

The British Army and  
Jewish Insurgency in  
Palestine, 1945–47

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For Mary, Stephen and Jennifer

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## Foreword

David Charters covers an important but under-researched period when Britain began her withdrawal from the Empire in the immediate post-war years. It was hardly an auspicious start but, as is clearly portrayed, the political, strategic and economic factors which determined the course of events in Palestine, were largely outside the control of the British Government.

As is also eventually conceded, having just finished fighting a world war, it was hardly surprising that the British army was intellectually, organisationally and professionally unprepared to conduct a subtle politically orientated anti-terrorist campaign. That is not to say, however, that avoidable errors of judgement were not committed.

Though those who were present during the last vicious years of the Mandate would not necessarily agree with some of his academic strictures, David Charters' analysis merits close attention. As he says, the lessons learnt were later applied successfully in other theatres. They remain as relevant today as ever.

This is not just a book for the specialist but also for anybody who is interested in the genesis of the state of Israel.

General Sir Nigel Bagnall, GCB, CVO, MC, ADC, Gen.

## Preface

This book traces its origins to the first military history seminar at the University of New Brunswick, 1970-1. Conducted against the backdrop of the Vietnam War and Canada's 'October Crisis', the seminar's focus on civil-military relations directed my interest in military affairs towards the study of what is now widely referred to as 'low-intensity conflict'. I became fascinated by the problems encountered by governments and military forces when they confront the unconventional political-military challenge posed by revolutionary war. That fascination continues to ignite my curiosity. It was the source of inspiration for this volume.

The frequent and often simplistic comparisons between the American 'defeat' in Vietnam and the British 'victory' in Malaya persuaded me that the British experience of 'counter-insurgency' might prove to be a fruitful subject for exploration. I was struck by the extent to which the Malayan Emergency 'model' had come to dominate British theory, practice and historiography of counter-insurgency in the post-war period. Yet, the campaign in Palestine, which preceded that in Malaya and had involved a much larger commitment of British troops, had been all but ignored by British military historians and strategic analysts. The reason for this asymmetry was abundantly clear. American President John F. Kennedy, reflecting ruefully on his debacle at the Bay of Pigs, is said to have quoted Count Ciano to the effect that, 'Victory has a hundred fathers, but defeat is an orphan'. Malaya was a British victory; Palestine was a defeat and in every sense an orphan. Believing nonetheless that there is often more to be learned from failure than from success, I chose to make the Palestine campaign the focus of my doctoral dissertation.

It proved to be a fortuitous choice. First, it provided insights into the ways in which men's minds are changed by the interplay of politics and violence. Second, and more significant for this study, it shed light on the manner in which an army – as an institution –

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learns to adapt to a new operational environment. Thus, the study proved to be enlightening not only for its intrinsic historical value in respect of Palestine, but also for its relevance to the study of contemporary low-intensity conflicts and the performance of armies, as social and professional institutions, in those conflicts. These matters have been at the heart of the research I have undertaken at the Centre for Conflict Studies for the past seven years. They provide the intellectual perspective which informs this book.

This volume sets out to answer two questions. First, to what extent did the British army adapt effectively to the counter-insurgency environment and missions of the Palestine campaign between 1945 and 1947? Second, to what extent did the operations of the army, in concert with those of the other security forces, determine the outcome of the conflict? The answers will be explored in six chapters. Chapter 1 examines the nature of insurgency and the political and military implications of that form of conflict for planning and directing counter-insurgency operations. The second chapter establishes the political setting in which the campaign was fought. In respect of the British, it explains the historical roots of the conflict and the place of Palestine in British Middle East policy, particularly Anglo-American relations. It also describes the state of the Zionist movement in the wake of the Holocaust: its organisation, objectives, and its ability to use its political strength in the United States. Chapter 3 shows how Zionist policy was translated into an insurgency within Palestine. It explains the origins, organisation and strategy of each of the insurgent groups. Then it demonstrates these strategies in action, by showing how violent operations and propaganda worked together to 'destabilise' the British position in Palestine.

The next two chapters focus on the British response to the insurgency. The organisation, strategic direction and operations of the security forces are discussed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 identifies and analyses the sources of the operational problems manifested in the previous chapter. To this end, it explores the development of the army's strategic thought and 'doctrine' of counter-insurgency, the institutional and organisational obstacles to tactical innovation in the areas of command and control, training, unit manpower stability and readiness. Finally, it examines critically intelligence and counter-propaganda activities. The final chapter addresses the two questions the book sets out to answer and attempts to place the

Palestine campaign in the historical context of the British counter-insurgency experience since 1945.

More than six years have passed since this study was completed as a dissertation. In this its revised form, it benefits, I hope, from the time I have had to reflect on these matters in different and wider contexts. That reflection and the process of revision have benefited as well, I believe, from the considerable expansion of relevant literature on terrorism, on intelligence activities and on the Palestine problem itself. In some respects, Palestine is no longer the historiographical orphan it was once. At the same time the story remains, in my view, incomplete. For Palestine there still is no companion volume to Charles Townshend's excellent history of the British campaign in Ireland, or to Anthony Short's authoritative study of the Malayan Emergency. This modest effort will, I hope, go some way to redress the balance.

