

The Holocaust: Factor in the Birth of Israel?

by

Evyatar Friesel

It is widely believed that the catastrophe of European Jewry during World War II had a decisive influence on the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948. According to this thesis, for the Jews the Holocaust triggered a supreme effort toward statehood, based on the understanding that only a Jewish state might again avoid the horrors of the 1940s. For the nations of the world, shocked by the horror of the extermination and burdened by feelings of guilt, the Holocaust convinced them that the Jews were entitled to a state of their own. All these assumptions seem extremely doubtful. They deserve careful re-examination in light of the historical evidence.

Statehood in Zionist Thought

The quest for a Jewish state had always been paramount in Zionist thought and action. For tactical reasons official Zionism was cautious in explaining its ultimate aims, especially when addressing general public opinion. Terms other than "state" were used in various political documents or official utterances by leading Zionist statesmen: Jewish home, Jewish National Home, commonwealth, Jewish commonwealth. But there is no reason to doubt that the ultimate aim of the Zionist mainstream was the creation of a state in Palestine. The question remained as to what methods should be used in order to reach the consummation of these hopes. One possibility was the evolutionary path, implied also in the political relations between the Zionists and leading British statesmen between 1917 and 1920. It found implicit expression in the terms and the structure of the Palestine Mandate approved by the League of Nations in July 1922. The underlying idea was that the Jewish National Home should attain political independence after a process that would prepare the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, to look

after its own affairs. It was more a position of principle than an articulated plan. Nevertheless, for most Zionist leaders it represented a concrete aim, despite the uncertainty as to the ways and means of attaining it.

More radical alternatives developed later, reflecting disenchantment with British policy in Palestine and increasing awareness of the gravity of the Arab question. As the tensions in Palestine worsened and a crisis developed between the Jews, the mandatory administration and the Arabs, the possibility that Jewish independence in Palestine may have to be attained not only in armed confrontation against the Arabs, but also in opposition to the British began to be considered. Already in 1932, Chaim Arlosoroff, the head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency, evoked the prospect of the Jews seizing political power in Palestine through a revolutionary act.¹

But these were the more extreme possibilities within the wide range of Zionist political options. During the 1920s and even the 1930s, Zionist policy took a more moderate approach. Most Zionists believed that the British Mandate still represented an acceptable framework for the development of the Jewish National Home. Chaim Weizmann, the president of the World Zionist Organization, maintained that if the Jewish National Home had not come closer to realization, this was the fault - at least up to the early 1930s - of the Jewish people and of the Zionist movement, rather than of the mandatory power.² Even a radical Zionist like Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky considered that, in principle, Great Britain was the right choice for a mandatory power, in spite of his deep disagreement with British policy in Palestine. In 1937, when the Peel Commission proposed a partition solution for the country, it was practically rejected by the Zionist movement. One of the reasons was the unformulated consensus among a majority of centrist and moderate-left Zionists that the status quo in Palestine still worked to the Zionists' advantage. Such a position, which, in hindsight, was a terrible mistake, made sense when considered in light of the realities in 1937. The Jewish community had been growing impressively during the 1930s; the forecast of population trends for Palestine prepared for the Peel Commission showed, by extrapolation of existing immigration figures, that a Jewish majority in Palestine was

¹ Letter to Chaim Weizmann, June 30, 1932, Weizmann Archives, Rehovot, Israel.

² Chaim Weizmann, *The Zionist Movement 1916-1931*, London, 1931, p. 16

foreseeable in ten to fifteen years³. If so, why not wait ?

Political Reformulation in 1939

The White Paper of 1939 caused a fundamental change in the political situation in Palestine.⁴ Despite fluctuations, British policy had hitherto considered a growing Jewish National Home as a logical corollary of its administration in Palestine. The 1939 White Paper revised this policy and imposed harsh limits on the development of the Jewish National Home. As noted in a statement of the Jewish Agency from May 17, 1939:

...the effect of the new policy for Palestine laid down by the Mandatory Government... is to deny to the Jewish people the right to reconstitute their national home in their ancestral country. It is a policy which transfers authority over Palestine to the present Arab majority, decrees the stoppage of Jewish immigration as soon as the Jewish inhabitants form one-third of the total, and set up a territorial ghetto for the Jews in their own homeland.⁵

The 1939 White Paper was unconditionally rejected by the Zionist movement. After its publication the Zionists were faced with a situation that demanded new decisions if the ultimate aim of the movement in Palestine was to be kept alive. Sooner or later the Zionists were brought to acknowledge that the alternative way toward statehood in Palestine - the active, even violent option - had been forced upon them .

Were they ready? During the 1930s the Jewish community in Palestine had developed considerably in all fields. Now, almost half a million strong, it may still have fallen short of the original Zionist expectations, but it certainly had created a strong communal structure that could function independently if necessary. Politically speaking, there seemed no other way: acceptance of

³ See ESCO: *Palestine, A Study of Jewish, Arab and British Policies*, vol. II, New Haven, 1947, pp. 852-857; Palestine Royal Commission, Report, Cmd 5479 (1937), p. 281.

⁴ For the text of the 1939 White Paper, see John N. Moore, ed., *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*, vol. III (Documents), Princeton, N.J., 1974 (hereafter, Moore), pp. 210-221; Yehuda Bauer, *From Diplomacy to Resistance*, Philadelphia, 1970 (hereafter, Bauer), pp. 28-43.

⁵ Moore, pp. 222-224; see also Ch. Weizmann to the High Commissioner for Palestine, May 31, 1939, in *Jewish Agency - Book of Documents*, New York, May 1947 (hereafter, Book of Documents), pp. 140-151.

the British White Paper meant to jeopardize the political future of the community. Now, after May 1939, the "revolutionary situation" mentioned by Chaim Arlosoroff in 1932 was at hand.

