

The 1947 Lehi Letter Bomb Plot Against President Harry S. Truman

In mid-1947, as tensions escalated in British Mandate Palestine, the Zionist paramilitary group Lehi, also known as the Stern Gang, orchestrated a bold but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to target U.S. President Harry S. Truman with letter bombs. This little-known incident, overshadowed by Lehi's more infamous acts, reflects the group's willingness to strike at international figures perceived as obstructing their vision for a Jewish state. While the plot failed to cause harm, it underscores the volatile intersection of U.S. foreign policy and the Jewish insurgency in the lead-up to Israel's establishment in 1948.

Background: Lehi and the Struggle for Palestine

Lehi, founded in 1940 by Avraham Stern, was a radical splinter group from the larger Irgun Zvai Leumi, both of which sought to end British rule in Palestine and establish a Jewish state. Unlike the more restrained Irgun, Lehi embraced extreme tactics, including assassinations and bombings, targeting British officials, Arab civilians, and even Jewish moderates. By 1947, Lehi's campaign had intensified, driven by frustration with Britain's restrictive Jewish immigration policies—codified in the 1939 White Paper—and the international community's slow progress toward resolving the Palestine question.

President Harry S. Truman, who assumed office in April 1945, was a pivotal figure in this context. Sympathetic to Jewish refugees and the Zionist cause, Truman supported the establishment of a Jewish homeland, famously recognizing Israel minutes after its declaration of independence on May 14, 1948. However, in 1947, his administration faced competing pressures: supporting Jewish aspirations while maintaining relations with Arab states and avoiding entanglement in the British Mandate's chaos. Truman's calls for increased Jewish immigration to Palestine and his endorsement of a UN partition plan were seen as insufficient by groups like Lehi, who viewed any delay or compromise as betrayal.

The Plot: Letter Bombs to the White House

In mid-1947, Lehi operatives mailed a series of letter bombs addressed to President Truman and senior White House staff. These devices, disguised as ordinary mail, were part of a broader campaign that saw similar bombs sent to British officials, including Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin and Colonial Secretary Arthur Creech Jones. The plot was orchestrated by Lehi's leadership, likely including figures like Yitzhak Shamir, a future Israeli Prime Minister who played a key role in Lehi's operations during this period.

The letter bombs were intercepted before reaching their targets, likely by U.S. postal or security services, though specific details of the interception remain scarce. No explosions occurred, and no injuries or deaths were reported. The incident received minimal public at-

tention at the time, possibly to avoid inflaming U.S.-Zionist relations or encouraging further attacks. Historical records, including accounts of U.S. presidential assassination attempts and Lehi's activities, confirm the plot's existence but offer limited specifics, reflecting its status as a minor, failed operation.

Motive: Why Target Truman?

Lehi's decision to target Truman stemmed from their perception of U.S. policy as insufficiently supportive of Zionist goals. Despite Truman's advocacy for Jewish immigration and a Jewish homeland, Lehi viewed his administration's cautious approach—balancing Arab and British interests—as an obstacle. The group's broader strategy aimed to internationalize their “war of liberation” against British rule and pressure global powers into decisive action. By targeting Truman, Lehi sought to send a message that no leader was beyond their reach, hoping to disrupt diplomatic inertia and draw attention to their cause.

The letter bomb tactic was not new for Lehi. They had pioneered its use in earlier attacks, including a 1946 attempt on British officials and the 1944 assassination of Lord Moyne, Britain's Minister of State in the Middle East.

The 1947 campaign extended this approach to the U.S., reflecting Lehi's growing audacity and desperation as the Palestine conflict intensified.

Aftermath and Impact

The foiled plot had little immediate impact. Truman, undeterred, continued to shape U.S. policy on Palestine, culminating in his swift recognition of Israel in 1948. The incident did not significantly alter U.S.-Zionist relations, likely due to its secrecy and the broader context of U.S. support for a Jewish state. Lehi, condemned as a terrorist organization by the UN, British, and U.S. governments, as well as mainstream Zionist leaders like David Ben-Gurion, was disbanded after Israel's formation in 1948. Its members were integrated into the Israeli Defense Forces, and some, like Shamir, rose to prominent political roles.

The plot's obscurity in historical narratives reflects its lack of tangible consequences and the sensitivity of U.S.-Israel relations at the time. Unlike Lehi's assassination of Folke Bernadotte in 1948, which provoked international outrage, the Truman plot remained a footnote, mentioned in passing in accounts of Lehi's activities or U.S. presidential security.

Legacy and Historical Significance

The 1947 letter bomb plot against Truman highlights the complexities of the pre-Israel Zionist movement, which encompassed both moderate and extremist factions. Lehi's actions, while condemned by figures like Chaim Weizmann and Ben-Gurion, were part of a broader struggle that ultimately contributed to Israel's establishment, though their methods alienated allies and complicated diplomacy. The incident also underscores the early challenges of U.S.

involvement in the Middle East, as Truman navigated domestic and international pressures to define America's role in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Today, the plot is occasionally cited in discussions of U.S. presidential assassination attempts or Lehi's controversial legacy. On platforms like X, references to the incident sometimes appear in narratives questioning U.S.-Israel relations, but these often lack nuance or exaggerate Lehi's influence. Historians view the plot as a minor but revealing episode, illustrating the lengths to which extremist groups would go in pursuit of their goals.

Conclusion

The 1947 Lehi letter bomb plot against President Harry S. Truman was a failed attempt to intimidate a key international figure during a pivotal moment in the Palestine conflict. While it caused no harm, it reflects the radical tactics of Lehi and the high stakes of the Zionist struggle for statehood. Truman's resilience and continued support for a Jewish state helped shape the modern Middle East, rendering Lehi's plot a fleeting, if audacious, act of defiance in a transformative era.