

# The Sergeants Affair: A Tragic Episode in the British Mandate of Palestine

In the turbulent final years of the British Mandate in Palestine, the Jewish underground group Irgun, led by future Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, waged a violent campaign against British authority. Their operations included bombing Arab marketplaces, targeting British military and administrative installations, and orchestrating high-profile kidnappings. While driven by nationalist aims, many of these actions - particularly those targeting civilians or intended to instill fear - would be unequivocally recognized today as acts of terrorism under widely accepted modern definitions.

The British authorities responded with severe countermeasures, including arrests, military trials, and executions of captured Irgun fighters. One of the most consequential episodes during this period was the Sergeants Affair, which began with the sentencing to death of three Irgun members captured during the Acre Prison break of May 1947. Found guilty of violent acts against British forces, including the use of explosives and armed resistance, Avshalom Haviv, Meir Nakar, and Yaakov Weiss were condemned to hang.

## The Kidnapping

Despite growing threats and explicit warnings issued by British intelligence and military authorities, the risk of abduction by Irgun operatives was often underestimated or disregarded by personnel on the ground. Such was the case with Sergeants Clifford Martin and Mervyn Paice, both just 20 years old and serving with the 252 Field Security Section of the British Army Intelligence Corps during the summer of 1947. On July 11, 1947 the two sergeants were off-duty, unarmed and in civilian clothes, and chose to socialize in Netanya, a coastal town known for both its Jewish population and underground activity. They had visited a cafe in Netanya and engaged in conversation with Aaron Weinberg, a Jewish refugee and local clerk at a British military resort camp.

Unbeknownst to the sergeants, Weinberg was operating as a double agent, secretly affiliated with both Haganah and the Irgun. Having gained the trust of British officers, Weinberg reported his encounter with the sergeants to Irgun leadership. The organization swiftly mobilized a team to act on the intelligence. The operation was led by Benjamin Kaplan, a seasoned Irgun operative who had previously been liberated during the dramatic Acre Prison break - the very raid for which the three Irgun members were now awaiting execution.

As Martin and Paice exited the café, they were ambushed and abducted by the Irgun unit. They were transported to a concealed location: a diamond-polishing plant in Netanya, converted into a makeshift detention site. There, they were confined in a cramped, air-tight underground cell, sustained for eighteen days by a limited supply of bottled oxygen, food,

and water. The physical conditions were grim, but the psychological warfare element was equally powerful: the abduction was a deliberate tactic designed to force British authorities to reconsider the planned executions of the Irgun prisoners. In this sense, the kidnapping was both a retaliatory threat and a strategic act of leverage.

## The Hostage Negotiations

The Irgun's motive was to use the sergeants as bargaining chips to halt the execution of the three Irgun militants - Avshalom Haviv, Meir Nakar, and Yaakov Weiss - who had been captured during the Acre Prison break in May 1947. The three had been convicted of illegal arms possession and intent to cause harm, and their death sentences were confirmed by British authorities on July 8. The Irgun issued a public threat: if the executions proceeded, Martin and Paice would be hanged in retaliation.

As news of the abduction spread, efforts to secure the sergeants' release intensified. On July 17, British MPs Richard Crossman and Maurice Edelman publicly appealed for their freedom, joined by other prominent figures and private citizens. Mervyn Paice's father wrote a heartfelt letter to Menachem Begin, pleading for his son's life. The letter reached Begin through an Irgun-affiliated postal worker, but Begin responded coldly via a radio broadcast on Irgun's clandestine radio station, *Kol Tsion HaLokhemet*, stating, "You must appeal to your government that thirsts for oil and blood."

Meanwhile, British intelligence and security services launched an intensive operation to locate and recover the hostages. Acting on a tip, they searched the Netanya diamond polishing plant, but the mission failed. The sergeants were being held in a concealed air-tight underground cell - a detail that rendered sniffer dogs and standard search techniques ineffective.

Faced with the escalating pressure of public appeals, the moral weight of potential retaliation, and the undeniable urgency of the situation, the British authorities stood their ground. Adhering to their long-standing policy of refusing to negotiate with terrorists, they elected to carry out the executions as scheduled. On July 27, the Palestinian Broadcasting Company announced that Haviv, Weiss, and Nakar would be executed on July 29. On July 29, 1947, Haviv, Nakar, and Weiss were hanged in Acre Prison.

## The Murders and Their Grisly Aftermath

Enraged by the executions, Menachem Begin ordered the immediate killing of Martin and Paice. On the evening of July 29, the sergeants were executed in what can only be described as a deliberately cruel and symbolic act. Irgun operatives used piano wire to carry out the hangings. The method ensured a slow and agonizing death - a grim contrast to the quick drop of the British gallows. The method was chosen as a direct counterpoint to the British execution style - an act of calculated brutality meant to send a message.

