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# Britain, the Holocaust, and Strategic Priorities

## A Complex Legacy

### Abstract

British policy concerning European Jews during World War II was shaped by a complex interplay of imperial priorities, military strategy, and humanitarian considerations. For better or worse, the British had a profound impact on the fate of European Jews throughout the war. While certain initiatives highlighted Britain's capacity for moral action, other policies reflected the tensions between strategic imperatives and the urgent needs of Jewish refugees. This article examines Britain's multifaceted engagement with the Jewish question during the war, illustrating the geopolitical challenges that shaped policy decisions. By assessing these complex dynamics, it provides a nuanced understanding of Britain's role in one of history's darkest chapters.

### British Actions Before the War

The Evian Conference of July 1938 was a critical moment in the international response to the refugee crisis precipitated by Nazi policies. Convened in Evian-les-Bains, France, representatives from thirty-two nations gathered to discuss the plight of Jewish refugees fleeing Germany and Austria. The British delegation at the Evian Conference claimed that the territories of the Empire were already too dense for settlement, were not suitable for settlement by Europeans, or did not allow settlement for political reasons. Britain further stipulated that its participation in the conference came with the precondition that no negotiations regarding Mandatory Palestine would be entertained within the meeting's framework. British representatives also cited their country's economic crisis, high unemployment, and lack of capacity to absorb immigrants as additional barriers.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Britain encouraged other nations to shoulder the responsibility while steadfastly avoiding any commitments that would strain its own imperial resources.<sup>2</sup> By prioritising geopolitical stability over humanitarian action, Britain's stance at Evian foreshadowed the dilemmas that would characterise its wartime responses to the Jewish question. The inaction at Evian sent a clear signal to Nazi leaders, suggesting that international opposition to their anti-Jewish policies would remain limited.

In response to the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 1938, Britain launched the Kindertransport initiative, which ultimately saved around 10,000 Jewish children from Nazi-occupied territories. This effort, though limited in scope, marked a significant humanitarian gesture by the British government. The program allowed Jewish

1 National Archives Kew, PRO, FO 7031/9 Pt 3, "Evian Conference Proceedings", July 1938.

2 Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933–1948: British Immigration Policy and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 70–72.

children to enter Britain, provided that private sponsors or organisations guaranteed their care and financial support.<sup>3</sup> This unprecedented act of rescue by a world leader could support the argument that Neville Chamberlain, under whose administration the programme was implemented, deserves recognition as Righteous Among the Nations. However, archival records and analyses reveal that his government approved the programme primarily in response to overwhelming public and political pressure following Kristallnacht, rather than as part of a broader humanitarian vision.<sup>4</sup> The programme's limitations in excluding adults and relying heavily on private funding and sponsorship reflected the government's broader reluctance to address the full scale of the refugee crisis. Moreover, the 1939 White Paper, which strictly limited Jewish immigration to Palestine, underscored Britain's geopolitical priorities over its moral responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>

### British Interests and Intelligence on Nazi Atrocities in the First Phase of the War

In 1940, the Madagascar Plan emerged as a central element of Nazi policy, proposing the mass deportation of Europe's Jewish population to the island of Madagascar. Originally conceived in the 1930s, even before Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany, the plan gained traction among key Nazi policymakers, including Himmler, Göring, Ribbentrop, and Julius Streicher.<sup>6</sup> The idea of deporting Jews to Madagascar resurfaced during the early successes of the German military campaign against France. The swift and decisive German victories created a temporary window of opportunity, as France's defeat made Madagascar, a French colony, potentially accessible. However, the plan's feasibility relied on more than military success. Control of Madagascar required Britain's agreement or acquiescence, as its dominance over sea routes to the Indian Ocean was crucial for implementing such a large-scale deportation.<sup>7</sup> British intelligence became aware of the Madagascar Plan through intercepted communications and intelligence reports. They regarded the plan as both impractical and a strategic threat. Madagascar's location on the flank of British trade and reinforcement routes off the eastern coast of Africa made its potential use by Germany a significant danger to British bases in North Africa and the Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup> For the Nazis, the failure of the Madagascar Plan coincided with their shift toward the "Final Solution", abandoning deportation in favour of extermination.<sup>9</sup>

Following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, British intelligence began receiving credible reports of Nazi atrocities against Jews. Intercepted communica-

3 National Archives Kew, PRO, FO 371/24085, letter from the Home Office, Aliens Department, 30 August 1939.

4 Yad Vashem Archives, O.75/3282, correspondence regarding reception in England of Simon Markel and Greta Dukat.

5 National Archives Kew, PRO, FO 371/24085, British Foreign Office, 23 November 1938; Jennifer Craig-Norton, "Contesting Memory: New Perspectives on the Kindertransport" (PhD diss., University of Southampton, 2014), 12–16; London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933–1948*, 13–14.

