

The Altalena Affair

By Judith Rice

[Editorial note: the following is the section about the Altalena affair from an article written by J. Rice. The full article – with the story of the S.S. Ben Hecht at its center – was published in the June 2010 Edition of the Jewish Magazine (see www.Jashp.org) under the caption: [The S.S. Ben Hecht - "The Mandate of Conscience"](#); Other selected parts of the original article are published on this website under the Aliya Bet/The S.S. Ben-Hecht's voyage section]

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 paramilitary groups continued to be active outside the IDF, including the Irgun (Etzel) which planned to ship [its own] 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 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, 5 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.

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."²

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Judith Rice is an associate member of the Jewish American Society for
Historic Preservation

www.Jashp.org

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irgun>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altalena_Affair