During the months between the publication of the White Paper and the Twenty-first Zionist Congress (Geneva, August 1939), the Zionist leadership began to formulate a new political line. The Zionists treaded cautiously on the shifting soil of political concepts, which, although expressed before, now had a disturbing dimension of immediacy. At the Congress David Ben-Gurion, chairman of the Jewish Agency, proclaimed the leading intention of Zionist policy for the coming years:

The "White Paper" has created a vacuum in the Mandate. For us, the "White Paper" does not exist in any form, under any condition, under any interpretation. For us there is only that vacuum created in the Mandate, and it is up to us to fill this vacuum, by ourselves alone...We ourselves shall have to act as if we were the state in Palestine; and we have to act that way until we shall become and in order that we shall become the state in Palestine.⁶

The outbreak of World War II in September 1939 forced upon the Zionist leadership new challenges and influenced the immediate Zionist priorities. Zionist policy during World War II was encumbered by the worsening situation of European Jewry and by the danger of a German invasion in Palestine.⁷ Yet while worrying about these developments, the leaders of the movement did not forget that the 1939 White Paper still represented an unavoidable point of political reference.

In the first half of 1941, Ben-Gurion presented before the Zionist institutions in Palestine plans for a huge and concentrated effort at the end of the war, "to execute the rapid transfer of millions of Jews [to Palestine] and their settlement as a self-governing people." While hoping for an understanding with the British, Ben-Gurion did not exclude the possibility of confrontation, even armed struggle.⁸

⁶ David Ben-Gurion, *Bama'arakha*, vol. II (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1957, pp. 188-189. For further expressions of the gradual radicalization of Ben-Gurion's position at that time, see Bauer, pp. 43-51.

⁷ Regarding British policy in Palestine during the war, see Ronald W. Zweig, *Britain and Palestine During the Second World War*, London, 1986.

⁸ See Bauer, pp. 230-233.

At about the same time, Weizman, then in London, was developing the ideas published in January 1942, in his well-known article in *Foreign Affairs*, "Palestine's Role in the Solution of the Jewish Problem." Weizmann, too, foresaw the establishment of a Jewish state at the end of the war. The situation of the Jews in Europe was evoked in Weizmann's article only in passing. Both his and Ben-Gurion's arguments were primarily directed against the 1939 White Paper. In the autumn of, 1941 Ben-Gurion went to the United States to establish contacts in American political circles and to explain the necessity of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine after the war.⁹

The Biltmore Program, 1942

The process of political maturation evolving among the Zionist leadership since the publication of the 1939 White Paper was due to express itself, sooner or later, in a new political platform. This happened in May 1942, when the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs convened an Extraordinary Zionist Conference in the Biltmore Hotel in New York. Among the participants were Weizmann, Ben-Gurion and Nahum Goldmann. The conference approved an eight-point declaration, which came to be known as the Biltmore Program. Point six called for the rejection of the White Paper of May 1939. Point eight urged that the gates of Palestine be opened; that the Jewish Agency be vested with control of immigration into Palestine and with the necessary authority for upbuilding the country...and that Palestine be established as a Jewish Commonwealth integrated in the structure of the new democratic world.¹⁰

The creation of the Jewish state had become the imminent political goal of the Zionist movement.

The minutes of the conference indicate that both the 1939 White Paper and the situation of European Jewry were present in the minds of the speakers.

⁹ Moshe Perlman, *Ben-Gurion Looks Back*, 1965, p. 111.

¹⁰ Minutes of the Extraordinary Zionist Conference, Zionist Archives and Library, New York. The resolutions were published in Abraham Tulin, ed., *Book of Documents Submitted to the General Assembly of the United Nations Relating to the Establishment of the National Home for the Jewish People*, New York, May 1947, pp. 226-227.

But the arguments touching on the fate of European Jewry, while displaying anxiety, were couched in rather general terms. Reference was made to "Nazi persecutions," but there was no mention of a Holocaust or of massive extermination of the Jews. Weizmann expressed the fear that up to 25 percent of East European Jews might be "liquidated" during the war. The remainder, in his estimation two to four million Jews, would be uprooted from their homes, and "...will be left as a floating population between heaven and hell, not knowing where to turn." He recalled his earlier warning in 1936, when he had said that for European Jewry the world was to be "...divided in two parts: the countries where they cannot live and the countries they cannot enter." But in spite of all this, Weizmann was still optimistic about the ultimate survival of European Jewry. The experience of World War I led him to hope that once again European Jewry would survive pogroms and persecutions to emerge stronger than before.

If Weizmann's position was more Diaspora-oriented, Ben-Gurion concentrated on the situation in Palestine. He demanded the fulfillment of the original terms of the Mandate, criticized the 1939 White Paper, and suggested solutions for the Arab problem.¹¹ But for both Weizmann and Ben-Gurion, it was the new political reality created by the 1939 White Paper that provided the impelling thrust toward a Jewish state. Both were still unaware - as were almost all the other delegates to the Biltmore Conference - that total destruction threatened European Jewry. The only hint of the magnitude of the catastrophe, reverberating strangely and almost dissonantly through the proceedings, came from Nahum Goldmann. He alone suggested that the large majority of European Jewry may not survive the war, and that those who might would be left without the strength to rise again and rebuild their shattered lives and communities.

The Biltmore Conference was not an official meeting of the leading institutions of the Zionist movement. Its resolutions were not binding, only political guidelines. Nevertheless, the program adopted at the conference represented a clear watershed in Zionist policy. It summed up the thoughts

¹¹ Minutes. Ben-Gurion's speech was published in David Ben-Gurion, *Rebirth and Destiny of Israel*, New York, 1954, pp. 113-132 .

and feelings that had begun to develop among Zionists since 1939. They were now translated into a program of political action that was gradually accepted both by the Zionist movement and by the main currents in world Jewry. The drive toward the creation of a Jewish state had now been proclaimed, and, in spite of subsequent political fluctuations, it was to remain the central goal of Zionist policy in the coming years .

In the formulation of the Biltmore Program, there was an awareness of the dangers confronting European Jewry. However, not before the summer of 1942 would the facts about the systematic extermination of European Jewry be known.¹²

Confronting the Holocaust

From the end of 1942, the realization that European Jewry faced literal annihilation introduced a new element of bitterness and anger in Jewish life everywhere. Jewish leaders and communities sought in different ways to act against the extermination, to help the Jews trapped in Europe, to participate in their efforts at resistance and revolt. If and how the Jews acted against the Nazi onslaught has remained a controversial theme in Jewish life; however, there is general agreement that there was a glaring disproportion between the appalling dimensions of the Jewish disaster and the limited possibilities of the Jews outside Europe to come to their brethren's aid. In the 1940s, the feeling of helplessness and the suspicion that the nations engaged in war against Germany were indifferent to the fate of European Jewry, brought about a new mood, combining despair and grim determination. An element of urgency and affliction was now added to the fundamental aim of Zionist strategy - to achieve Jewish statehood.