6 Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution* (Knopf, 1991), 61; Arno J. Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?: The "Final Solution" in History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 195–197.

7 National Archives Kew, PRO, CAB 121/622, "Correspondence on Madagascar Plan", 1940.

8 Yad Vashem Archives, O.51/115, Ernst Wormann on Rademacher's message of cancelling the Madagascar Plan, 14 February 1942.

9 Yad Vashem Archives, M69/9254, "Pan-arische Bewegung Vorschlag zur Gruendung eines Judenstaates auf Madagascar".

tions, escapee testimonies, and resistance network reports painted a grim picture of systematic persecution and mass murder. By November 1941, the British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Stafford Cripps, reported that approximately 1.5 million Jews had “disappeared” in Nazi-occupied Poland. Further corroboration came in January 1942 with a telegram from Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet foreign secretary, which detailed mass executions in the Kiev region, apparently referring to the Babi Yar massacre. These accounts compelled British officials to confront the reality of Nazi extermination policies, though their responses remained cautious.<sup>10</sup> By mid-1942, information such as the “Bund Report” and the Riegner Telegram had provided extensive evidence of the Holocaust. Eduard Schulte’s testimony, transmitted via Gerhart Riegner, the representative of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva, revealed Hitler’s plans for the systematic extermination of European Jewry. British officials received these reports with scepticism, reluctant to accept the unprecedented scale of Nazi crimes without further verification.<sup>11</sup>

The sinking of the Struma in February 1942 epitomised the tragic consequences of Britain’s restrictive immigration policies during the Holocaust and created public relations challenges for the British government. The Struma, a ship carrying over 769 Jewish refugees from Romania, sought asylum in Mandatory Palestine but was detained in Istanbul due to British enforcement of the White Paper of 1939. Despite appeals from Jewish organisations and Turkish authorities, Britain denied entry to the refugees. Shortly after the vessel was towed back to the Black Sea, it was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine, killing all but one passenger.<sup>12</sup> The Struma disaster provoked widespread condemnation, especially from Jewish communities in Britain, Washington and the Yishuv in Palestine. This tragedy further intensified anti-British sentiment within the Yishuv, contributing to a growing radicalisation among segments of the Jewish community.<sup>13</sup> The assassination attempt on High Commissioner Harold McMichael in 1944 by members of the Lehi underground organisation can, in part, be traced to the frustration and anger stemming from events like the Struma which they found him responsible for.<sup>14</sup>

In response to escalating atrocities in Europe, the Biltmore Conference, held in New York in May 1942, marked a significant turning point in Zionist strategy during World War II for the coordination of efforts to address the Jewish crisis. The conference brought together Zionist leaders to reevaluate their objectives, and the centrepiece of the conference was the “Biltmore Declaration”, which formally endorsed the establishment of a Jewish Commonwealth in Palestine. This declaration underscored a strategic pivot within the Zionist movement, orchestrated largely by David Ben-Gurion, to prioritise American support over British alignment.<sup>15</sup> Ben-Gurion’s

10 Shlomo Aronson, *Hitler, the Allies, and the Jews* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 112–113. For more on Cripps and Eden’s visit to Moscow on November 1941, see Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Stafford Cripps’ Mission to Moscow, 1940–1942* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 269–276.

11 Yad Vashem Archive, O.33/10200 Samuel Scheps Correspondence regarding the Riegner Telegram; P.34/4019698 Stephen Wise collection; M.10.ARI/937, The Bund Report.

12 Yad Vashem, O.11/65, “Megilat Struma (The Struma Scroll)”, published by the Association of Romanian Immigrants to Eretz Israel, Jerusalem, 1942; O.41/619/7021374, Lists of Jewish passengers on the “Struma” ship.

13 “Struma: Telegram to the High Commissioner, Jerusalem, From: Boyd, Colonial Office, Palestine Desk”, 5/3/1942, “Shiva for the Struma Disaster: Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Histadrut, Tel Aviv, March 1, 1942”, in Yaakov Sharett, ed., *Political Struggle 1942 January–May: An Anthology of Speeches and Documents from Moshe Sharett*, vol. 1, part 1 [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Moshe Sharett Heritage Association, 2014), 213–237.

14 Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939–1945* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, Tel Aviv 1979), 123–134.

