

## The *Patria* Affair: Moderates vs. Activists in Mapai in the 1940s\*

Meir Chazan

On 25 November 1940, Jews planted a bomb on the aging and rickety ship *Patria*, anchored in Haifa harbor, in a bid to prevent its departure. At the time, there were some 1,900 Jewish refugees on board, whom the British had denied entry to Palestine and were planning to deport to detention camps on the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. Some 267 persons lost their lives when the *Patria* sunk. Engraved on the memorial stone in Haifa's old cemetery at the foot of the graves of the victims of the blast is an inscription taken from Psalms 124:2, 5: "When men rose up against us.... Then the seething waters passed over our souls."<sup>1</sup> This article examines the fierce controversy generated by the *Patria* affair, which was a crucial juncture in the history of the illegal immigration to Palestine.

Jewish life in Palestine constituted the purpose of the Zionist dream and the precondition for its realization. The possibility of bringing Jews to Palestine was severely curtailed by the stringent restrictions on Jewish immigration in the White Paper published by the British government in May 1939 and the spread of World War II to the Mediterranean theater in 1940. Against this background, the political organizations of the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine) became divided on the question of what measures should be taken in view of Britain's retreat from its promise to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine. In this period, two major factions concerning the use of force had evolved in Mapai (the Israel Workers Party), which was the most dominant and influential party in the *Yishuv*. While the "activists" called for intensive combat against the British, the "moderates" advocated a policy of utmost restraint as a means of realizing the aims of the Zionist movement in its struggle for a homeland. In the 1940s the moderates became a distinct political stream within Mapai, which continually found itself clashing with the activist views of the senior party members. At the head of the Mapai activists were David Ben-Gurion, Berl Katznelson, Yitzhak Tabenkin, Aharon Zisling, Dov Hoz, Shaul Meirov (Avigur) and Yisrael Galili. The moderates were headed by Eliezer Kaplan, David Remez, Yosef Sprinzak, Pinhas Lubianiker (Lavon) and Yitzhak Lofban.

The *Patria* affair was made up of two events: the bombing of the ship itself and the subsequent forced deportation from the Atlit detention camp near Haifa of the *ma'apilim* (illegal immigrants) from another ship, the *Atlantic*. The first was the fruit of an action initiated by the activist branch in Mapai, while the second bore the mark of the pressures coming from the party's moderate wing. Together, these two events generated a sharp dispute with political, moral and educational dimensions, which raged from the end of 1940 to the beginning of 1941.

The *Patria* affair unfolded at the time of the Battle of Britain. Western Europe had fallen to the invading Nazi armies. There were powerful voices raised in the United States arguing for America to keep out of the war. The Soviet Union was busy with consolidating control over the countries it had been apportioned as spoils in the Ribbentrop–Molotov agreement. Britain stood alone against the Nazi onslaught that had swept seemingly at will across most of Europe. British cities were being bombarded by the *Luftwaffe* on a nightly basis. In the middle of November 1940, the Germans attacked Coventry, destroying a third of its buildings; 554 of its inhabitants perished in the bombardment. A few weeks earlier, on 9 September, Italian planes had bombed Tel Aviv, with a toll of 107 lives.<sup>2</sup> The sinking of the *Patria* was, therefore, one more incident in a seemingly endless chain of horrible events. Nonetheless, it was the greatest single disaster in the entire history of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine. Never before had the architects of Zionist policy experienced such a tragic event for which they were directly accountable. The leaders of the Zionist movement, Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann, were in New York and London at the time, far from the scene of the catastrophic events, and were thus not involved in the controversy that developed in the *Yishuv* over the *Patria* affair.

The sinking of the *Patria* was the kind of accident that sometimes occurs in a struggle accompanied by the resort to force. But this accident might well have become a method, part of a hallowed tradition bearing a message for the young and for future generations regarding the proper paths of struggle in times of distress. Although that did not occur, that option is interwoven with the history of the *Patria* and its aftermath. The fierce controversy that erupted both within Mapai and in the *Yishuv* in general at the time also spilled over into historiography. Yigal Elam has likened the affair to the “sacrifice of Isaac”: the *Yishuv*, through its activists, had made use of the *ma'apilim* to further its political aims. Shabtai B. Beit-Zvi formulated his assessment along similar lines. Both criticized the views expressed by other writers, such as Monya Mardor, Yehuda Slutsky and Bracha Habas, who saw the affair as a “symbol of the Jewish revolt,” as one of the events that tested its emerging strength.<sup>3</sup> The *Patria* affair therefore illuminates with particular clarity the fundamental debate over the use of force that accompanied the Zionist movement