By October 1944, the Jewish Agency had indicated to the British government that its political aim was to transform Palestine into a Jewish Commonwealth at the end of the war. Without varying from this goal, between 1944 and 1947, Zionist policy was to undergo several changes in its position *vis-a-vis* a possible partition of the country between Jews and Arabs .

¹² Yehuda Bauer, "When Did They Know?", *Midstream*, April 1968, pp. 51-58.

In October 1944, the Jewish Agency had stated that all of Palestine should be turned into a Jewish state. However, at the important meeting of its executive in Paris in August 1946, the Jewish Agency declared itself ready to consider a partition plan, provided the dimensions of Jewish Palestine were acceptable. Later, at the first postwar Zionist Congress, held in Basle in December 1946, the idea of partition was rejected, and a resolution calling for a Jewish state throughout Palestine was approved.¹³

This resolution was actually something of a tactical step: it was thought that more might be obtained, in terms of partition, if the Zionists demanded all of the country and left it to a third party to suggest a division. The resolution also reflected the confrontation between the gradualist position of Weizmann and the more radical trend led by Ben-Gurion. The latter's approach prevailed at the Congress, and Weizmann was not re-elected president of the World Zionist Organization. By now, however, both moderates and radicals were working toward the creation of a Jewish state.

In the formulation of Zionist policies in those years, the Holocaust and its consequences were mentioned in practical rather than in moral terms. The primary emphasis was on the problem of thousands upon thousands of survivors, uprooted, clamoring for a solution, asking to enter Palestine. The Holocaust was certainly very much present in the minds of the delegates at the Zionist Congress in 1946, but the tone of the resolutions was directed against British policy in Palestine and in favor of opening the gates of Eretz Israel to the European refugees.¹⁴

The same applies to the copious written statements and memoranda by the Jewish Agency and other Jewish bodies¹⁵, as well as to the statements of Zionist leaders (Weizmann, Ben-Gurion, Silver, Shertok and others)¹⁶ presented before the Anglo-American Commission of Enquiry in 1946, and before the diverse bodies of the United Nations in 1947. Mention of the

¹³ See Jacob C. Hurewitz, *The Struggle for Palestine*, New York, 1976 (hereafter, Hurewitz), pp. 204, 260, 268-269.

¹⁴ See *Book of Documents*, pp. 238-242, 304-308.

¹⁵ Jewish Agency for Palestine: Statements, March 1946, The Jewish Case Before the Anglo-American Committee of Enquiry on Palestine, Jerusalem, 1946, pp. 3-259; The Jewish Agency Before the United Nations, New York, May 1947; *The Jewish Plan for Palestine*, Jerusalem, September 1947 (hereafter, The Jewish Plan for Palestine), pp. 269-559.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Holocaust was subdued; precedence was invariably given to the refugee problem and the situation in Palestine.

How to explain this kind of reticence, so soon after the greatest disaster in the history of the Jewish Diaspora? It seems that, for a time, Jews and Zionists were unable to react to the catastrophe beyond the basic level of shock and grief. What had happened seemed unbelievable and inexplicable. But this was the critical hour of political decision. The Zionist leaders kept their feelings under a tight rein, outwardly at least. The problems of the Jewish people were almost beyond solution. The only way out was to concentrate on the urgent issues that were the immediate consequences of the Catastrophe; they at least represented a political platform to be fought for, in line with Zionist objectives.

Inevitably, however, there were occasions when the burden of the tragedy broke sharply through: "Can anybody realize - a million Jewish babies burned in the gas chambers? A third of our people, almost as many as the whole population of Sweden, murdered? cried out Ben-Gurion, perhaps the least sentimental, the most goal-directed among the Zionists leaders in his testimony before UNSCOP.¹⁷

The reserve displayed by the Zionists in the presentation of their case paralleled, curiously enough, the kind of attitude exhibited by the various international bodies that dealt with the question of Palestine. Some of the members of these commissions were aware of the connection between the Holocaust, the history of European Jewry, and the political hopes of the Zionist movement. In this respect there was a difference between the position of the Anglo-American Commission of Enquiry and of UNSCOP. The former's terms of reference included the examination of both the "economic and social conditions in Palestine" and the "position of the Jews in those countries in Europe where they have been the victims of Nazi and Fascist persecution." Diversely, UNSCOP's terms of reference mentioned only the facts connected with the Palestinian problem.¹⁸ However, considered in terms of recommendations, both commissions dealt only with practical matters - the

¹⁷ *The Jewish Plan for Palestine*, p. 310.

¹⁸ Report of the Anglo-American Committee of Enquiry, Preface, pp. 11-15 ; Report to the General Assembly by the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), August 31, 1947 (hereafter, UNSCOP, Report), p. 3.

situation in Palestine, the problem of the Jewish refugees - and nothing was said about the larger connection between the Holocaust and the existing difficulties of the Jewish people. Almost all the issues raised and painstakingly analyzed during the questioning of the Zionist representatives who appeared before the various commissions were concerned with current political matters. The situation of European Jewry and its fate were hardly mentioned .

The Palestine Issue at the UN, 1947

The last phase in the historical process leading to the creation of the State of Israel began on February 14, 1947 when the British government decided to refer the problem of Palestine to the United Nations.¹⁹ In a sense, this decision was an outcome of the report of the Anglo-American Commission. The rejection by the British government of the commission's main recommendation - the admittance of 100,000 Jewish refugees to Palestine - increased the political pressures surrounding the Palestine issue both in Britain and abroad. Months before the report of the Anglo-American Commission was published, there had been a growing feeling in Parliament that British policy regarding Palestine was going from bad to worse. The tension in Palestine, the changing circumstances in the Middle East, and the postwar political weight of the United States in international matters brought the British to turn the issue over to the United Nations.