15 Ken Stein, “The Biltmore Program”, *Center for Israel Education* (February 2011).

advocacy in the United States for Zionist self-determination capitalised on America's emerging global influence and the growing political power of American Jewry. His foresight in aligning with American Zionists, while strategically distancing the movement from Britain's increasingly hostile stance, proved instrumental in reshaping Zionist policy.<sup>16</sup> For Zionist leaders, the Biltmore Declaration became a rallying cry, galvanising support for statehood as the only viable solution to the Jewish plight. The horrors of the Holocaust imbued the movement with a renewed sense of urgency, as leaders recognised that the survival of European Jewry required a sovereign Jewish state.<sup>17</sup> The abandonment of the Jews at the onset of this drama impelled Ben-Gurion to take an "activist" stance towards the British. The Biltmore Program became a de facto foundation stone even though it had been conceived before the full gravity of the Holocaust was known.<sup>18</sup>

In August 1942, Churchill, accompanied by Cripps, still the British ambassador to the Soviet Union, travelled to Moscow primarily to strengthen Allied cooperation with the Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup> The discussions revolved around operational military strategies, particularly the delay in opening a second front in Europe and the forthcoming Allied invasion of North Africa, Operation Torch. Both leaders emphasised the need to defeat Nazi Germany as the overriding priority. Churchill acknowledged Nazi crimes during his discussions with Stalin, but this acknowledgment was framed within broader denunciations of Nazi brutality rather than specific mentions of Jewish suffering.<sup>20</sup> Stalin's interest in Nazi atrocities was generally tied to Soviet losses and the treatment of Soviet citizens under German occupation. Stalin expressed outrage at Nazi crimes in general but did not specifically focus on the Jewish genocide during these talks.<sup>21</sup>

Beginning in October 1942, the Battle of El Alamein marked a pivotal moment in the North African campaign. The British triumph ended a period that was later referred to as the "200 Days of Dread" by the journalist Haviv Canaan, who coined the term in his 1974 book on the topic. For the Yishuv in Palestine, this victory brought an end to months of fear and uncertainty, during which the possibility of a Nazi invasion loomed large.<sup>22</sup> The "200 Days", spanning from the spring to the autumn of 1942, saw the Yishuv gripped by anxiety as Axis forces advanced dangerously close to the borders of Palestine. The rapid progress of Rommel's forces through North Africa posed a direct threat to the Jewish population in British-controlled Palestine. Jewish leaders feared that a Nazi invasion would result in mass deportation or extermination, mirroring the horrors unfolding in Europe. In response, emergency preparations were initiated, including the development of defence strategies such as the "Plan of the North", also known as "Masada on Mt. Carmel". This plan, referencing the ancient Jewish stronghold of Masada, envisioned a final stand in the Haifa area

16 David Ben Gurion, *Bamaaracha*, vol. 4 [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1957), 43–44.

17 National Archives Kew, CO 733/444/17, Biltmore Resolutions: reactions in World Zionism; ACC/3121/C/14/023, Biltmore Resolution: British and American messages and resolutions of support for a Jewish Home in Palestine especially British Zionist support for American Zionists.

18 Shlomo Aronson, *David Ben-Gurion and the Jewish Renaissance* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 168–172.

19 Martin H. Folly, *Seeking Comradeship: Winston Churchill's Quest for a Warrior Alliance and His Mission to Stalin, August 1942* (London: Brunel University, 2007), 267–269.

20 Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol.4: *The Hinge of Fate* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), 478–479.

21 National Archives Kew, CAB 65/27/34, The Prime Minister – Visit to the Middle East and Moscow, August 1942.

22 Chaviv Cna'an, *200 Days of Anxiety: Palestine Facing Rommel's Army*, Tel Aviv [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Mol-Art, 1974), 172–176.

should the British retreat in the face of a German advance.<sup>23</sup> These preparations reflected the Yishuv's growing awareness of the existential threat posed by the Axis powers and its determination to ensure its own survival. The British victory at El Alamein not only averted an immediate existential threat but also reinforced the Yishuv's confidence in Britain's capacity to counter Nazi advances.<sup>24</sup>