Following the killings, the Irgun transferred the bodies to a secluded eucalyptus grove near Netanya. There, the corpses were suspended from trees, faces covered with bandages, shirts partially removed, and placed in a manner that highlighted their vulnerability

and humiliation. To amplify the shock and deter any swift recovery, the Irgun rigged a contact mine beneath Sergeant Martin's body. This addition turned the discovery site into a lethal trap.

The final act of this propaganda-driven operation was media manipulation. The Irgun anonymously contacted Tel Aviv newspapers, providing the location of the bodies. On July 31, British soldiers, accompanied by journalists discovered the bodies. The scene was horrific: the sergeants' blackened, bloodied corpses swung from the trees, with Irgun communiqués pinned to them accusing the men of "anti-Jewish crimes." Captain D.H. Galatti, after checking the area, began cutting down Martin's body using a knife attached to a pole. When the body fell, the mine detonated, obliterating Martin's corpse, mutilating Paice's, and wounding Galatti in the face and shoulder. The gruesome images captured by the press shocked the world.

## Global Condemnation and Violent Reprisals

The execution of Sergeants Clifford Martin and Mervyn Paice by the Irgun sent a shock-wave of revulsion through Britain and beyond. The gruesome nature of the killings, combined with their symbolic timing and the Irgun's unapologetic stance, provoked widespread condemnation across political, media, and public spheres.

In the British press, the response was swift and scathing. The Times captured the national mood in a powerful editorial, stating:

"It is difficult to estimate the damage that will be done to the Jewish cause not only in this country but throughout the world by the cold-blooded murder of the two British soldiers."

Similarly, The Manchester Guardian condemned the killings as among the most heinous acts in the history of modern political violence, drawing comparisons to Nazi atrocities.

In Britain, the backlash extended beyond rhetoric. During the August Bank Holiday weekend of 1947, a wave of antisemitic riots broke out across several cities. Liverpool, London, Manchester, and Glasgow witnessed attacks on Jewish-owned businesses, homes, and synagogues. Windows were smashed, buildings were looted, and Jewish communities were harassed in what became the worst antisemitic violence seen in Britain in decades. Graffiti appeared bearing chilling slogans such as "Jewish murderers" and "Hitler was right".

Meanwhile, in Palestine, the reaction could not have been more different. The Irgun, far from expressing remorse, took pride in the killings, portraying them as a justified act of wartime resistance. In their underground press, they published bold declarations such as:

"We recognize no one-sided laws of war."

This statement reflected the Irgun's broader ideological position: that Britain had no moral authority to enforce laws or dictate the terms of engagement. For them, the hanging of the sergeants was not a crime, but a calculated act of deterrence and defiance - a response to what they perceived as British oppression and injustice. In this framing, moral

legitimacy was not defined by international law or universal principles but by the perceived righteousness of their national struggle. This form of reasoning - depicting violent reprisals as acts of resistance against an illegitimate occupying power - finds echoes in the rhetoric of later militant movements such as Hamas, which similarly justifies violence as defensive action against what it perceives as foreign domination and systemic injustice.

Yet while the Irgun's actions won admiration in some Zionist circles as expressions of uncompromising national resolve, they also provoked deep moral unease within the broader Jewish community and outrage abroad. International opinion, especially in Britain and the United States, turned sharply against the Zionist cause, which many now associated with terrorism rather than liberation. The Sergeants Affair thus exposed a dangerous paradox that continues to haunt nationalist and insurgent movements: that the same actions deemed heroic acts of resistance by one side can be viewed as indefensible atrocities by another. This statement reflected the Irgun's broader ideological position: that Britain, had no moral authority to enforce laws or dictate the terms of engagement. For them, the hanging of the sergeants was not a crime, but a calculated act of deterrence and defiance - a response to what they perceived as British oppression and injustice.

## **Legacy and Historical Significance**

The Sergeants Affair marked a definitive turning point in the unraveling of British rule in Palestine. Just months after the brutal killings of Sergeants Clifford Martin and Mervyn Paice, the British government formally notified the United Nations of its intention to terminate the Mandate. Decades of administrative burden, escalating violence, and rising political costs had made continued control untenable. The Irgun's campaign - culminating in the public execution of British soldiers - had not only struck a deep blow to British morale but had also demonstrated the limits of imperial power in the face of relentless insurgency and international scrutiny.

In November 1947, the United Nations voted on a partition plan that would divide Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem under international control. The proposal allocated approximately 55% of the land to the Jewish state, despite Jews comprising only about one-third of the population at the time and holding legal ownership over just 7% of the territory. The decision was met with jubilation among many Jews and fierce rejection by the Arab states and Palestinian Arab leadership, setting the stage for civil conflict and, ultimately, full-scale war.

No reigning British monarch has ever visited the State of Israel. While members of the royal family have made visits in recent years, Queen Elizabeth II, who reigned for seventy years, never set foot in the country - an omission often interpreted as a subtle but enduring expression of unresolved diplomatic tension rooted in the painful final years of British rule.

The Sergeants Affair thus stands not only as a moment of shocking violence but also as a historical inflection point - where empire collapsed, diplomacy faltered, and a new, volatile chapter in Middle Eastern history began.

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