* immigration would be used. From across Southern Europe ships were purchased, refitted and overcrowded with refugees being sent to Palestine. Most were intercepted by the British. Still they kept coming.

Bergson remained an outsider to mainstream Jewish leadership. He was Revisionist to the Haganah, not to be trusted. Bergson had not sat by quietly while Jews were being killed, he was not willing to simply sit by now. The Group had to do their part to bring Jews to Palestine, to Eretz Israel, to build a future state. Money was needed to bring the people home. Bergson turned to Ben Hecht, to his pen, to his theatrical connections, to write a play for the American League for a Free Palestine. The purpose of the play was no secret:

"'A Flag is Born' is not ordinary theatre. It was not written to amuse or beguile. 'A Flag is Born' was written to make money--to make money to provide ships to get Hebrews to Palestine ... and [to] arouse American public opinion to support the fight for freedom and independence now being waged by the resistance in Palestine."³⁵



Marlon Brando, Celia Adler, Paul Muni

³⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Flag_is_Born

"A Flag Is Born was a play promoting the creation of a Jewish State in the ancient land of Israel. It opened on Broadway on September 4, 1946. The cast included Paul Muni, Celia Adler and Marlon Brando. Hollywood's most successful screenwriter, Ben Hecht was the playwright. It was directed by Luther Adler with music by Kurt Weill. It was produced by the American League for a Free Palestine, an organization headed by Hillel Kook, known in America by the anglicized name Peter Bergson.

The play had only three characters. Paul Muni and Celia Adler, major stars at the time, played Tevye and Zelda, survivors of the Treblinka death camp who are attempting to travel to the Land of Israel, and Marlon Brando, who played David, an angry young concentration camp survivor.

The play opens as the older couple halts for the night and Zelda lights Shabbat candles on a broken tombstone. Tevye recites the Shabbat prayers, then dreams of the town where he was born as it was before it was destroyed by the Nazis. He then dreams of King Saul at the battle of Gilead and has a dream conversation with King David after which, in his dream, he stands before the council of the United Nations, England, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union, and pleads for the formation of a Jewish State. They ignore him. When Tevye awakens, he finds that Zelda has died during the night. He recites a traditional Jewish memorial prayer, Kaddish, and welcomes the Angel of Death who has come for him. As the young hero, David, considers committing suicide, three Jewish soldiers appear and promise to take him with them to the Land of Israel to fight for Jewish independence. In the play's stirring finale, David delivers a moving Zionist speech and marches off to fight for Jewish freedom holding a Zionist flag made out of Tevya's prayer shawl.

Although Marlon Brando had already been voted "Broadway's Most Promising Actor" for his role as an anguished veteran in *Truckline Café*, the play was not a commercial success and Brando was still young, relatively unknown and impecunious. Nevertheless, he explained that he desperately believed that the survivors of the Holocaust deserved to have their own land where they could live free from oppression and the anti-Semitic tyranny of the outside world. He accepted only the Actor's Equity minimum payment; enabling the play's proceeds to go to helping create the state of Israel.

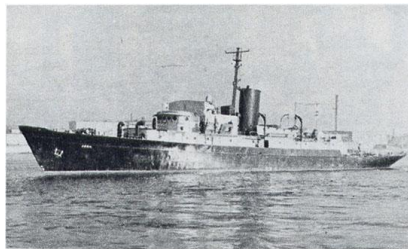
In promoting the play the Bergson Group emphasized the parallels between the American and Jewish struggles for independence and the Jewish fighters in Israel to the heroes of the American Revolution. Ads portrayed Irgun fighters as "modern-day Nathan Hales," denounced London's policy of "taxation [in Palestine] without representation," quoted Thomas Jefferson's memorable phrase, "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God," and used the motto, "It's 1776 in Palestine!" When Tevya speaks in his dream to the council of representatives of England, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union, he compares Palestine in the 1940s with the

American colonies in the 1770s. The cover of the program was sketch of three young Jews, one with a gun, one with a hoe, and one with a Zionist flag, and in the background the famous illustration of three figures from the American revolution playing drums and flute.

"A Flag is Born" played in six North American cities and raised more than \$400,000 for the ALFP, the largest block of funds it ever attained.....