D.A.C.

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I should like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to the many people and institutions whose assistance has made this book possible. The list, inevitably, is incomplete.

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This book would not have been possible without access to various archives and their permission to use the papers cited herein. The staff of the Public Record Office deserve commendation if only for copying the sheer volume of my document requests. Crown-copyright material in the Public Record Office and other archives is reproduced by permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Copyright material from the *LHI Bulletin* is reproduced by permission of the British Library. Lady Kathleen Liddell Hart was most gracious in permitting me to use her late husband's papers during the time when the collection resided at their home, States House,

Medmenham, Buckinghamshire. When the collection moved to King's College, London, Miss Patricia Methven handled my requests with pleasant efficiency. Mr John Briance and General Sir Rodney Moore were also helpful in providing copies of documents from their own private collections. Thanks are due as well to the staffs of: the British Library; the Harriet Irving Library, University of New Brunswick; the Imperial War Museum; the Jabotinsky Institute, Tel Aviv, Israel; the Middle East Centre, St Antony's College, Oxford; the Rhodes House Library, Oxford; the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, London; the Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University; and the Wiener Library, London.

While, as author, I must take sole credit and responsibility for the contents, this book represents the combined efforts of many persons for whose support and assistance I am grateful. Mr Scot Robertson took valuable time away from his doctoral research to locate documents in the Public Record Office that I had missed during my initial trawl. Mr Yisrael Medad, of the National Studies Institute, Jerusalem, was a fount of insight and information concerning the Jewish underground movements. Mr Brent Wilson was kind enough to read the manuscript and to offer his comments. Mrs Thelma Clarke tackled the typing of the manuscript with vigour and good cheer, all the while keeping a watchful eye on my grammar and punctuation. Mrs Deborah Stapleford, of the Centre for Conflict Studies, the University of New Brunswick, handled the extensive correspondence and other typing that publication of this study entailed. Mr Simon Winder and Miss S. Kemp, my editors at Macmillan, were both helpful and patient. Mrs. Linda Hansen rendered valuable assistance in reading and correcting the proofs.

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Finally, I must conclude with a personal note of thanks. This book owes its existence to the support of my family. My parents and grandparents provided the encouragement and assistance which allowed me to study the subject that interested me. My wife, Mary, and the two children were more than patient when the task of revising the dissertation into a book consumed many evenings and weekends. Any credit for perseverance must go to them.

Dr David A. Charters

July 1987

# List of Abbreviations

AIG	Assistant Inspector-General
ALFP	American League for a Free Palestine
Arm'd	Armoured
AZEC	American Zionist Emergency Committee
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BGS	Brigadier, General Staff
BIS	British Information Services
CAB	Cabinet (Papers)
CDC	Cabinet Defence Committee (see also DO)
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
CINC	Commander in Chief
CM	Cabinet Minutes
CO	Colonial Office (Papers)
COI	Central Office of Information
Col.	Colonel
col.	Column
COS	Chief(s) of Staff
COSC	Chiefs of Staff Committee
COSITNTREP	Confidential Situation Intelligence Report
CP	Cabinet Paper
CSDIC	Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre
DIV	Division
DO	Defence/Overseas (see also CDC)
DP	Displaced Person
DOS	Defence Security Office
DSP	District Superintendent of Police
f.	File/folio
FIN	Fortnightly Intelligence Newsletter
FIS	Fortnightly Intelligence Summary
FO	Foreign Office (Papers)
GHO	General Headquarters

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## List of Abbreviations

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GOC	General Officer Commanding
GS	General Staff
GSI	General Staff, Intelligence
HC	House of Commons (Command Paper)
HMG	His Majesty's Government
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
HO	Headquarters
IG	Inspector-General
INF	Ministry of Information (Papers)
Inf.	Infantry
IPD	Information Policy Department
IS	Internal Security
ISUM	Intelligence Summary
IZL	Irgun Zvai Leumi
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee
JP	Joint Planning (Staff)
JRUSI	<i>Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies</i>
MEEF	Middle East Forces
MELF	Middle East Land Forces
MOI	Ministry of Information
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
OI	Operational Instruction
OO	Operational Order
OPC	Overseas Planning Committee (See MOI)
PIO	Palestine Information Office(f)
PMF	Police Mobile Force
RA	Royal Artillery
RAC	Royal Armoured Corps
REME	Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
Sqn	Squadron
UN	United Nations
UNSCOP	United Nations Special Committee on Palestine
VCIGS	Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff
WCP	War Cabinet Paper
WIR	Weekly Intelligence Review
WIS	Weekly Intelligence Summary
WMIR	Weekly Military Intelligence Review
WO	War Office (Papers)
WZO	World Zionist Organisation
ZOA	Zionist Organisation of America



*I earnestly trust that the Government will,  
if they have to fight this squalid war,  
make perfectly certain that the willpower  
of the British State is not conquered by  
brigands and bandits . . . .*

Sir Winston Churchill, House of Commons, 31 January 1947