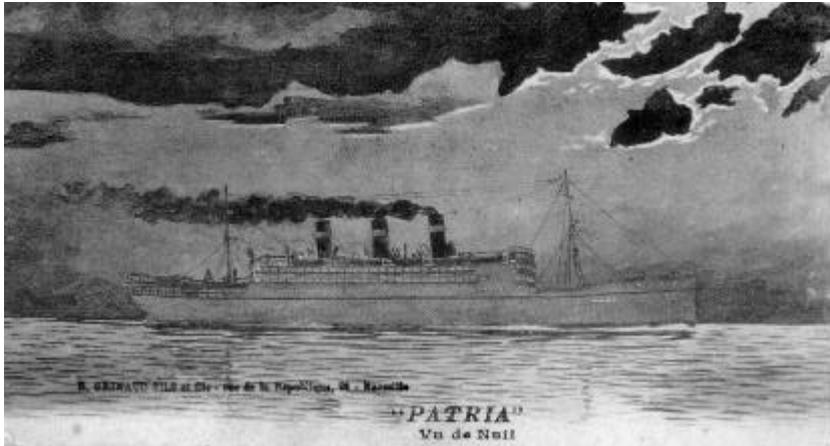
throughout the 1940s. This article focuses on identifying the points of dispute between the activists and moderates, clarifying the conceptual and political climate in which the decision to sabotage the ship was made, and examining the disaster's aftermath and repercussions. As compared with previous research, I will devote greater attention to the "moderate" view of the *Patria* episode and its ramifications, while seeking to shed new light on the views and actions of the "activists."

### *Tragedy along Haifa's Coast*

The ships *Milos*, *Pacific* and *Atlantic* departed from the port of Tulcia in Romania in September 1940 with the Gestapo's agreement and active assistance. Their departure was organized by Berthold Shtorper, under pressure from Eichmann, who demanded from the representatives of Jewish communities in Central Europe that they increase the number of Jews leaving the territory of the Reich.<sup>4</sup> The convoy reached Palestinian waters in early November, led by the *Pacific* on 1 November and the *Milos* two days later (the *Atlantic* arrived only three weeks later). Both ships were intercepted by the British coast guard and escorted to Haifa. On 4 November, their passengers were transferred to the *Patria*, a British deportation ship (see figure 1). Three days later it became known that the British government intended to send them to Mauritius, an idea that had emerged during the course of 1940 in London as one of the means for combating illegal immigration. The High Commissioner Roland MacMichael recommended this step regarding the convoy from Tulcia after the British had learned in September of its departure.<sup>5</sup>

The first dispute regarding the *Patria* broke out in a meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive on 7 November. The activists argued that this was a tragic event. By this they were not referring to the fact that the ships had come from Nazi-occupied Europe, but rather that large numbers of Jews, who had managed to reach the shores of Palestine, were being forbidden to disembark. They insisted on the need to foil this plan by means of forceful action. The moderates rejected the idea that this was some sort of terrible tragedy. They argued that it was necessary to accept realities and refrain from contemplating drastic measures in response. Their approach was based on the argument that British policy was understandable in the context of the special circumstances of the war and the British desire to appease the Arab countries, especially at a time when Britain needed all the help it could obtain in its war against Germany. This caution was compounded by rumors (subsequently proved baseless) that there were German spies on board the ships, a kind of "fifth column." After the war, the fate of European Jewry and the calamitous end that had befallen many of the *ma'apilim* aboard the *Patria* made it natural to view the event as tragic, but in November 1940 the basis for such a consensus

FIGURE 1  
A POSTCARD OF THE PATRIA, 1934  
(Courtesy of the Haganah Archive, Tel Aviv)



did not yet exist. In a vote taken in the Political Committee of Mapai, a majority opted for calling a general strike throughout the *Yishuv*. This was the first time that such a decision was taken by an organ that was basically meant to function as a consultative body.<sup>6</sup>