The play was extremely popular, the Broadway run was extended and a tour was arranged. The sponsoring committee included many prominent people, including composer Leonard Bernstein, novelist Lion Feuchtwanger, New York City Mayor William O'Dwyer, and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Following the Broadway run, "A Flag is Born" traveled to Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Boston. It was also scheduled to play at the National Theater in Washington, D.C. However, in an early action of the Civil rights movement, Americans who opposed racial discrimination began a boycott to oppose the practice of barring blacks from attending Washington theaters, and the committee moved the play to the Maryland Theater in Baltimore. A special train brought members of Congress to the performance.^[1] The American League for a Free Palestine and the NAACP cooperated to use the occasion to force the management of the Maryland Theater to abrogate its segregation policy (blacks restricted to the balcony) for the duration of the play's run which, in the context of the times, was considered a victory for civil rights."³⁶



The Abril (S.S. Ben Hecht)

The funds raised by the play were used to buy a rusting derelict "yacht". She was built (1931) by Krupp Germania - Werft A. G. –in Kiel, Germany, as luxury private yacht. She was named the *Argosy*. She smuggled arms to the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War. During World War II, the U.S. Navy purchased the ship as a Coast Guard Cutter. She was renamed the USS *Cythera* (Pk-31). Classified as World War II surplus, the ship was sold in 1946. The buyer was a front for the Revisionist Zionists, the Thyne Shipping Company. The newly renamed 400 ton *Abril* was refitted in Brooklyn's Gowanus Canal. The ship was originally designed to carry fifteen passengers and a crew of twenty. The *Abril* sailed December 27, 1946 manned by an American

³⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Flag_is_Born

crew of Jews and Christians. The crew was made up of men who came for many different reasons.

Yitshaq Ben-Ami, a Bergson Group leader, interviewed prospective members of the all-volunteer crew. "We had to weed through fiery idealists and adventurers, crooks, informers, and all other sorts," he later wrote.

The ones they chose were quite a colorful group. "We had twenty men, with twenty different reasons for joining up," Captain H. Robert Levitan recalled. Walter "Heavy" Greaves, for example, a beefy, tattooed sailor who survived three torpedo attacks in World War II, Greaves signed up for the Ben Hecht after meeting DP camp inmates face to face in Germany at the end of his service.

Elliott Roosevelt, son of the late president and himself an experienced yachtsman, initially offered to captain the ship, but withdrew after objections from his mother, former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

'We had a crew member who was Irish Catholic and hated the British,' Geno Berkovits, who served as a Messman on the ship, told me in an interview last year. "We had a Jewish crewman who was religious and put on tefillin every day, and there were others, like me, who weren't so religious but just wanted to help the Jewish cause." There were also two young Norwegians, Haakom Liliby and Erling Sorensen. "They didn't speak much English and nobody knew quite why they were there," Berkovits said, "but when the engines broke down, they worked 24 hours straight to get us going again."

And there was Walter Cushenberry. Tall, 33 years old, originally from Mayfield, Kentucky, he was living in Brooklyn at the time he volunteered for the voyage. Berkovits, who became particularly friendly with Cushenberry, remembered: "As a Black man, he knew what it was like to be kicked around, and he didn't like seeing the Jews get kicked around." Captain Levitan described him as "one of the gentlest men you could ever meet, and he just liked helping out the underdog."³⁷

The *Abril* sailed, December 27, 1946, for Southern France and Port du Bouc. March 1, 1947, she left France for Palestine. Her decks were crammed with over 600 Holocaust survivors eagerly looking eastward. While at sea, the *Abril* was renamed the S.S. *Ben Hecht*.

Seven days later, March 8, she was spotted by British reconnaissance aircraft. British destroyers intercepted the *Ben Hecht*. She was boarded, impounded and towed to Haifa under

³⁷ <http://www.jewishledger.com/articles/2010/01/13/opinions/edit01.txt>

British control. The refugees were sent to the prison camps in Cyprus. The American crew was arrested and sent to the infamous Acre Prison.

“Dealing with the American crewmen, however, was more complicated. While the British government pondered their fate, Cushenberry and the rest of the crew were taken to the Acre Prison fortress, where they were jailed alongside members of the Irgun Zvai Leumi underground militia. The British would soon regret that. The Irgun was planning a breakout, but one obstacle remained: how to photograph the would-be escapees in order to make false identity cards so they could get past British roadblocks. Captain Levitan solved that problem: he had smuggled a small camera into the prison. On May 4, the Irgun blew open the fortress's southern wall, in what the international media described as the most spectacular prison break of modern times. The operation was later immortalized in the film "Exodus."