In November 1942, a rare opportunity arose as the British government orchestrated a diplomatic exchange that resulted in the rescue of seventy-eight Jewish individuals from Nazi-occupied Europe. These Jews, primarily women and children holding British mandatory passports, were exchanged for sixty-nine German Templers – members of a Protestant sect residing in Palestine. This exchange was among the few direct British efforts to save Jewish lives during the Holocaust, if not the only one. The rescued Jews arrived in British-mandated Palestine, bringing with them detailed testimonies of Nazi atrocities. Their accounts described the dire conditions in Warsaw and Piotrków, as well as the systematic deportations to extermination camps such as Treblinka, Sobibor, and Auschwitz. They also provided critical information about deportations from Western European cities, including Berlin and Vienna, to Nazi-controlled areas in the East.<sup>25</sup> This operation was significant both for its humanitarian impact and the intelligence it provided, but further revelations were yet to come. In October 1942, Jan Karski, a member of the Polish underground, undertook a daring mission to deliver firsthand accounts of the Holocaust to Allied leaders. Having witnessed the horrors of the Warsaw Ghetto and a Nazi transit camp, Karski provided vivid and harrowing descriptions of the systematic extermination of Jews.<sup>26</sup> Karski's mission brought him to London, where he met with senior British officials, including Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. Despite the urgency of Karski's accounts, British leaders received his reports with scepticism, regarding the details of Nazi crimes as difficult to substantiate. British reluctance stemmed partly from the unprecedented scale of the atrocities Karski described and concerns over potential accusations of exaggeration or propaganda.<sup>27</sup> Despite this restraint, Karski's testimony underscored the urgency of the situation, pressuring Britain to consider some form of action.

On 17 December 1942, the Allied governments issued a joint declaration condemning the Nazi regime's systematic extermination of Jews. Drawing on intelligence gathered from diplomatic reports, underground networks, and escapee testimonies, the declaration represented the first coordinated acknowledgment of the Holocaust by the Allies. It marked a significant moment in Allied wartime rhetoric, even though concrete rescue initiatives remained limited.<sup>28</sup> Eden presented the declaration before the House of Commons, describing Nazi atrocities as “a crime without a name”.<sup>29</sup> The

23 National Archives Kew, HW 1/717, Government Code: Signals Intelligence Passed to the Prime Minister, Messages and Correspondence. North Africa: Panzer Army report for July 9, El Alamein; Uri Brenner, ed., *Facing the Threat of a German Invasion to the Land of Israel, 1940–1942* (Ramat Gan: Yad Tabenkin, 1981), 95–112.

24 Gerhard L. Weinberg, “Two Separate Issues? Historiography of World War II and the Holocaust”, in *Holocaust Historiography in Context*, eds. David Bankier and Dan Michman (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008), 386–388.

25 Dina Porat, “First Testimonies on the Holocaust? The Problematic Nature of the Conveying and Absorbing Them, and the Reaction in the Yishuv”, in *Holocaust Historiography in Context*, eds. David Bankier and Dan Michman (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008), 438–439; Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe*, 186–187.

26 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the Republic of Poland, “The Mass Extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland, Official Government-documented Alert about the Holocaust and Genocide of Poles Addressed to the Wartime Allies” (New York, London, and Melbourne: Hutchinson & Co., 1942).

27 Yad Vashem Archives, P.42/5083566, Jan Karski Collection.

28 National Archives Kew, RG-59/740.00116, “Allied Joint Declaration Text”, 17 December 1942.

29 “Persecution of the Jews: Allies Declaration”, *UK Parliament – Commons Sitting*, HL Deb, 17 December 1942, vol. 125, cc607-12.

declaration pledged to hold Nazi perpetrators accountable and condemned the extermination of Jews as a barbaric act. However, it fell short of committing to specific rescue initiatives, as Britain and other Allied governments emphasised that military victory over Nazi Germany remained their priority. Nonetheless, the declaration laid the groundwork for future war crimes trials, including the Nuremberg Trials, by establishing a framework for holding perpetrators accountable.<sup>30</sup>

### British Responses to Atrocities: Action amid Awareness

The Casablanca Conference, held in January 1943, marked a pivotal moment in Allied wartime strategy. Convened by Churchill and Roosevelt, the conference was notable for the absence of Stalin, who was unable to attend due to the ongoing Battle of Stalingrad and the swift timetable, which made the journey from Moscow to Morocco impractical. The timing of the conference was strategically significant.<sup>31</sup> The Americans and British, wary of a repeat of the 1917 Brest-Litovsk Treaty, when the Soviets signed a separate peace with Germany during World War I, sought to preempt any potential overtures from Stalin to negotiate with Hitler. The unprecedented attrition of both German and Soviet forces at Stalingrad heightened these fears, amplifying concerns that Stalin might end the Eastern Front conflict on terms favourable to the Soviet Union but detrimental to Allied unity. Therefore, they seemed comfortable with his absence from the conference.<sup>32</sup>