In a meeting of the Smaller Zionist Executive Committee (*Va'ad ha-Po'el ha-Tziyoni ha-Metzumzam*), Kaplan argued that their clear responsibility was to tend to the interests of Zionist policy. That necessitated prudence and refraining from proclamations in the spirit of "we won't budge" if they could not be certain of implementing them. He asserted that at a time of war there were narrow limits to political struggle, reminding his audience of the choice to concentrate on creating an effective force by enlistment in the British army and fighting side by side with them in the war. This meant putting the fight against the White Paper on a back burner for the interim. Kaplan called for exerting legal political pressure in Palestine and London by mobilizing large numbers of protesters, for example by means of a petition, to show that these were the sentiments of the public as a whole. For him, the prime question was whether strikes and demonstrations at that juncture would benefit or harm Zionist aims. Kaplan explained: "I will not assume the responsibility of saying whether that will help or harm the 2,000 people who are on the sea." But the situation made it difficult for the moderates to provide a satisfactory response to the demands and intense emotions of broad sectors of the public as a result of the shift in British policy. Kaplan admitted it was clear they would be denounced as "compromisers" and "appeasers" and the like, "but can we break out of this circle and take other steps?"<sup>7</sup> Two weeks later, a painful answer was

given to this question, which at the time he had intended to be merely rhetorical.

The National Council (*Va'ad Le'umi*, the quasi-government of the *Yishuv*) decided to call a general strike on 20 November. The British Mandatory government announced on the day of the strike that the passengers on board the ships would be deported to a British colony, where they would be detained for the duration of the war, and that they would not be permitted to enter Palestine after the war. Similar action would be taken against other groups attempting to enter Palestine in this manner.<sup>8</sup> In the wake of the British decision, discourse on the question of the *Patria* became even more heated in the *Yishuv*, as reflected in the bulletin of Kibbutz Beit ha-Shitah, published on the day of the strike: "We are not fighting to commit suicide but to win a life for ourselves.... It is precisely at the edge of the abyss that we have to keep our wits.... In this war for our very survival, we will know how to avoid being led astray by slogans of despair."<sup>9</sup> The article reveals that some members of Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad (the United Kibbutz movement) — the largest kibbutz movement, marked by revolutionary devotion and fervor — believed that the planned deportation necessitated a forceful response and action that might well entail the loss of life. In a meeting of the Mapai Political Committee on 21 November, Aharon Zisling, Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad representative in the National Command of the Haganah (the security force of the *Yishuv*), proposed a second strike. A vehement dispute followed, which Remez concluded by proclaiming: "I would like to propose a hunger strike in the traditional form of a public fast on the day of the ship's departure. My aim is to jolt the imagination of Jews abroad." However, it was evidently not the matter of solidarity that concerned him, but the fear that in its absence, "there are liable to be other manifestations, less public, that may lead to complications."<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the session it was decided to leave any decision on a second strike to the Mapai members of the National Council. Another strike was not called, but the "complications" caused by the form of protest that was undertaken were more severe than the speaker could ever have imagined. While some were busy talking in the Mapai institutions, others, delegated by Mapai members, were taking concrete action. A mine was smuggled onto the *Patria* that same morning, 21 November. A snag in its firing mechanism prevented an explosion, but preparations continued unabated. The next morning, in his speech on the occasion of the opening of Arlosoroff House in Tel Aviv (headquarters of the General Federation of Labor, the Histadrut), Berl Katznelson, one of the prominent leaders of Mapai, opined: "To my mind, to deport a Jewish immigrant from abroad is an act of murder for the individual and cruel mockery of the general community."<sup>11</sup> The *Atlantic* arrived in Haifa on 24 November; 130 of its passengers were forcibly transferred to the *Patria*.

The Haganah became involved in dealing with the *Patria* episode while itself at the height of a serious internal crisis. As Galili, Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad representative in the Haganah leadership, put it, there was a "Satanic devil's dance" around its actions.<sup>12</sup> The dispute centered on parity in the composition of the National Command. The result was a deep cleavage between the parties representing the *hugim ezrahiim* (civic sector, i.e. the sectors not affiliated with the labor movement: the political right, independent farmers and the urban middle class) and the parties of the Histadrut. In early November, Israel Rokach, mayor of Tel Aviv, resigned as head of Kofer ha-Yishuv (an organization responsible for fundraising for the Haganah). In the civic sector there was opposition to transforming the Haganah from a local into a *Yishuv*-wide force. Moshe Smilansky, one of the leaders of the League of Farmers, espoused that view with characteristic clarity. He argued on 19 November that "the saber is only for times of need, difficult, brief and ephemeral ... if it becomes something fixed and permanent it will, by dint of that very fact, turn into a weapon of the devil."<sup>13</sup> The behavior of the activists during the *Patria* crisis, including the decision to sabotage the ship, can in large measure be attributed to the pervasive sense that they were under siege — internally because of the *Yishuv's* attitude to them, and externally because of the harsh British policy being imposed on them. The fact that the deed became a "weapon of the devil" was a tragedy that none desired or foresaw.

