

Ben-Gurion, David

(1886--1973), Zionist leader and first prime minister of Israel. Born in Poland, Ben-Gurion moved to Palestine in 1906. From 1935 to 1948 he served as chairman of the Jewish Agency and Zionist Executive.

As the situation in Europe deteriorated during the late 1930s, Ben-Gurion became increasingly desperate to devise a plan for mass Jewish immigration to Palestine. During the first two years of World War II, Ben-Gurion traveled around the United States, rallying the support of American Jewry for a bold new program called the Biltmore Resolution. This program called for Palestine to be opened up for large-scale immigration after the war and for it to become a Jewish state, under Jewish control. The Zionists would deal with the political side of the Biltmore program, while Jewish organizations throughout the free world would be responsible to fund the project and provide immediate assistance for the Jews of Europe.

Ben-Gurion returned to Palestine in October 1942. By that time, he had confirmed reports of the systematic mass murder of European Jewry. From then on, he worked at organizing the *Yishuv's* rescue operations. He encouraged the Jews of Palestine to mobilize for the war effort, and called for the creation of Jewish units in the British army. He did not let the Jewish Agency set up its own wide-reaching rescue committee, preferring that the *Yishuv* run its own official committee. However, he did allow the Jewish Agency to coordinate political action.

Many historians view Ben-Gurion's actions during the war as rather controversial; they believe that he was dispassionate and did not try hard enough to save European Jews. It seems that Ben-Gurion believed that the *Yishuv* could not feasibly save many lives, because of the strength of the German war machine and because the Allied powers were not willing to support most rescue plans. Thus, Ben-Gurion decided to turn his attention to smaller, more practical rescue operations that could actually succeed. In fact, he was not apathetic at all to the plight of European Jewry—he was deeply touched by the tragedy, and thus tried to develop policies that would allow for long-term solutions.