To solidify Allied policy and create a *fait accompli*, the Casablanca Conference swiftly adopted the doctrine of “unconditional surrender”. This resolution ensured that no peace negotiations with the Axis powers would occur, either collectively or separately, and reinforced the Allies’ commitment to the complete defeat of Nazism and Fascism.<sup>33</sup> However, by precluding the possibility of negotiated settlements, the policy had direct implications for Jewish rescue efforts. Negotiations with Nazi leaders to save Jewish lives became virtually impossible under this framework.<sup>34</sup> Churchill’s single-minded determination to pulverise and punish Germany played directly into the hands of Joseph Goebbels and Stalin. The Nazi propaganda minister exploited the Allied demand for unconditional surrender, along with the vindictive Morgenthau Plan, to convince Germans that surrender would mean annihilation for their nation, thus fuelling a determination to fight to the death. Meanwhile, Eisenhower later argued that the demand for unconditional surrender at Casablanca prolonged the war by years, costing countless lives. The destruction of Germany, to which Churchill was deeply committed, created a power vacuum in Europe that Stalin inevitably filled.<sup>35</sup>

In April 1943, the Central Leadership of the Movement of Working Classes in Poland sent an urgent appeal to the British Labour Party, detailing the systematic

30 Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* (New York: Holt, 1981), 93–105.

31 Yaron Pasher, “Ideological Logistics: Between the Final Solution and the German War Machine”, *Bishvil Hazikaron* no. 38 [in Hebrew], *Journal for Holocaust Education and Studies* (2021), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem: 30–31.

32 Liddell Hart-Military Archives, Kings College London, Allan Brook 6/1/1, *Casablanca Conference January 1943: Papers and Minutes of Meetings*, edited and printed by the office of the combined Chiefs of staff 1943, Paper 156: “Suggested Procedure for Dealing with the Agenda of the Conference”; Paper 162/2: “Draft Telegram from the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Great Britain to Premier Stalin”.

33 National Archives Kew, DEFE 2/1013, Strategy for 1943 laid down at the Casablanca Conference.

34 Richard Overy, *Blood and Ruins: The Last Imperial War, 1931–1945* (London: Allan Lane, 2021), 268–269.

35 Patrick J. Buchanan, *Churchill, Hitler and the Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World* (New York Crown, 2008), 405–407; Robert Sherwood, *The White House Papers of Harry L. Hopkins*, vol. 2: *January 1942–July 1945* (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1949), 665–695.

atrocities perpetrated by the Germans in occupied Poland. They described the displacement and mass murder of Polish peasants and Jews, including the massacre of 1.5 million Jews and the horrors of extermination camps such as Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Majdanek. The letter criticised Allied warnings of post-war retribution as insufficient to deter German barbarity, urging immediate and decisive action, including reprisals against German civilian centres to hold the German population accountable for Nazi crimes.<sup>36</sup> Clement Attlee, leader of the British Labour Party, responded with sympathy and admiration, commending the Polish resistance for its courage and steadfastness in the face of brutal oppression. He reaffirmed Allied solidarity and the strategic importance of the air raids on German cities, emphasising the contributions of Polish airmen to the war effort. However, the indifference and inaction to the suffering in Europe were not confined to the Conservative Party; Labour's response, while empathetic, reflected the same constraints of prioritising military strategy over direct humanitarian intervention, revealing a broader pattern in British wartime policy.<sup>37</sup>

In April 1943, the British and Americans convened the Bermuda Conference to address the worsening refugee crisis caused by the escalating atrocities of Nazi persecution. Held in the isolated location of Hamilton, Bermuda, the conference occurred against the backdrop of a turning tide in the war, particularly following the Soviet victory at Stalingrad and increasing public pressure in Britain and the United States to rescue Jewish refugees. However, the conference was organised more to calm public opinion rather than produce meaningful action.<sup>38</sup> The conference opened on 19 April 1943, ironically the same day as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, underscoring the urgency of the refugee crisis. Yet, the timing only amplified its disappointing outcomes. Despite expectations for decisive action, the conference marked the culmination of efforts by senior officials in Britain and the United States to thwart a move towards more effective action to save European Jewry. British and American delegations approached the discussions with predetermined constraints. Richard Law, leading the British delegation, emphasised logistical challenges, particularly the alleged shortage of ships to transport refugees. The British flatly refused to amend the restrictive immigration quotas imposed by the 1939 White Paper, citing geopolitical concerns about destabilising Palestine and the broader Middle East.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, no Jewish organisations were allowed to participate in the conference, a deliberate decision to distance the proceedings from external pressure. Closed-door sessions lasted for nine days, concluding without any concrete measures to alleviate Jewish suffering.<sup>40</sup> The Bermuda Conference's location itself reflected the Allies' reluctance to address the issue transparently. Held far from major population centres, it was "intended to distance the conference from the press and public opinion", ensuring minimal scrutiny.<sup>41</sup>

The Transnistria Ransom Plan, proposed in December 1942, reflected both the desperate plight of Jews deported to the Romanian-controlled region and the com-

36 National Archives Kew, FO371/34550, letter from the Central Leadership of the Movement of Working Classes in Poland to Attlee.