This did not necessarily mean that the British government was considering the relinquishment of political power in Palestine. As it was explained by the Secretary of State for the Colonies:

We are not going to the United Nations to surrender the Mandate. We are going to the United Nations setting out the problem and asking for

¹⁹ This period is well described by Michael J. Cohen, *Palestine and the Great Powers 1945-1948*, Princeton, 1982, and Wm. Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945-1951. Arab Nationalism, the United States and Postwar Imperialism*, Oxford, 1984 (hereafter, Louis), part IV; good descriptions from the time are found in Jacob Robinson, *Palestine and the United Nations*, Washington, 1947 (hereafter, Robinson), and the detailed but uncritical account of Joseph J. Zasloff, *Great Britain and Palestine - A Study of the Problem Before the United Nations*, 1952 (hereafter, Zasloff) also, Leonard L. Leonard, "The United Nations and Palestine," *International Conciliation*, no. 454, October 1949 (hereafter, Leonard), pp. 603-786; see also the very perceptive article by Susan Strange, "Palestine and the United Nations," *Yearbook of World Affairs*, 1949 (hereafter, Strange), pp. 151-168.

their advice as to how the Mandate can be administered. If the Mandate cannot be administered in its present form we are asking how it can be amended.²⁰

But once the issue was presented before the UN, the international community began to consider the question of Palestine from its own vantage point, which did not necessarily run parallel to Britain's ideas and interests. It soon became clear that the problematic position of the British in Palestine was not going to be politically improved by the outcome of the UN discussions.

During the months from the middle of 1947 to the first part of 1948, British policy was characterized by bewilderment and frustration. In September 1947, the British announced that it was their intention to leave Palestine as soon as possible. Later on, after the partition resolution in late November, British behavior was a rather sour note of non-cooperation and even obstruction, tempered by the occasional feeling of relief at the imminent termination of the Mandate.²¹

The discussions on Palestine in the United Nations, from February 1947 until mid-1948, can be divided into four major phases: the First Special Session of the General Assembly (April 28 to May 15, 1947), which decided to establish the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP); the deliberations of UNSCOP and its recommendations; the decision of the General Assembly of November 29, 1947, on the partition of Palestine; and the deliberations at the UN up to the middle of 1948, which tried to cope with the worsening conflict between Jews and Arabs. With regard to our theme - the Holocaust and the creation of Israel - similar patterns run through all four phases. As Jacob Robinson has pointed out with regard to the First Special Session of the United Nations:

The overwhelming majority [of the delegates] did not express their preferences or sympathies on behalf of either of the two directly interested parties in the Palestine issue. While there was a group which solidly supported every move in the interest of the Arab Higher Committee, no such group existed to support the Jewish position.²²

²⁰ Robinson, p. 44.

²¹ British reactions are lucidly described in Louis, pp. 464-494.

²² Robinson, p. 248.

The neutrality of most of the delegations only emphasized the fact that one side - the Arabs - already had firmly committed supporters. Some of the delegates expressed sympathy or understanding for the Jewish national aspirations in Palestine, but even then they were careful to balance their words with identical declarations regarding Arab interests. Only one country, South Africa, maintained a firm pro-Zionist position from the beginning.

At this stage, therefore, there was very little indication in the opinions expressed by the different nations to show that the Holocaust had influenced their positions.

UNSCOP

In the entire process of the UN deliberations on the Palestine question in 1947-1948, the activity of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine was of pivotal importance. Its work was the factual expression that Palestine had become an international issue entirely in the hands of the UN. Its recommendations (late August 1947) put an end to any intentions the British still nurtured of holding on to Palestine.

UNSCOP's report formulated the main concepts later approved by the General Assembly - a three-fold partition of the country, the creation of two states, the idea of an economic union between both, and the fact of their mutual dependence in matters of security, due to the peculiar form of the frontiers suggested.²³ The UNSCOP report both represented and shaped the trend of thought at the United Nations during that period. Two matters demanded immediate solutions: the growing political tension in Palestine, and the problem of the homeless Jewish refugees in Europe. The readiness of the refugees to go to Palestine and of the Jewish community there to absorb them offered a practical possibility for a political answer. Again, there is little evidence that the knowledge about the Holocaust played a significant part in these deliberations and in the shaping of the resolutions. As we have

²³ UNSCOP, Report; for excerpts, see Moore, III, pp. 259-312. A vivid description of UNSCOP's work is found in David Horowitz, *State in Making*, New York, 1953 (hereafter, Horowitz); see also, Edward B. Glick, *Latin America and the Palestine Problem*, New York, 1958 (hereafter, Glick), pp. 60-77

previously noted, the Zionist representatives who appeared before the Commission barely alluded to the subject.

During its deliberations the Commission approved a set of twelve general principles, which served as guidelines for more detailed recommendations. The last of these principles (the only one not adopted unanimously) deserves attention:

In the appraisal of the Palestine question, it [must] be accepted as uncontroversial that any solution for Palestine cannot be considered as a solution of the Jewish problem in general.²⁴

The arguments for this position were both practical and political. As the country was small, quite densely populated, and of limited natural resources, it was thought "most improbable that there could be settled in Palestine all the Jews who may wish to leave their present domiciles..." Furthermore, serious consideration had to be given to Arab opposition throughout the Middle East against large-scale Jewish immigration to Palestine.²⁵ In other words, it was not thought advisable to unload upon the already complicated Palestine situation the additional burden of connecting it with "the solution of the Jewish problem in general".

In spite of the fact that this principle was included in the UNSCOP report, it can be said that its meaning got lost in the rush of events during the following months - which was felicitous, from a Zionist point of view .

Viewed as an expression of a basic trend of thought, Article XII may well be considered as one of the major ideological defeats that the Zionists suffered during the UN deliberations. The entire moral case for a Jewish national home in Palestine had, after all, rested upon its connection with the Jewish people at large, with its past history and its present problems. The recognition of "the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine" as the grounds for "reconstituting their national home in that country" had been inserted into the preamble of the Palestine Mandate only after strenuous efforts of the Zionist leadership. It represented one of the cornerstones of Jewish aspirations in Palestine .

²⁴ UNSCOP, Report, p. 71.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 72 .