The plans and preparations to delay the *Patria's* departure by planting a bomb on board began at least a week before the blast, on 18 November. Yitzhak Sadeh, a top Haganah commander, was in charge of the sabotage operation. Monya Mardor had direct on-the-spot responsibility. Shaul Avigur was the liaison between the Haganah and the political level in the operation.<sup>14</sup> Who then gave the actual order for planting the bomb? There are several differing versions, but all agree that the decision was not made in any body formally authorized to order an action with such complex possible consequences. On the basis of an interview with Avigur, Dalia Ofer is of the view that Eliyahu Golomb (head of the Haganah), Galili and Zisling, acting with Katznelson's backing, gave the green light for the operation. In her analysis, the decision-making process here shows how the Haganah was utilized instrumentally to advance activist positions both in Mapai and the Zionist movement at a time when they were minority views.<sup>15</sup> But as we will see, this view is not borne out by what actually transpired in the *Patria* affair. Moreover, it is significant that activists felt the need, both at the time and later, to present their behavior as being outside the legitimate decision-making channels. This suggests that they thought they had a right, by virtue of their daily involvement in matters of security, to determine on their own what the national needs were in times of crisis.

Another way of considering the question of responsibility is to ask whether anyone in the formal and actual decision-making hierarchy was in a position — by dint of office, information, responsibility or authority — to intervene and call off the planned sabotage. The only individual so positioned was Moshe Shertok (Sharett), at the time chair of the *Yishuv* Security Committee, who during Ben-Gurion's absence from Palestine acted as the senior political representative of the *Yishuv*. His office, together with his family ties to Avigur, Golomb and Hoz (they were all brothers-in-law), provided him with a lever to prevent the plot if it was not consonant with his own views.<sup>16</sup> Another individual at a critical junction who perhaps might have been able to tip the balance in the decision to bomb the *Patria* was Moshe Kleinboim (Sneh). In view of the rift between the Civic and the Histadrut parties in regard to the Haganah, there was at the time a small Haganah secretariat consisting of Sneh, Zisling and Yaakov Reiser, an engineer by training and a trustee of the Jewish Agency Executive who was head of the Haganah National Command. Sneh devoted all his time to the Haganah. As sole representative of one of the two political factions in the Haganah's decision-making echelon, and as one who had come from ravaged Europe but a few months before, he had both the authority and the background to oppose the sabotage plan.<sup>17</sup> Sneh has not left any direct information about his position on the matter. However, judging from Ben-Gurion's comments to him on the eve of his assumption of duties and in the light of his later activity in the Haganah, it is clear that he was among the ranks of the activists.<sup>18</sup>

The most authoritative answer as regards direct responsibility for authorizing the *Patria* bombing was given by Sharett in a 1962 letter to a certain Rabbi Haim Bloch of New York. In terms of his biography, it would be difficult to describe his views and political path in the 1940s and 1950s without that essential fact, whose burden seems to have affected his subsequent behavior. Nonetheless, it should be recalled, if only because of the caution this sensitive topic demands, that this was a document written a full 22 years after the event.

I must confirm the fact ... that the *Patria* was sunk by the order of the undersigned and in any event by his authorization.... I have never spoken about this matter in public. But I did have the opportunity in more restricted circles to note that the sinking of the *Patria* occurred by authorization of the supreme national body operative at that time, i.e. the Political Department of the Jewish Agency, headed at the time by the undersigned.... Had I been asked on the public stage, whether orally or in writing, about the role I had played in this incident, I would not have concealed the truth.... I would not have boasted about an act so bloody. But I would not have considered it an action that necessitated

apologizing for. Rather, it was the fulfillment of a duty and the assumption of responsibility. Although authorization was given only for the plan to cause damage to the ship alone and not for anything entailing possible victims, in such actions it is not always possible to foresee the outcome. And whoever authorizes the action bears responsibility for its results, both anticipated and unforeseen. During the period of my tenure as head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency and thereafter as a member of the Israeli government, I participated in numerous decisions that cost human lives. This cannot be avoided in the political life of a people struggling for survival, where its sons are called upon to sacrifice their lives for its future.<sup>19</sup>