37 National Archives Kew, FO 371/34550, 14 April 1943, letter from Attlee to the Central Leadership of the Movement of Working Classes in Poland in response to their request for action.

38 David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941–1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 104–106.

39 Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe*, 159–163.

40 Michael Makowsky, *Churchill's Promised Land: Zionism and Statecraft* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 189.

41 National Archives Kew, CO 323/1846/14, "Conference in Bermuda: proceedings, April 1943".

plex geopolitical constraints that hindered their rescue. Romanian officials signalled their willingness to release 70,000 surviving Jews from the death trap of Transnistria after 180,000 Jews had already perished, in exchange for a substantial ransom and arrangements for safe emigration.<sup>42</sup> The plan, though initiated by Romanian authorities, was quickly thwarted when the Germans, under whose influence Romania operated, opposed the scheme upon learning of it. However, it was not only the Germans who halted the plan. Britain and the United States, meanwhile, refused to cooperate, adhering to policies prohibiting negotiations with Axis powers and the transfer of funds into occupied territories, a stance directly shaped by the Casablanca Conference resolution of “unconditional surrender”. British officials were also concerned about violating the 1939 White Paper quotas. Consequently, the plan collapsed by March 1943, leading to the abandonment of hopes for large-scale rescue operations from the region.<sup>43</sup>

The Allies’ response to the “Auschwitz Protocols” of Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler remains one of the most controversial moral and strategic failures of World War II.<sup>44</sup> Reaching Allied leaders on 26 June 1944 from British representatives in Bern, discussions within the British and American governments focused on the feasibility of bombing Auschwitz or its railway lines, as appealed for by Jewish organisations.<sup>45</sup> While Jewish leaders, including members of the World Jewish Congress and figures such as Chaim Weizmann and Moshe Shertok (Sharett), petitioned for military intervention, allied officials rejected these appeals.<sup>46</sup> The United States Department of War, in a letter dated June 1944, argued that such an operation would “divert resources from the broader war effort” and questioned its military effectiveness.<sup>47</sup> However, Martin Gilbert and other historians have noted that Allied bombers regularly targeted industrial zones in close proximity to Auschwitz, with photographic reconnaissance clearly showing the gas chambers.<sup>48</sup> While Churchill expressed support for proposals to bomb the camp, the British Air Ministry and the United States’ military ultimately opposed such actions. In Gilbert’s assessment, the failure to bomb Auschwitz reflected indifference rather than operational constraints. The refusal to act was compounded by fears of collateral damage and concerns about being accused of prioritising Jewish lives over the broader war effort. As Barbara Rogers has argued, declassified documents show that British intelligence knew of Auschwitz’s function as early as 1942, which challenges Gilbert’s earlier conclusions that the camp’s role remained a secret until 1944.<sup>49</sup>

The assassination of Lord Moyne, the British minister of state in the Middle East, on 6 November 1944, marked another pivotal moment in British-Zionist relations. Moyne, a close associate of Winston Churchill, had been a staunch enforcer of Britain’s restrictive 1939 White Paper, which severely limited Jewish immigration to Pal-

42 Tuvia Friling, *Arrows in the Dark: David Ben-Gurion, the Yishuv Leadership, and Rescue Attempts During the Holocaust*, vol. 1 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 196.

43 *Ibid.*, 202–204; Dina Porat, *An Entangled Leadership: The Yishuv and the Holocaust 1942–1945* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1986), 309–311, 317–320, 328.

44 Rudolf Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz* [in Hebrew] (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1998), 290–321. See full Auschwitz Protocols by Vrba and Wetzler.

45 Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* (New York: Holt, 1981), 231, 290–292.

46 Yehuda Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations, 1933–1945* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2001), 240–241.

47 Zohar Segev, “Rethinking the Dilemma of Bombing Auschwitz”, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 111, no. 2 (2021): 267.

48 John S. Conway, review of Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, *American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (2001): 1071–1072.