The Arabs understood the importance of this matter perfectly well. During the 1945 discussions about the draft of the United Nations Charter, they had invested great efforts (in vain) to prevent the terms of the Palestinian Mandate, which had been approved by the defunct League of Nations, to be transferred to the United Nations.²⁶ When the British Foreign Minister, Ernest Bevin, declared in November 1945 that the Palestine question should be separated from the Jewish problem in general - as it had now been stated in the UNSCOP principles - the Jewish Agency objected vehemently.²⁷ Therefore, even if the UNSCOP recommendations did not bind the General Assembly, and even if Article XII did not surface later among the resolutions approved by the United Nations, its basic significance remains: it was a clear-cut indication of the general approach of most of the nations regarding the Palestine question, the relationship to the Jewish problem and to the aspirations of the Jewish people regarding Palestine. It contradicted the very basis of Zionist aspirations.

American and Russian Policies at the UN

The United Nations vote for the partition of Palestine on November 29, 1947, was one of the most dramatic moments in the early history of the organization.²⁸ Historians still wonder at the outcome. "One way of interpreting the sequence of these complex events would be to maintain that it was the Zionists' year for a miracle" - wrote Wm. Roger Louis.²⁹ Why each nation voted as it did, or abstained, are questions whose answers may still lie buried in the archives of the Foreign Offices of the different countries, if they were

²⁶ Robinson, pp. 2-6; Eliyahu Elath, *Zionism at the UN, a Diary of the First Days*, Philadelphia, 1976, entries for 29 May 1945 to 6 June 1945.

²⁷ Hurewitz, pp. 237-238. See also the arguments of E.R. Fabregat, the representative of Uruguay, who, together with the representative of Guatemala, J. Garcia-Granados, voted against Article XII, UNSCOP, Report, Annexes, pp. 77-79.

²⁸ There is a large corpus of literature describing and analyzing the efforts and pressures exerted by the different sides to influence the final vote. See Hurewitz, pp. 302-309; John Snetsinger, *Truman, the Jewish Vote and the Creation of Israel*, Stanford, 1974 (hereafter, Snetsinger), pp. 66-72; Zvi Ganin, *Truman, American Jewry, and Israel 1945-1948*, New York/London, 1979, chapter IX. Pro-Zionist descriptions are to be found in Jorge Garcia-Granados, *The Birth of Israel*, New York, 1948, pp. 246-269; Horowitz, pp. 275-304; Glick, pp. 78-122. For anti-Zionist descriptions, see Alfred M. Lilienthal, *What Price Israel?*, Chicago, 1953; Kermit Roosevelt, "The Partition of Palestine: A Lesson in Pressure Politics," *Middle East Journal*, vol. II, 1948, pp. 1-16.

²⁹ Louis, p. 395.

recorded at all.³⁰ But there were several factors affecting the decision of the General Assembly that seem clear enough. What made the final decision possible was the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union found themselves in agreement regarding the actual proposed solution. This was not only remarkable - at the time it seemed like a true wonder.³¹ These were, after all, the years of the Cold War, with Western and Communist interests clashing in Greece, Turkey and Iran.

In historical perspective, it has become evident that the agreement between the two super-powers regarding partition was possible only because it reflected completely different motivations. Although the Soviet decision surprised many, the reasoning behind it seems quite straightforward.

They saw clearly, as did some helpless British and American diplomats, that with the British forced out of Palestine, Britain's power and prestige in the Near East would come closer to collapse. A Jewish state in the midst of the Arab world would be a continuous cause of conflict between the West and the Arabs and would offer Russia some interesting opportunities in an area from which she had been completely excluded.³²

In other words, the Soviet Union had much to gain and nothing to lose from partition.

The attitude of the United States regarding Palestine was more complex. Comprehending it is not made any easier by the misconception that American policy in 1947-1948 was significantly influenced by the idealistic desire to help the Jewish people to establish their own state. True, American public opinion was generally sympathetic to the plight of the Jewish people. Perhaps the

³⁰ See Strange, p. 152. Some partial information is to be found in Glick's book, pp. 78- 122. The favorable decision was obtained due to changes in the positions of Haiti, Liberia and the Philippines; see the comparative vote tables in Snetsinger, note 48, pp. 167-168.

³¹ "The main point is the positive attitude of both of America and of Russia, and it is almost tantamount to a miracle that these two countries should have agreed on our problem," wrote Ch. Weizmann to J. Ch. Smuts, on October 28, 1947; *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, Series A, vol. XXIII, Jerusalem, 1980, p. 23.

³² Adam B. Uman, *Expansion and Coexistence - The History of Soviet Foreign Policy 1917-1967*, New York, 1968, p. 584; Y. Ro'i, "Soviet-Israeli Relations, 1947-1954," Michael Confino and Shimon Shamir, eds., *The USSR and the Middle East* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1973 pp. 123-146. Ro'i adds another possible element in Soviet policy regarding Palestine in 1947: Russian hopes for greater influence on American Jewish public opinion (*ibid.*, p. 128). See also Alexander Dallin, *The Soviet Union at the United Nations*, New York, 1962, pp. 29-31; Robinson, pp. 236-239.

great political effort of organized American Jewry in the postwar years had some influence on American political decision-making regarding Palestine.³³ But to consider these factors as decisive or leading motives of American foreign policy seems unrealistic and hampers the comprehension of American strategy at that time.³⁴

Up to World War II, the Middle East was, in the eyes of American policy-makers, Great Britain's political turf. This situation was well suited to America's isolationist foreign policy. It spared the Americans involvement in the political problems of the region, but did not hinder the aggressive efforts of the big American oil companies to secure large concessions in the Arabian peninsula.³⁵ This situation changed radically in the aftermath of the war. The Middle East acquired a new importance in the strategic and economic considerations of the United States. The political and military thrust of the Soviet-backed movements and parties in Greece, Turkey and Iran transformed the Middle East into one of the main areas of confrontation between Western and Soviet policies. By 1947, the Middle East had become a major front in the Cold War.