By the time of the breakout, the crew of the *Ben Hecht* was long gone. To London's dismay, the detention of the Americans had become a lightning rod for criticism from members of Congress, the media, and the U.S. Jewish community. After holding the seamen for a month, the British decided they were more trouble than they were worth and put them on a ship bound for New York. Arriving home on April 16, Cushenberry and his colleagues were honored at a City Hall reception hosted by the mayor and then feted at a gala dinner hosted by a very proud Ben Hecht.”³⁸

The *Ben Hecht* sailed from Port du Bouc just a few months ahead of the most iconic ship in the entire Aliyah Bet saga, the *Exodus*. The *Exodus*, originally an American Chesapeake Bay steamer name the *President Warfield*, was also crewed by American Jews and Christians. Her dramatic story led to her being known as *the Ship that Launched a Nation*. The *Exodus* burned mysteriously (1951) and remains sunk, forgotten, in Haifa Harbor. The story of the breakout from the Acre prison became a central dramatic story in the Otto Preminger 1960 movie that stirred the emotions of the world about the establishment of the State of Israel – Exodus.

The *Ben Hecht* was absorbed into the new Israeli Navy in 1948. Again, she was renamed, the *Maoz* (Stronghold) and registered as the Q-24. Under her first Israeli commander, Yochai Ben Nun, she participated in the dramatic sinking of the Egyptian navy's flagship the *Emir El Farouq* and her escort minesweeper off the coast of Ashkelon, October 22, 1948.

The old ship was sold to Israel businessmen in 1955 as a cargo vessel and once again renamed the *Abril*. The Israeli businessmen quickly resold her to an Italian firm, *Naviazione Libera di*

³⁸ <http://www.jewishledger.com/articles/2010/01/13/opinions/edit01.txt>

Golfo. The name Abril changed one last time to the Santa Maria del Mare. She became a ferry boat in the Gulf of Naples.

Hecht remained active with the Revisionists after Israeli independence. He remained involved until Zionist politics became more important than saving Jewish life and establishing the State of Israel. A Revisionist munitions and refugee ship, purchased with monies Hecht and others had raised in the U.S. was the reason he turned his back on active Zionism. The ship was named for the wife of Vladimir Jabotinsky, the *Altalena*.

“The Altalena Affair was a violent confrontation that took place in June 1948 between the newly-formed Israel Defense Forces and the Irgun, a paramilitary Jewish group. The confrontation involved a cargo ship, *Altalena*, captained by Monroe Fein, which carried weapons and fighters for the Irgun.³⁹

As the British Mandate of Palestine was coming to an end, Jewish leaders proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948. The declaration of independence was followed by the establishment of a provisional government and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The process of absorbing all military organizations into the IDF proved complicated, and several paramilitary groups continued to be active outside the IDF. One of the largest groups, Irgun, planned to ship weapons and fighters to the newly formed state. The plans included a ship renamed *Altalena* (a pseudonym of Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky) and a target date for the ship's arrival from Europe was set to mid May, 1948. The *Altalena*, former landing ship tank USS LST-138, purchased by Irgun members abroad, was originally intended to reach Israel on 15 May 1948, loaded with fighters and military equipment.

Weapons valued at 153 million francs were donated by the French government, in accordance to a secret agreement approved by the French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault. The exact text of the agreement has not been found, and the French motivation is unclear. However it is known that Bidault was very concerned about the possibility of a Jordanian takeover of Jerusalem. Deputy Chief of Staff General Henri Coudraux, who was involved in the operation, told a 1949 enquiry that France had "reached a secret agreement with the Irgun, which promised it advantages if it were to come into power (in Israel)." He described the Irgun's representative in the negotiations, Shmuel Ariel, as "a terrorist who did not represent a legitimate organization and acted to take power by force."

Organizational matters took longer than expected, and the sailing was postponed for several weeks. Meanwhile, on 1 June, an agreement had been signed for the absorption of the Irgun into the IDF and one of the clauses stated that the Irgun had to cease all independent arms

³⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irgun>

acquisition activities. Consequently, representatives of the Israel Government were informed about the ship and its sailing schedule.