49 Barbara Rogers, “British Intelligence and the Holocaust: *Auschwitz and the Allies* Re-Examined”, *The Journal of Holocaust Education* 8, no. 1 (1999): 89–106.



estine. For segments of the *Yishuv*, particularly militant factions like Lehi (the Stern Gang), Moyne represented the embodiment of British obstruction to Jewish rescue and statehood during the Holocaust.<sup>50</sup> Lehi operatives Eliahu Bet-Zuri and Eliahu Hakim ambushed Moyne outside his Cairo residence, fatally shooting him and his driver. The assassins were quickly apprehended, tried, and executed by Egyptian authorities.<sup>51</sup> Moyne's killing prompted a sharp reaction from Churchill, who privately expressed profound anger at what he termed "an odious act of ingratitude", particularly given Britain's wartime sacrifices. The minutes from a war cabinet meeting on 20 November 1944 reflect that the "Prime minister raises the Question whether it is really wise that the drastic action for Lord Moyne's assassination calls, should be directed against the whole Jewish community in Palestine".<sup>52</sup>

However, the context of Moyne's assassination is inseparable from the desperation surrounding the Holocaust and Britain's refusal to reconsider immigration policies. During one of Joel Brand's negotiations over Eichmann's "Blood for Goods" proposal – the Nazi scheme to exchange up to one million Jews for trucks and goods which rolled into creating the Kastner affair, Moyne reportedly questioned "[w]hat can I do with a million Jews? Where can I put them?" This dismissive stance, relayed by Brand, became emblematic of Britain's perceived indifference to the plight of European Jews, further fuelling tensions within the *Yishuv*. Moyne's death also led to a notable shift in Churchill's tone toward Zionist issues. Publicly, Churchill condemned the assassination and urged the execution of the perpetrators, yet the event prompted him to reconsider Britain's position on Jewish affairs. It appears Churchill's correspondences following Moyne's death reflected increasing frostiness, with his rhetoric on Jewish matters becoming more cautious and restrained. By early 1945, Churchill's focus remained squarely on military objectives, sidelining Holocaust-related issues despite emerging reports of genocide from eastern Europe.<sup>53</sup>

### The Final Stages of War

The British-*Yishuv* paratrooper missions of World War II exemplified a complex partnership forged by overlapping yet divergent wartime objectives. Between 1943 and 1944, the British trained and dispatched thirty-seven Jewish paratroopers from the *Yishuv* into Nazi-occupied Europe. Figures such as Hannah Szenes, Haviva Reik, and Enzo Sereni became iconic for their bravery, despite the high-risk nature and ultimately limited success of these missions.<sup>54</sup> From the British perspective, these missions served practical wartime purposes: by using the paratroopers' knowledge of eastern European languages, they were engaged in gathering intelligence in enemy-occupied territories, establishing connections with local resistance groups, and aiding downed Allied pilots. Intelligence operations in occupied Europe were

50 Yaakov Sharett, ed., "Meeting of the Limited Zionist Working Committee, Jerusalem, 24/9/1942", *Moshe Sharett: Political Struggle 1942 June–December: An Anthology of Speeches and Documents*, vol. 1, part 2, 418–420.

51 National Archives Kew, FO 954/5D/688m Egypt: Foreign Office telegram to Cairo No 230. From Prime Minister and Secretary of State both assassins of Lord Moyne must be executed.

52 National Archives Kew, PRO, Premiere 4/51/11.

53 Richard Breitman, *Other Responses to the Holocaust: US Intelligence and the Nazis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 45–71; Makowsky, *Churchill's Promised Land*, 216–219; National Archives Kew, PRO: PREM 4/52/3, Dr. Weizmann and Jewish Agency 1941 Apr.–1945 Jun., *Private Correspondence Between Churchill and Eden*, 18 January 1945.

54 Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe*, 240–241.

critical for the broader Allied strategy, particularly as Britain sought to maintain contact with partisan movements disrupting German logistics.<sup>55</sup> For the Yishuv, these missions embodied both humanitarian and national aspirations. Paratroopers were tasked with establishing ties with Jewish communities, assessing the fate of European Jews, and encouraging resistance efforts.<sup>56</sup> Above all, these missions reveal the meticulous intelligence Britain possessed about the tragedy unfolding in Nazi-occupied territories.

Following the paratroopers' mission, the establishment of the Jewish Brigade in 1944 marked a significant moment in the relationship between Britain and the Yishuv during World War II. Approved by Churchill after persistent lobbying by the Yishuv leadership, the brigade became the first Jewish military unit officially recognised under British command. Its creation served dual purposes: meeting British wartime needs and advancing Zionist aspirations for Jewish recognition and statehood.<sup>57</sup> Beyond its military contributions, the brigade played a key humanitarian role. After the war, brigade members were active in the Brichah movement, facilitating the escape of thousands of Holocaust survivors from displaced persons camps across Europe and their illegal immigration to Palestine. These efforts demonstrated the Yishuv's dual commitment to Jewish rescue and state-building.<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, by the time the brigade was established, its 5,000 members only witnessed the final moments of the war in northern Italy at Trieste, where they successfully subdued a German Wehrmacht division.<sup>59</sup> This outcome inevitably raises questions about what more could have been accomplished had the British approved its establishment earlier in the war.<sup>60</sup>