Regarding Palestine, American policy was cautious, even hesitant. If, until 1946, there was little to justify a major American involvement in the country, there was still much about it advising prudence. The political problems of Palestine seemed more complicated and less clear-cut than those the Americans were facing in Greece and Iran. The British represented a political presence to be reckoned with - as a matter of fact, all through 1947, the

³³ The effort was real; its actual influence, doubtful. Even Samuel Halperin, in his comprehensive, although apologetic, work, *The Political World of American Zionism*, Detroit, 1961, concluded: "To what extent the evolving American Zionist power and influence potential chronicled in this study contributed to the creation of the State of Israel is not at all certain. Perhaps little more can ever be claimed than that the Zionist [in the United States] was one of the necessary prerequisites for the realization of the Zionist program" (p. 295). Years later, in an interesting article published in 1977, Zvi Ganin maintained that the political work of the American Zionist Emergency Council had influenced the partition resolution of the UN, but that the AZEC was unable to avoid the American retreat from partition in March 1948; see "The Limits of American Jewish Political Power: America's Retreat from Partition, November 1947-March 1948," *Jewish Social Studies*, XXXIX, 1977 pp. 1-36.

³⁴ See Alexander Deconde, *A History of American Foreign Policy*, New York, 1967, pp. 745-749; John C. Campbell, *Defense of the Middle East*, New York, 1958; E.H. Nolte, "United States Policy and the Middle East," Georgiana P. Stevens, ed., *The United States and the Middle East*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1964; Elizabeth Monroe, *Great Britain's Moment in the Middle East 1914-1956*, London, 1963, pp. 158-159.

³⁵ see Benjamin Shwadran, *The Middle East, Oil and the Great Powers*, New York, 1973, pp. 347-318.

Americans tried hard to avoid the British retreat from Palestine. The published documents on American foreign policy clearly show how reluctant the gradual American involvement in the Palestine question was.³⁶

An additional reason for American hesitation was the opposing pressures in Washington, forcing American policy-makers to find their way under divided counsel. On the one hand, the State Department was very doubtful about the viability of a Jewish state and opposed to antagonizing the Arab countries and rulers of the region. Its position was strongly supported by the representatives of American oil interests in the Middle East. On the other hand, there were the efforts of the American Jewish and Zionist organizations, as well as the sympathy of American public opinion regarding the Jewish problem and Zionist aspirations. Even if their political weight was (and has remained) difficult to evaluate, they could not be ignored.³⁷ Electoral considerations - the influence of the Jewish vote in some key American states - were also an element to be considered. Presidential elections were scheduled in late 1948, and President Truman's prospects of election were by no means secure.³⁸ Indeed, the American policy-makers found it so difficult to adopt a clear position on Palestine that it is curious why the Americans became involved in the Palestine imbroglio at all.³⁹ It seems that the decisive factor was the growing recognition that the situation in Palestine was rapidly deteriorating toward an armed conflict between Jews, Arabs and the British. Considering the realities of the Middle East, this represented a danger to be avoided at all costs. A Jewish-Arab war in Palestine, probably engulfing other countries in the Middle East, could only be detrimental to the many Western interests in that region. It certainly would open new avenues to Soviet political influence and penetration.

³⁶ see *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1947, vol. V, Washington, D.C., 1971 (hereafter, FRUS); 1948, vol. V, part 2, Washington, 1976 (hereafter, FRUS, 1948).

³⁷ Beside Samuel Halperin's *The Political World of American Zionism*, see also Joseph B. Schechtman, *The United States and the Jewish State Movement*, New York, 1966 (hereafter, Schechtman), chapter 15, "Zionism and Palestine in American Politics", which, if read in a careful and unbiased way, is illuminating indeed; Snetsinger; and Frank F. Manuel's still important book, *The Realities of American-Palestine Relations*, Washington, D.C., 1949.

³⁸ In Snetsinger's opinion, pp. 137-149, electoral considerations were one of the major reasons behind President Truman's decision to recognize the State of Israel minutes after its proclamation on May 15, 1948.

³⁹ See State Department Memorandum, September 30, 1947; President Truman's position, October 6, 1947, November 24, 1947, FRUS, pp. 1166-1170, 1177-1178, 1283-1284.

The guiding line of American diplomacy from the beginning of the deliberations at the UN was, therefore, to reduce the possibilities of conflict in Palestine. As stated by the American delegate to the UN Herschel V. Johnson in the spring of 1947:

We believe that this may be the last chance for the solving of this problem in a peaceful and fair manner. If this chance is missed, chaos and disorder might well result in Palestine of so serious a nature that that country would be ruined physically and morally.⁴⁰

As a result, when, at a given moment, the various political pressures acting in Washington had to be translated into a policy at least partially acceptable to the diverse interests involved, the United States decided to support partition. Since the Arab-Jewish confrontation seemed to exclude the possibility of a bi-national state, partition represented, if not the best of solutions, at least one that might avoid a war. Partition also opened a way for a solution for the Jewish refugees in Europe. Last but not least, it was the main recommendation of UNSCOP .

Making virtue out of necessity, the emphasis was not - as it was among the Zionists - on Jewish statehood. American interest lay not in states and independence, but in the avoidance of armed conflict in the Middle East.⁴¹ This position was clearly stated in President Truman's memoirs: "I was not committed to any particular formula of statehood in Palestine or to any particular time schedule for its accomplishment." His aims were peace between Jews and Arabs and a solution for the Jewish refugees in Europe.⁴²

Decision and Indecision at the United Nations

Basically, it seems that most of the nations who voted for partition on November 29, 1947, accepted the reasoning described above. The General Assembly also decided that, in addition to the two states, an international

⁴⁰ Robinson, p. v.

⁴¹ See State Department Memorandum, September 30, 1947; President Truman's position, October 6, 1947, November 24, 1947, FRUS, pp. 1166-1170, 1177-1178, 1,283-1,284.

⁴² Harry S Truman, *Memoirs*, vol. II, Garden City, N.Y., 1956, pp. 156-157.

regime under the United Nations should be established for Jerusalem - in spite of the fact that more than two-thirds of the city's population were Jews and that a Jewish state without Jerusalem represented a fundamental contradiction from a Zionist and a Jewish point of view. The UN resolution also defined the borders between the two parts as well as their economic relationship. A Palestine Commission was appointed to implement the decision.⁴³

From November 19, 1947, to May 15, 1948, the United Nations did nothing of consequence to carry out the partition plan it had adopted for Palestine. The provisions made in the plan itself for execution by UN organs depended completely on British cooperation. Since this was denied, the Palestine Commission that was appointed could only submit gloomy reports of growing chaos and of their own helplessness.⁴⁴

The inactivity of the commission had its causes. The very premises upon which the partition plan was based, i.e., the avoidance of an armed confrontation between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, started crumbling soon after November 29. The United States now took the initiative to deal with the worsening situation. In December 1947, an American embargo was declared on arms shipments to the Middle East. It soon became clear that the resolution worked mainly against the Jews and that, in the long run, it was ineffective, since sooner or later both sides managed to obtain arms elsewhere.⁴⁵ When, in February 1948, the Palestine Commission reported to the Security Council that it could not fulfill its functions, the United States considered new means of bringing the Palestinian situation under control.