In retrospect, Sharett positioned himself at the very nub of the decision-making process. In formal terms, that is correct, though it should be recalled that as the official representative of the Jewish Agency Executive, he could not allow himself to be identified in the slightest way with involvement in acts of terror. In practical terms, without the backing of Katznelson, his three brothers-in-law and Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad, the sabotage would never have been carried out. Plans to bomb the *Patria* were also prepared by the right-wing military organization, Irgun Tzvai Le'umi (Etzel). The scheme was to fire a torpedo from a nearby boat. David Raziell, Etzel commander, was in Haifa at the time and was taken by surprise by the explosion. Initially he instructed that no one be told that this was not an Etzel action. It occurred shortly after the radical armed underground organization Lohamei Herut Yisrael (Lehi, Fighters for the Freedom of Israel) had split from the Etzel, and questions of prestige would play a prime role. But after the magnitude of the carnage became clear, Etzel circles were quick to state they had had no hand in the affair. Nonetheless, since an action of this type appeared in mesh with Etzel thinking, even years later the British tended to blame them for the attack.<sup>20</sup>

At 9 a.m. on Friday 25 November, the bomb planted with the help of contacts on board exploded, ripping a large hole in the ship. The ship quickly began to sink, contrary to the original intention of those who had planned the sabotage (see figure 2). Most of the *ma'apilim* were rescued by British security personnel, as well as by Arab boats that rushed to the scene.<sup>21</sup> It is estimated that 267 persons lost their lives. In an "act of clemency," the British cabinet decided on 27 November to allow the survivors to remain in Palestine.<sup>22</sup> Yet the High Commissioner told Sharett: "The fellow who had done it deserved to be hanged sky-high," since it was clearly no accident.<sup>23</sup>

The Mapai press responded in two contradictory ways to the sinking. The magazine of Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad activists, *Tzror Mikhtavim* (Bundle of Letters), expressed a positive response:

FIGURE 2  
THE SINKING OF THE PATRIA, 25 NOVEMBER 1940  
(Courtesy of the Haganah Archive, Tel Aviv)



All the land is a gallows!... On 25 November 1940, the *ma'apilim* ship exploded.... What else exploded there? Illusions? Delusive promises? Dependence on the benevolence of donors? Or perhaps something new was forged there, fused with the eternal and abiding Jewish dictum of *ein breirah*, "there's no alternative."<sup>24</sup>

By contrast, in the weekly *Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir*, Yisrael Cohen lamented, in an article that was to become notorious: "On one bitter and impetuous day, a *malicious handsank* the ship, causing injury and death to many."<sup>25</sup>

The morning after, Yosef Sprinzak was incensed when he greeted Berl Reptor, a leading Haifa activist, as he was entering the meeting of the Mapai Political Committee: "Who bears responsibility for that decision?" "Not me," Reptor replied. Sprinzak, in disbelief, protested: "Look, [it was] in your own town of Haifa. And you don't know?!" Reptor, of course, knew perfectly well since he had been involved in preparations for the bombing.<sup>26</sup> This incident, which Reptor related in his memoirs, was not only meant as an interesting anecdote of a personal clash; it represents the slight contempt that some Mapai activists felt for the ideas and positions of the moderates at that time and afterwards.

The debate on the bombing action was delayed until hopes were finally dashed that the British might refrain from deporting the *Atlantic* immigrants. A Haganah plan to mobilize the masses to use arms to prevent the deportation was scotched. The moderates' awareness in the wake of the *Patria* explosion that such an action was possible apparently led to their intensive efforts to thwart it. For some of the activists as well, it was too soon after the *Patria*. The



decision for restraint underscored the fear of another bloody incident, this time involving a direct clash with the British. Less extreme proposals for action were rejected by the Haganah as meaningless. The British deported the *Atlantic* refugees, who had been transferred to the Atlit camp, on 9 December. The *ma'apilim* resisted fiercely. The deportation was seen as a searing disgrace and profound humiliation for the *Yishuv*, which had merely stood by.<sup>27</sup> What had seemed inordinate activism in the case of the *Patria* had become excessive restraint in regard to the *Atlantic*. Both responses demonstrated the constricted space for maneuver available to the Zionists for engaging in a significant struggle during that time of world war. The surrogate for political-military struggle without was ideological confrontation within. Under the prevailing circumstances that was a reasonable choice. It would direct anger onto paths whose damage at that juncture was considered more acceptable from the perspective of advancing the Zionist cause.