The Irgun headquarters in Paris did their best to keep the *Altalena's* preparations for departure a secret, but it was difficult to conceal the movement of 940 fighters and the loading of a large quantity of arms and ammunition. It was feared that if the plans were discovered, attempts might be made to sabotage the *Altalena* at sea.

For this reason, when it raised anchor on June 11, no cable was sent to the Irgun command in Israel, for fear that it would fall into the wrong hands. These precautionary measures proved fruitless, however, and the following day Radio London reported that the *Altalena* had sailed from Port-de-Bouc, France in the direction of Israel with 1,000 Jewish volunteers and a large quantity of weapons on board.

The first truce in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War had also begun on June 11 and when the Irgun leaders in Israel learned through the Radio London broadcast of the embarkation of the vessel, they feared that this breach of the truce conditions (i.e., the ban on bringing military equipment and fighters into the country) would be revealed (these aspects of the truce were ignored by both sides). Menachem Begin decided therefore to postpone the arrival of the ship, and the Irgun staff secretary, Zippora Levi-Kessel, sent a wireless message to the *Altalena* to stay put and await orders. A similar cable was sent to Shmuel Katz (member of the General Headquarters), who was then in Paris, but the ship had already left the day before the message arrived.

On June 15, Begin and his comrades held a meeting with government representatives, at which Begin announced that the ship had sailed without his knowledge and that he wanted to hold consultations on how to proceed. In his diary for June 16, David Ben-Gurion, the head of the provisional government, wrote the following about the meeting:

Yisrael [Galili] and Skolnik [Levi Eshkol] met yesterday with Begin. Tomorrow or the next day their ship is due to arrive: 4,500 tons, bringing 800-900 men, 5,000 rifles, 250 Bren guns, 5 million bullets, 50 bazookas, 10 Bren carriers. Zipstein (director of Tel Aviv port) assumes that at night it will be possible to unload it all. I believe we should not endanger Tel Aviv port. They should not be sent back. They should be disembarked at an unknown shore.

Galili informed Begin of Ben-Gurion's consent to the landing of the ship, adding a request that it be done as fast as possible. Zippora Levi-Kessel then radioed the vessel to come in at full speed. The following day, a working meeting was held between Irgun representatives and Ministry of Defense personnel. While the Irgun proposed directing the *Altalena* to Tel Aviv beach, Ministry of Defence representatives claimed that the Kfar Vitkin beach was preferable, since it would be easier to evade UN observers there. The ship was therefore instructed to make for Kfar Vitkin.

Intense negotiations between representatives of the provisional government (headed by Ben-Gurion) and the Irgun (headed by Begin) followed the departure of *Altalena* from France. Among the issues discussed were logistics of the ship's landing and distribution of the cargo between the military organizations. Whilst there was agreement on the anchoring place of the *Altalena*, there were differences of opinion about the allocation of the cargo. Ben-Gurion agreed to Begin's initial request that 20% of the weapons be dispatched to the Irgun's Jerusalem Battalion, which was still fighting independently. His second request, however, that the remainder be transferred to the IDF to equip the newly-incorporated Irgun battalions, was rejected by the Government representatives, who interpreted the request as a demand to reinforce an 'army within an army.'

The *Altalena* reached Kfar Vitkin in the late afternoon of Sunday, June 20. Among the Irgun members waiting on the shore was Menachem Begin, who greeted the arrivals with great emotion. After the passengers had disembarked, members of the fishing village of Mikhmoret helped unload the cargo of military equipment. Concomitantly with the events at Kfar Vitkin, the government had convened in Tel Aviv for its weekly meeting. Ben-Gurion reported on the meetings which had preceded the arrival of the *Altalena*, and was adamant in his demand that Begin surrender and hand over all of the weapons:

We must decide whether to hand over power to Begin or to order him to cease his separate activities. If he does not do so, we will open fire! Otherwise, we must decide to disperse our own army.