The political considerations that had given birth to the partition resolution were now coldly reconsidered, and new solutions were suggested. The American delegate declared on February 24, 1948, that his country would be ready to consider some form of armed intervention by the United Nations in Palestine - not for the enforcement of partition, but in order to guarantee peace. On March 19, the State Department went one step farther: the American delegate to the Security Council declared that, instead of the

⁴³ For the November 29, 1947, UN resolution, Resolution 181, II, see Moore, pp. 313-319.

⁴⁴ Ben Halpern, *The Idea of the Jewish State*, Cambridge, Mass., 1961, p. 375.

⁴⁵ See Schechtman, pp. 318-328.

partition plan, a temporary trusteeship of the United Nations in Palestine should be considered. On April 16, the Second Special Session of the General Assembly convened to discuss new alternatives for the future government of Palestine.⁴⁶

A sharp internal controversy erupted between the White House and the State Department because of the March 19 declaration. The Jewish Agency and the Jewish community in Palestine protested vehemently against what was considered a surrender of the United Nations in general and of the United States in particular to British non-cooperation and to Arab violence.⁴⁷ Had American policy really undergone so major a change? From an American point of view, their policy regarding Palestine may have been hesitant and tactically inconsistent. Nevertheless, it seems that their strategic approach to the problem did not change during this period. Their basic aim remained the same all along: to avoid, or at least to minimize, the looming armed conflict in Palestine, in accordance with the interests of the United States in the Middle East.

At the beginning of May, a new proposal was approved by the UN, again spurred by the United States: to nominate a Mediator for Palestine with broad powers. The way the Mediator (Count Folke Bernadotte of Sweden) was to understand his role and responsibilities throws further light on the attitude of the United Nations toward the question of Palestine. He was not bound (and if he was, Bernadotte did not consider himself so) by the terms established in the November 29 resolution and, arguably, not even by partition itself.⁴⁸

But events soon overtook the intentions of the United States and the plans of the UN. On May 15, 1948, the State of Israel was proclaimed. A new political reality was thus established. In the words of the Israeli diplomat Walter Eytan :
If this Jewish state came into being...it was not primarily because the United

⁴⁶ See Zvi Ganin's detailed analysis of American policy in the article cited above (note 33), as well as in his book, *Truman, American Jewry and Israel, 1945-1948*, New York/London, 1979, chapter X: "America's Retreat from Partition"; also FRUS, 1948, p. 825; Leonard, pp. 661-666; Zasloff, pp. 104-111.

⁴⁷ Ganin, *ibid*; FRUS, *ibid.*, pp. 744-746, 753, 776-777. The White House maintained that the declaration had been made without the authorization of President Truman.

⁴⁸ See the correspondence between the Israeli government and Bernadotte during July 1948; F. Bernadotte, *To Jerusalem*, London, 1951, pp. 149-158.

Nations had recommended it...When the day of independence dawned, the decision was Israel's alone.⁴⁹

The Question of the Connection: The Viewpoint of the Non-Jews

Was there, then, a connection between the Holocaust and the creation of Israel? Is it conceivable that the two most decisive events in modern Jewish history could occur almost simultaneously and not be linked? Is it possible that the emergence of the Jewish state was unrelated to the terrible disaster of the Jewish people and to the remorse of the nations of the world?

Regarding the deliberations of the United Nations and its bodies in 1947-1948, it is difficult to find evidence that the Holocaust played a decisive or even significant role. No bloc of nations proclaimed during the UN discussions on Palestine that its foremost aim was the creation of a Jewish state. (On the other hand, an important group of countries did favor the transformation of Palestine into an Arab state.) What impelled the international body was the practical problem of the Jewish refugees and, even more, the awareness that the Palestinian problem was drifting toward chaos and war.

The actual General Assembly decision regarding partition was made possible by the support of the two super-powers. However, although their agreement was a necessary condition for the UN partition resolution, it was not in itself sufficient. The majority of the UN members who voted for the resolution deserve additional consideration, especially since the American representatives abstained from lobbying too actively for the UNSCOP proposal. True, some of the countries of the Western bloc did display an understanding - and, in a few cases, even a genuine interest - in Jewish and Zionist aspirations, but, for most of the states represented at the UN, the Jewish problem was something far removed from their concerns. It was, however, natural and understandable for them to go along with the Soviet-American proposition, given the great political and moral weight of such an agreement between the super-powers. And since the measure of agreement

⁴⁹ Walter Eytan, *The First Ten Years*, New York, 1958, pp. 1-2. Evyatar Friesel, "The Holocaust: Factor in the Birth of Israel?", In *Major Changes Within the Jewish People in the Wake of the Holocaust*, Yad Vashem 1996, pp. 519-544.

between the United States and the Soviet Union neutralized clear-cut international rivalries, their tendency was to consider the Palestine question in terms of political realities. Factors such as the historical connection of the Jewish people to Palestine, or feelings of remorse because of the recent Jewish tragedy were hardly heard, if at all. Indeed, were they to be expected? It is only reasonable to assume that the great majority of UN members considered the Palestine question in "practical" terms. That attitude was well expressed in Article XII of the UNSCOP principles, which stressed that there could be no connection between the Palestinian issue and the Jewish problem

Consequently, when at the beginning of 1948, it became increasingly clear that partition was not going to prevent a war in Palestine, the UN (spurred by the United States) started looking for a different, "practical" solution. All of which only emphasizes how modest a role the facts about and the reactions to the Holocaust played in the considerations of the international community. Even if there were a similarity in the actual outcome under consideration, there was little in common between the reasons impelling Jews and Zionists toward Jewish statehood and the reasoning behind the United Nations resolution for the partition of Palestine.