In a special session of the Histadrut Executive (Va'ad ha-Po'el) on 9 December, it was proposed to break off the regular session of the Histadrut Council and to organize a general strike throughout Palestine the following day. At the close of the session, it was decided that Katznelson would address the Council, after which it would disperse for a week in a demonstrative sign of mourning and protest. Katznelson stated that the day of the deportation was a "bitter day in the history of Zionism," the bitterest day in the entire period of British rule in Palestine. He pointed out that every people had symbols of tribulation that it alone understood. For the Jews, immigration to Palestine was just such an emblem. But it took a long time for a notion consisting of a few abstract words, an "ism," to become a lived idea. A movement paid a high price, he warned, for any delay in embodying the idea in concrete palpable values. He regarded the deportation of the *Atlantic* refugees as evidence of such delay. He believed that it had been possible to attempt to prevent the deportation, arguing that "readiness to incur danger rescues one from danger!" The dispute in the labor movement escalated to a new stage when Katznelson explicitly attacked those supporting the moderate line: "Maybe, if we had a different movement, the fate of the *Patria* passengers would have been different."<sup>28</sup>

Katznelson's speech marked the rupture line between the conclusion of the two chapters of the *Patria* incident, the sinking of the ship and the deportation, and the beginning of a new cycle in the debate on the nature, use and implications of force in the Zionist struggle. A leaflet entitled "The *Yishuv* Guard" (a code name for Haganah circles), published on the day of Katznelson's speech in the Histadrut Council, stated that the "shocking tragedy of the *Patria* [had] reversed the edict of exile and deportation of the Mandatory government," implying that the bombing had also had a positive dimension.<sup>29</sup> As the political institutions of the *Yishuv* and the labor movement

sought to analyze and evaluate the significance of the *Patria* sabotage, they were weighed down by the trauma of the numerous casualties. Black headlines on the first page of the papers informed readers how many bodies had been recovered each day, how many had been identified and the number of those buried. Ten years later Tabenkin observed: "The full tragedy of the *Patria* was not revealed to us all at once. Day after day, ever more bodies were recovered, their numbers mounting. We felt like cursing that sea. As if the *Patria* had exploded not just once, but again and again, day after day."<sup>30</sup> There was a rather shocking exchange of correspondence between the heads of the Haifa community and the institutions of the *Yishuv* on how expenses for the burial of the victims recovered should be financed. The haggling between them reached such a point that one day it was decided to hire Arabs to transport the bodies for burial.<sup>31</sup>

### *Reactions to the Incident: "Beforehand and in Retrospect"*

A month later, the Mapai institutions convened for a series of discussions that were among the most inflamed and tense in the party's history. At the meeting of the Mapai Central Committee on 15 December, Sharett disputed Katznelson's claim that it had been possible to prevent the deportation. He recalled his past opposition to proposals for action put forward by Ben-Gurion during the debate on the response to the limits on Zionist land purchases imposed by the 1939 White Paper. Kaplan decried the use of highly emotional discourse such as "surrender," "bowing the head in humiliation," "keeping silent in the face of brutality and insult" in response to matters where cool reason had to prevail. Lubianiker attacked Katznelson, arguing that the question was quite simple: "Will there be riots in Palestine or not? Youth is at the boiling point, the ranks are organized and seething. Boats are arriving every month, their defense must of necessity lead to disturbances," namely, to a head-on clash with the Arabs. A particularly heated argument revolved around the question of which day had been more difficult: that of the *Patria* explosion or that of the forced deportation from Atlit. Katznelson, Golomb and Zalman Aharonovitz (Aranne) insisted that the *Yishuv* had not known a worse day under British occupation than the day when the refugees of the *Atlantic* had been deported. By contrast, Lofban believed the *Patria* explosion had been the most difficult day in his 32 years in Palestine. Beyond all the futile wrangling, a dispute began to emerge over whether it had been a mistake to sabotage the *Patria*, or to oppose the action, in the light of the deportation from Atlit. A remark made by Sharett pointed to the heart of the dispute. He argued that it was "necessary to distinguish between our attitude to the *Patria* tragedy beforehand and in retrospect."<sup>32</sup> These words, "beforehand and in retrospect" referred to three crucial issues: (1) at what level decisions on