Returning to the Casablanca Conference resolutions, the "unconditional surrender" policy, which eliminated any prospect of separate peace agreements with Nazi Germany, was driven by a desire to avoid post-war ambiguity or compromise. This policy had significant implications for subsequent military and humanitarian negotiations, creating a strict diplomatic framework that precluded formal engagements with Nazi officials, even when opportunities arose to weaken the German war effort or save lives.<sup>61</sup> Against this backdrop, Operation Sunrise emerged in early 1945 as a clandestine initiative involving SS General Karl Wolff and American OSS officer Allen Dulles. Wolff, as Himmler's deputy and supreme SS and police commander in Italy, offered to negotiate the surrender of German forces in northern Italy to the Western Allies.<sup>62</sup> While the proposal promised substantial strategic gains by hastening the collapse of Nazi resistance, it posed a serious dilemma for the Allies. Engaging with Wolff, a high-ranking Nazi implicated in war crimes, risked undermining the Casablanca principle and alienating the Soviet Union, which remained excluded

55 Judith Tydor Baumel, "The Heroism of Hannah Senesz: An Exercise in Creating Collective National Memory in the State of Israel", *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, no. 3 (1996), 522–524.

56 Porat, *An Entangled Leadership*, 404–405, 413–417.

57 National Archives Kew, CO 733/468/5, Jewish Fighting Force: formation of a Jewish Brigade Group; Dr Weizmann's proposals.

58 Yehuda Bauer, *Flight and Rescue: Brichah* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 1970), 304–306.

59 National Archives Kew, WO 170/4488, Jewish Brigade: H.Q., 1945 Jan.–June.

60 Ben-Gurion, *Bamaaracha*, vol.3, 173–178; Tom Segev, *Palestine under the British* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 365–366.

61 "Mr. Alexander C. Kirk, Political Adviser on the Staff of the Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean Theater, to the Secretary of State," "The Acting Secretary of State to the Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Hariman)", in *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1945, vol 3: European Advisory Commission, Austria, Germany*, eds. William Slany et al. (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1968), 722–724.

62 Martin Moll, "Lingen, Kerstin von, SS und Secret Service. „Verschwörung des Schweigens“ – Die Akte Karl Wolff", *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte* 128, no. 1 (2011): 273–276.

from these negotiations.<sup>63</sup> While pragmatic military interests compelled them to consider Wolff's surrender proposal, they remained bound to the Casablanca principle of unconditional surrender, complicating any formal engagement. Ultimately, the negotiations proceeded covertly, achieving the German surrender in Italy on 2 May 1945. However, Operation Sunrise's success came at a cost. Wolff's cooperation during the negotiations insulated him from full accountability for his role in Nazi atrocities, as post-war efforts to prosecute him as well as Albert Ganzenmüller, the undersecretary of transport in Germany and head of the Reichsbahn, were obstructed by political and intelligence considerations tied to the Cold War.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

British policy during World War II played a pivotal role in shaping the fate of European Jews, as it navigated the competing demands of imperial interests, military strategy, and humanitarian responsibility. Central to this policy was the White Paper of 1939, which severely restricted Jewish immigration to Palestine, effectively closing one of the few escape routes available to Holocaust victims. This stance reflected Britain's broader commitment to maintaining stability in the Middle East, even as evidence of Nazi atrocities mounted. The Madagascar Plan, while never realised, further illustrates Britain's critical role in thwarting Nazi demographic ambitions. British control of sea routes made the plan infeasible, highlighting how imperial interests indirectly influenced Nazi policies and the eventual shift to the Final Solution. Yet, Britain's reluctance to confront Nazi policies head-on was solidified at the Casablanca Conference in 1943, where the resolution of unconditional surrender precluded negotiations with Axis powers, effectively eliminating opportunities for rescue efforts like the Transnistria Ransom Plan or Joel Brand's "Blood for Goods" proposal. While Britain occasionally demonstrated moral action, such as through the Kindertransport, its broader policies, rooted in strategic priorities and imperial considerations, left European Jews with few avenues for escape or survival. These choices underscore the profound consequences of political inaction in the face of humanitarian catastrophe, highlighting the far-reaching consequences of prioritising strategy over humanitarian aid.

63 Kerstin von Lingen, "Conspiracy of Silence: How the Old Boys of American Intelligence Shielded SS General Karl Wolff from Prosecution", *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 22, no. 1 (2008): 74–77.

64 Staatsarchiv München, Staatsanwaltschaften 34865/75 fol. 888 ff; Prozess gegen Karl Wolff; Zeugenvernehmung von Albert Ganzenmüller.

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