The birth of Israel

Long, longroad

Anonymous Soldiers: The Struggle for

Israel, 1917-1947.

I

SRAEL’S creation has many causes, but

among the most powerful, argues Bruce

Hoffman, is terrorism. For a decade, the

anonymous soldiers of the Jewish under-

ground waged a terror campaign to estab-

lish a state, targeting first Arabs, then Brit-

ish forces, then Arabsagain.

Mr Hoffman has worked for the CIA

and American forces in Baghdad, and he

established the Handa Centre forthe Study

of Terrorism and Political Violence at St

AndrewsUniversity. Although he dismiss-

essome Arab militantsofthe age asatavis-

tic marauders out to “kill as many Jews as

possible”, he maintains a thinly veiled ad-

miration for the Jewish irregulars whose

plan to upsetBritain’s25-yearrule ofPales-

tine he describesas“unequivocallytrium-

phant” and “brilliant in its simplicity”.

“Terrorism,” Mr Hoffman writes, “can, in

the right conditions and with the appro-

priate strategy and tactics, succeed in

attaining at least some of its practitioners’

fundamental aims.”

In its infancy, the Jewish Yishuv, or set-

tlement, cheered asBritain assiduously set

about fulfilling Lord Balfour’s promise to

create a Jewish homeland in Palestine. As

the Yishuv’s power grew, however, Brit-

ain’s presence became more of a hin-

drance than a help to its aspirations for

statehood. By1945, its prime military arm,

the Haganah (or“Defence”), wasa 40,000-

strong force—the most powerful in the

Middle East afterthe British army. The Ha-

ganah was against using force to end Brit-

ish rule, but two ofits offshoots, the Irgun

and Lehi, had no such qualms.

Some of the Irgun’s 3,500 men were

battle-hardened, having fought together

with the British army during the second

world war. Others, like its leader, Mena-

chem Begin, were officers with the exiled

Polish army. In 1944 theysetaboutfighting

Britain’s occupation of Palestine much as

theyhad the Nazi occupation ofEurope.

By1947 theyhad killed almost300 peo-

ple, many of them civilians, invented the

letterbomb and used milkchurns to blow

up Britain’s seat of government in Pales-

tine, the KingDavid Hotel. Over90 people,

many ofthem civilians, were killed in the

attack, which ranked asthe world’sbloodi-

est terrorist atrocity for four decades. The

Irgun targeted British symbolsto puncture

itsprestige, while the smallerLehi targeted

itspersonnel.

The British government, fresh from lib-

erating Jews from Nazi death camps, was

stunned to find so manynowturningon it,

wanting to hasten the collapse ofBritain’s

Middle East rule. Using declassified docu-

ments, Mr Hoffman explains how the Ha-

ganah’s crack force, the Palmach, bank-

rolled the Irgun and seconded 460 men to

its ranks. For a time, they formally joined

forces in a wider front, bombing railways

and approving the attack on the King Da-

vid Hotel. While Chaim Weizmann, presi-

dent of the World Zionist Organisation,

wasentertainingBritish high commission-

ersfortea, hisnephewand subsequent de-

fence minister, EzerWeizman, wasplotting

to blow up Evelyn Barker, commander of

Britain’sforcesin Palestine.

Exhausted byworld war, Britain lacked

the stomach, money and will to fight. Its

100,000 troops in Palestine turned down-

town Jerusalem into a fortified camp

ringed with barbed wire, imposed cur-

fews, checked pass papers and engaged in

crass anti-Semitism. But they were ham-

strung by America’s support for Zionism.

PresidentRoosevelt’swife, Eleanor, helped

fundraise forthe Irgun, sponsoringa chari-

tyrun ofa Broadwayplay. Itstarred Marlon

Brando, who celebrated the “new Jewish

language” ofbulletsnotprayers.

Derided by Congress, Britain flinched

from the methodsithad used on an earlier

Arab revolt. The Royal Air Force dropped

bombson ArabsnotJews, and the army set

abouttryingto demolish much ofold Arab

Jaffa with gelignite, buttheyspared Jewish

houses until a few months shy of ceding

Britain’s mandate. (Mr Hoffman says the

British did not hit Arabs hard enough, and

wastoo tough on Jews.)

Somewhatoddly, MrHoffman stopshis

account in August 1947, shortly before

Begin’s militants went back to bombing

Arabsin theircinemasand cafés, and Lehi

killed Count Folke Bernadotte, a Swedish

diplomat who had saved Jews from Nazi

death campsand who, atthe time, was the

UN’senvoyto Palestine.

Disappointingly, also, the book lacks a

concluding chapter analysing the terro-

rists’ legacy. Mr Hoffman notes that Begin

and Lehi’s leader, Yitzhak Yezernitzky (lat-

erShamir), became Israeli prime ministers.

And he makes passing reference to the Ir-

gun’s operations chief, whose daughter,

Tzipi Livni, became foreign minister. Buthe

iscircumspecton whatpracticesaswell as

personnel survived the passage to state-

hood. (In 1946, Lehi assassinsdressed up as

tennis players to kill a British detective,

ThomasMartin, a disguise lateradopted to

kill a Hamasoperative in Dubai.)

On the Haganah’s broader influence,

MrHoffman notesthatal-Qaeda’sAfghan

library had a copy ofBegin’s “The Revolt”,

but does not askwhy so many Palestinian

prisonerstake Israeli universitycourses on

how Jews established their state. Much of

what they do, including building terror

tunnels, bombing transport nodes, lob-

bing mortars at residential neighbour-

hoods and burying arms dumps in places

ofworship, hasantecedentsin Jewish mili-

tancy. Israel knows Palestinian methods

and ithasan arrayofanti-terrorlegislation

which, had Britain responded similarly,

mighthave aborted the future state.