actions with political implications should be made, and whether the members of the top institutional echelon were not being confronted in essence with *faits accomplis*; (2) to what extent the leaders were willing to put forward political aims and engage in actions that might entail the shedding of Jewish blood; and (3) whether the era of what was known as “constructive Zionism” — the focus on land purchase, settlement, immigration and Jewish labor — was coming to an end, to be replaced by a period of “shortcuts” and historic breakthrough.

Sharett sought to cobble together an agreement: “If we had been asked in advance whether it was permissible to delay the departure of the ship and have the refugees remain in Palestine at the price of those victims, it is clear to me that there is none in our ranks who would have said yes.”<sup>33</sup> Although it had been accepted in Mapai that the battle to realize Zionism would entail casualties, and that this was the high price to be paid for the dream of Jewish independence,<sup>34</sup> what was new was the recognition that this might be the main way of advancing the goals of Zionism at the present time. Ben-Gurion’s demand, from the days of opposition to the White Paper in May–August 1939 and following the Land Transfer Regulations in March 1940, to wage a struggle that might lead to loss of life, was once again on the agenda. The idea of a mass struggle entailing possible bloodshed, which previously had caused many to hesitate in espousing his plan, now gained apparent support among the activists.

By contrast, Remez sought to return his associates to their Zionist origins. In his view, the question was not “what to do, but what *not* to do.”

when we were young, we didn’t school ourselves in the doctrine of street clashes with the police and military, but rather were educated in the heroism of settlement, of going to remote places, the heroism of the strenuous life, life as pioneers.... It’s one or the other: either the entire path was wrong from the outset, or the shortcut is an error.<sup>35</sup>

Remez warned against the “shortcut,” against the use of force as an operative value. He cautioned that that path led only to one end, martyrdom. Sprinzak agreed that the method manifested in the *Patria* and *Atlantic* affairs was “likely to hinder us from achieving our own *patria*.” The objective would not be achieved by emotional rhetoric and inflaming the hearts of the young. Sprinzak declared that he did not “espouse the path expressed in the phrase ‘the *Yishuv* will not rest!’ I want it to be quiet, at peace.” He called for restraint. “For Jews, the question ‘what do we use to light the fire?’ is hypocritical. We light it with whatever is available and at any time. It’s not at all difficult to provoke unrest.”<sup>36</sup> Sprinzak was expressing one of the fundamental problems associated with the moderate view on the resort to force. In a situation of ongoing political dispute, events inevitably occur that fuel the belief that reality can be changed by violent means. The rhetorical,

polemical style that the moderates adopted in the *Patria* affair did not stem solely from the speakers' character. It was also influenced by the need to make up for the lack of important figures championing a moderate tack among key decision-makers in the sphere of security.

Fierce criticism of the sabotage of the *Patria* and its human toll was also voiced outside Mapai's ranks. Yitzhak Grinboim, the former leader of Polish Jewry and a member of the Jewish Agency Executive, commented:

We are all at the helm. We are not yet accustomed to sending people to their deaths. But we have to get used to that too. We will have to act that way or to abandon all our positions. There's no alternative.... And whoever tells himself: if I'd been asked beforehand and had known how many victims there'd be, I wouldn't have agreed, such a person can't be at the helm in these days. And I'm telling you this loud and clear.<sup>37</sup>

It is quite likely that other top political leaders of the *Yishuv* shared the view Grinboim expressed "loud and clear." But the codes, concepts and state of mind underlying the way they dealt with the public prevented them from speaking out in such a forthright manner.