The Question of the Connection: The Jewish Standpoint

Obviously, from the standpoint of Jewish history, there is a different perspective about the relationship between Jewish statehood and the Holocaust. One factor to be pondered is the subjective attitudes of post-Holocaust Jewry regarding the Holocaust. The process of weaving the knowledge of the Holocaust into the texture of Jewish historical consciousness, which began with the extermination and which has continued ever since, has a sense of its own. It is an ongoing labor in which diverse segments of the Jewish people, in Israel or in the Diaspora, tend to emphasize different aspects of the tragedy that befell the Jewish people during World War II. The nearness in time between the Holocaust and the birth of Israel also encourages the connection between the events, if only for the purpose of self-consolation. But their enormous historical significance

demands sharp and unpitying lucidity in order to understand their place in the history of the Jewish people. The complex logic of this historical problem suggests apparently contradictory conclusions: that there was a relationship between the Holocaust and the emergence of Israel - and that there was none.

Either way, it seems clear that both the Holocaust and Jewish statehood had some common historical foundations. Each expressed, in its own way, the final crisis of the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish society, a relationship based on patterns of co-existence that had developed in Europe since the Middle Ages. In that sense, both represented radical responses. Rather than converging, however, both responses ran parallel and in opposite directions. Considered alongside the establishment of the Jewish state, the Holocaust represented the *sitra ahra*, the other face, of Jewish existence - the side of darkness and destruction, against the side of creation and continuity.

The reaction to the Holocaust brought about a peculiar tension in Jewish life, a sense of *aharit ha-yamim* ("end of days"), reminiscent of the response to the earlier disasters in Jewish history, such as the destruction of the First and the Second Temples, or the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in the late Middle Ages. This consciousness brought about an awakening of inner strength, blending despair and grim hope that permeated the political struggle of the Jews to prevail in Palestine and to overcome all obstacles in spite of and against all odds. This spirit, uncharacteristic - and perhaps undesirable - in times when the life of a people runs its normal course, was an essential component of the Zionist and Jewish effort to establish their state in Palestine .

Any examination of what happened in the late 1940s in Palestine and at the United Nations shows that the Jews were not the strongest among the political participants in that international drama. But they were possessed by a singleness of purpose and by a sense of total dedication to a constructive goal that were unmatched by any of the other direct or indirect participants in the question of Palestine.

That characteristic in Jewish political activism became a powerful lever in a situation that, for reasons unrelated, had already reached the point of maturation. As we have shown above, in a narrower sense it was the British

policy in Palestine, or, more specifically, the White Paper of 1939, that set in motion the process leading toward the political aim of Zionism - the creation of a Jewish state. In the background there were additional long-term factors. The wheels moving toward the emergence of Israel the state reflected developments going back a century at least: the modernization of Jewish society, the rise of Jewish nationalism, the crisis of the Jewish-Gentile relationship in modern times, and the emergence of Zionism itself. The extermination of European Jewry happened long after these long or short term forces in Jewish history, striving toward national sovereignty and independent statehood, had been set into motion.

True, a distinction should be made between the influence of the Holocaust as a historical occurrence (as we have just done), and the Holocaust as a molding factor in later Jewish consciousness. In the second case there seems little reason to believe that the Holocaust influenced the creation of the Jewish state. In terms of subjective insight, it would take a long time for the Holocaust to be absorbed by the Jewish people in its deeper historical and meta-historical significances. The incorporation of the Holocaust into the collective awareness of the Jewish people is a process that is far from complete even at the end of the twentieth century. It will take a long time for the Jewish people to learn how to live with the knowledge of the Holocaust and how to merge this knowledge into the complex structure of its millennial historical consciousness, with its varied patterns of shadows and light, tragedy and creation, death and life. The emergence of the State of Israel in 1948 occurred long before then.

Nevertheless ...

Nevertheless, there was a point of contact and influence between the Holocaust and the creation of the Jewish state. It was, however, exactly the reverse of what is commonly assumed: the destruction of European Jewry almost rendered the birth of Israel impossible.

Zionism as an idea and a movement expressed yearnings and needs of very diverse strata of the Jewish people, from the fringe of the almost assimilated to the opposite fringe of those almost untouched by modern secular culture. In

its focal point, its vital and most creative mainstream, Zionism was the movement of a broad part of Jewish society, combining a significant degree of cultural integration in the secular world with a high degree of Jewish consciousness. Zionism arose out of a long experience of relations between Jews and non-Jews, where all the options of mutual understanding had been tried and had failed, up to the point in modern times where only negative solutions remained open - from the Jewish as well as from the non-Jewish perspectives. In this respect Zionism was essentially a product of European Jewry, especially East European Jewry.

Ironically, that sector of the Jewish people was almost completely annihilated in the Holocaust. When the dust settled after the tempest of World War II, and Jewry took stock of its situation, what remained were three major groups of Jews. First, the Jewish communities in Arab lands, soon to be swept by the messianic hope of Israel-reborn, but strangers to the European-grounded social and ideological premises that had created modern Zionism. Second, there were the new Western communities, such as American Jewry, rich and active, but still young and unsettled sociologically and trying to define its status in its new general environment. But the patterns of Jewish life there were developing significantly different from the conditions that had brought about the development of Zionism in Europe. Finally, there was the Jewish community in Palestine - the last creation of a Jewry that was no more.

The most vital segment of modern Jewry, the most settled and vigorous among the Jewish communities, the East European Jewry that had created the Jewish National Home in Palestine and would have been the most able and most prepared to complete the task, had been exterminated in the war. The child of its hopes and endeavors, Israel-the-state, was reborn beside the graves of its fathers and mothers at the Jewish people's darkest hour. Israel came forth smaller and poorer, in the physical and spiritual sense, than she would have had the huge reservoir of manpower and talent within European Jewry attended her birth and kept watch over her cradle. In her internal structure, in her spiritual life, even in her relationship with her surroundings and in her position among the nations of the world, both as a state and as a people, Israel is still enduring the consequences of the Holocaust.

Source: *Major Changes Within the Jewish People in the Wake of the Holocaust*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 1996, pp. 519-544.