The debate ended in a resolution to empower the army to use force if necessary to overcome the Irgun and to confiscate the ship and its cargo. Implementation of this decision was assigned to the Alexandroni Brigade, commanded by Dan Even (Epstein), which the following day surrounded the Kfar Vitkin area. Dan Even issued the following ultimatum:

To: M. Begin

By special order from the Chief of the General Staff of the Israel Defence Forces, I am empowered to confiscate the weapons and military materials which have arrived on the Israeli coast in the area of my jurisdiction in the name of the Israel Government. I have been authorized to demand that you hand over the weapons to me for safekeeping and to inform you that you should establish contact with the supreme command. You are required to carry out this order immediately. If you do not agree to carry out this order, I shall use all the means at my disposal in order to implement the order and to requisition the weapons which have reached shore and transfer them from private possession into the possession of the Israel government. I wish to inform you that the entire area is surrounded by fully armed military units and armored cars, and all roads are blocked. I hold you fully responsible for any consequences in the event of your refusal to carry out this order. The immigrants - unarmed -

will be permitted to travel to the camps in accordance with your arrangements. You have ten minutes to give me your answer.

D.E., Brigade Commander

The ultimatum was made, according to Even, "in order not to give the Irgun commander time for lengthy considerations and to gain the advantage of surprise." Begin refused to respond to the ultimatum, and all attempts at mediation failed. Begin's failure to respond was a blow to Even's prestige, and a clash was now inevitable. Fighting ensued and there were a number of casualties. In order to prevent further bloodshed, the Kfar Vitkin settlers initiated negotiations between Yaakov Meridor (Begin's deputy) and Dan Even, which ended in a general ceasefire and the transfer of the weapons on shore to the local IDF commander.



Altalena on fire after being shelled near Tel-Aviv

Begin had meanwhile boarded the *Altalena* which was headed for Tel Aviv where the Irgun had more supporters. Many Irgun members, who joined the IDF earlier that month, left their bases and concentrated on the Tel Aviv beach. A confrontation between them and the IDF units started. In response, Ben-Gurion ordered Yigael Yadin (acting Chief of Staff) to concentrate large forces on the Tel Aviv beach and to take the ship by force. Heavy guns were transferred to the area and at four in the afternoon, Ben-Gurion ordered the shelling of the *Altalena*. One of the shells hit the ship, which began to burn.

There was danger that the fire would spread to the holds which contained explosives and Captain Monroe Fein ordered all aboard to abandon ship. People jumped into the water whilst their comrades on shore set out to meet them on rafts. Although Captain Fein flew the white flag of surrender, automatic fire continued to be directed at the unarmed survivors swimming in the water. Begin, who was on deck, agreed to leave the ship only after the last of the wounded had been evacuated. Sixteen Irgun fighters were killed in the confrontation with the army (all but three were veteran members and not newcomers in the ship); six were killed in the Kfar Vitkin area and ten on Tel Aviv beach. Three IDF soldiers were killed: two at Kfar Vitkin and one in Tel Aviv.

After the shelling of the *Altalena*, more than 200 Irgun fighters were arrested. Most of them were released several weeks later, with the exception of five senior commanders (Moshe Hason, Eliyahu Lankin, Yaakov Meridor, Bezalel Amitzur, and Hillel Kook), who were detained for more than two months, until August 27, 1948. The Irgun soldiers were fully integrated with the IDF and not kept in separate units.

About a year later, *Altalena* was refloated, towed 15 miles out to sea and sunk.^[4]

The Altalena Affair exposed deep rifts between the main political factions in Israel, and is still occasionally referenced in Israeli media to illustrate the modern debate as to whether or not the use of force by the Israeli government against fringe Jewish political elements is legitimate. Proponents of Ben-Gurion's actions praised them as essential to establishing the Government's authority and discouraging factionalism and formation of rival armies. This was consistent with other actions he took, such as dissolving the Palmach later that year. Furthermore, Ben-Gurion's supporters have argued that a state must have a monopoly over the use of force (see Max Weber for a detailed discussion of this idea). The Irgun, by attempting to import weapons to use as a private militia, was undermining the legitimacy of the fledgling State of Israel.



Altalena memorial on Tel-Aviv Beach

Opponents condemned what they saw as unnecessary violence and claimed that opportunities for a peaceful resolution were intentionally frustrated by Ben-Gurion and top IDF officers. As events have faded into history, the debate on Altalena in Israel has become less intense, though it was reignited for a short time when Likud headed by Menachem Begin won the 1977 elections. On the 60th anniversary of the affair a memorial on the Tel Aviv beach was inaugurated, based on the Irgun and its followers narrative and mentioning only the Irgun's casualties.

Begin later said, "My greatest accomplishment was not retaliating and causing civil war". Years later, on the eve of the Six-Day War, in June, 1967 (when Levi Eshkol was Prime Minister), Menachem Begin joined a delegation which visited Sde Boker to ask David Ben-Gurion to return and accept the

premiership again. After that meeting, Ben-Gurion said that if he had then known Begin as he did now, the face of history would have been different."⁴⁰

Hecht's view of the attack on the beached *Altalena* was quite different from Ben Gurion's memory. He wrote in his auto-biography about Ben Gurion's statements as the *Altalena* burned and Jew killed Jew.

"Ben-Gurion issued a statement to the world.

"Blessed be the bullets that killed these enemies of Israel," he said. "The cannon that destroyed the *Altalena* is a holy gun and should be placed in the temple."

I leave the bullet blesser with the last word. This little politician with the comic haircut, whose white hair looked always like a chicken with its wings spread, was not only good at politics. He was good at hating. The gallows this little angry man of Tel Aviv had kept in his head for fifteen years-had finally claimed its tall, bright-faced quarry.

But I'll write no more of Palestine. I turned my back on it the same time Abrasha Stavsky did."⁴¹

"Six months after the establishment of Israel by the United Nations, Bergson and Hecht officially dissolved the organization which produced the fund-raising play, followed by a dinner in New York City where Menachem Begin appeared, saying, "I believe that my people, liberated and re-assembled in its country, will contribute its full share toward the progress of all mankind ... [and predicted] that all of Palestine eventually would be free and that peace and brotherhood would prevail among Arabs and Jews alike." 42

Peter Bergson returned to Israel and reassumed his real name, Hillel Kook. He served one term in the Knesset. An interview with Louis Rappaport entitled *A Political Epilogue*, Kook pragmatically commented on the elusive Middle East peace so desperately sought by Israel.

"In order to achieve a settlement there can only be two entities. There's no room in the territory of Palestine for three states. Which is easiest: to eliminate Israel, to destroy all the Palestinians, or to change the name of Jordan? Hussein himself, in an interview with *Nouvel Observateur* in July 1967, launched a trial balloon. He said I'm thinking of abolishing the monarchy, or changing the name of my country to Palestine and becoming its first president.

⁴⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altalena_Affair

⁴¹ Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1954

⁴² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Hecht

When the Kingdom of Transjordan was established in 1946 – not in 1922, as some people think – King Abdullah wanted to call it the Kingdom of Palestine, but the British wouldn't let him."⁴³
Kook died July 18, 2001.

Ben Hecht died April 18, 1964 in New York. He was 70.

"Thanks to his fund-raising, speeches, and jawboning, Sternlicht writes, "Ben Hecht did more to help Jewish refugees from the Holocaust and to ensure the survival of the nascent State of Israel than any other American Jew in the twentieth century". As much as anything, it was the abiding love of his Jewish parent and Rose Hecht that motivated the writer to become arguably "the most effective propagandist the Jewish state ever had." In 1964, at Hecht's funeral service at Temple Rodeph Shalom in New York City, among the eulogists was Menachem Begin, the future Prime Minister of Israel."⁴⁴

Of all of the nearly 100 Aliyah Bet ships that courageously struggled to bring Jewish refugees home, only one remains afloat. Ironically, it is the only ship that was purchased, equipped and sailed by those who never wanted give up a single inch of the land of Israel. They believed that the land of Israel constituted the entire biblical Promised Land. They did not believe in trading land for "peace." All of the other Aliyah Bet and Haganah ships, have been sunk, sold for scrap, vanished as museum relics, or are simply gone from the oceans of the world and history. The one ship that remains afloat, championing the ideal of "Keeping the Faith", is the Revisionist ship, the S.S. *Ben Hecht*. In 2008 she was sold by the Italians to investors. She was refitted, repainted, refurbished and remade into the glistening private yacht she once was. (The S.S. *Ben Hecht*) The *Santa Maria Del Mare* is for sale for 15,000,000 Euros.

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www.Jashp.org

⁴³ Shake Heaven & Earth, Peter Bergson and the struggle to Rescue the Jews of Europe, by Louis Rapaport, Geffen Press, Jerusalem, 1999, pg. 214

⁴⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Hecht