Werner Santor, representative of the non-Zionists in the Jewish Agency Executive who was known for his eminently moderate views, maintained that regardless of his own opinion about the act of sabotage, the act in itself had considerable value. He compared it with "actions by the Jews in the Middle Ages when they went to their death in sanctification of the Holy Name (*kiddush ha-shem*) [i.e. as martyrs]. The tragedy is horrible, and we have no interest whatsoever in concealing the fact that Jews did what they did."<sup>38</sup> In contrast with Remez, Santor saw nothing wrong in such a death for Jews in Palestine in the twentieth century. Remez, however, was deeply disturbed that a historical expression from the diaspora, *kiddush ha-shem*, was being appropriated to justify actions he deplored. He did not believe that Zionism's purpose was to sanctify God and death. Among the *Yishuv* political leaders, it was Moshe Smilansky who expressed the most cutting assessment of the *Patria* affair. Claiming that it demonstrated a loss of sensitivity in the decision-making echelon, he contended that it would have been better to explain to the wretched souls on the ships that during a war against Satan it was necessary to yield, to accept the harsh judgment and sail on to a distant colony until better days came. In his view, there was "only one interpretation" for the sabotage and resistance in the detention camp: "rebellion, and rebellion against one side in a war unwittingly entails abetting the other side." The other side here was the Nazis. By contrast, an Etzel leaflet proclaimed that the deportation of the immigrants was "implementation of the Nazi plan for the 'solution of the Jewish question' at the hands of the British."<sup>39</sup> Both sides used "Nazism" as ammunition in hurling unfounded allegations.

It was Moshe Sneh's harsh speech in the Smaller Zionist Executive Committee on 14 January 1941 that was a milestone in the dispute raging within the *Yishuv* establishment over the *Patria* affair. It brought together the three questions implicit in Sharett's remark. Sneh proclaimed he knew there were persons totally and completely opposed to the *Patria* sabotage (Sprinzak interrupted, "beforehand and in retrospect"), averring that the dispute was nothing new. As Kaplan and Yitzhak Ben Zvi, chairman of the National Council and one of the leaders of Mapai, protested, he contended that the time of constructive Zionism was nearing its end. Now it was imperative to use the strength that had been amassed to force a political decision. In the same discussion, Golomb stated that there were times when the main thing was to demonstrate the final goal. In that era, as the question of the fate of nations hung in the uncertain balance, it was an obligation to put forward the full political objective: immigration, mass settlement and a Jewish state.<sup>40</sup> Berl Katznelson had preceded them by a few days.

Although Katznelson did not take an active part in the discussions on the *Patria* affair, the desperate plight of European Jewry had convinced him that it was no longer possible to postpone proclaiming Zionism's final objective. The moment had come "to raise the banner of the solution to the Jewish Question, to unfurl the flag of the Jewish state."<sup>41</sup> Lubianiker disagreed with this view, cautioning against creating the "prospect of a shortcut" in solving the Jewish problem. He concurred that the time for decision had arrived, but the "solution would come as a result of a circuitous path, by much zigzagging, through great suffering... And it would be a solution that would emerge over an extremely long time period, with ups and downs along the way." As for the dispute over the *Patria* affair, Katznelson noted that he had no interest in participating in a debate that sought to present the tragedy as a confrontation between two camps: those who valued human life and those who did not. In response to Sprinzak's warning against publicly proclaiming a Jewish state as Zionism's explicit goal before that had been properly deliberated in a limited forum, Katznelson avowed that he was willing to be reprimanded by the party. Sprinzak replied it was not his intention to reprimand anyone, but that "reprimands are also possible, why not? Ah, if only reprimands could suffice for terror. I'd rather be reprimanded twice a day if that meant avoiding physical blows."<sup>42</sup>

### *Concerning a Public Slap in the Face*

In the aftermath of the deportation of the *Atlantic* immigrants, an illegal leaflet signed by "the faithful" thundered: "Away with those who shackle the defensive ability of the Jewish *Yishuv*!"<sup>43</sup> As they left a meeting of the Histadrut Council where Katznelson had spoken on 9 December 1940, after the

deportation had become known, Kaplan and Sprinzak, the chief proponents of the moderate line in Mapai, discussed the situation. Sprinzak feared that they were entering a period of internecine conflict where friends would be pitched one against another. If indeed there were traitors among them, if it had in fact been possible to delay the departure of the immigrants and someone had actually prevented that, then it was necessary — and easier — to fight against such people.<sup>44</sup>

And indeed, three days later, on 12 December, Ben-Gurion's son, Amos, and Mordechai (Motke) Cohen, burst into the editorial offices of the weekly *Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir*. Amos strode up to the editor Yitzhak Lofban and slapped him squarely in the face — an emotional reaction to Yisrael Cohen's "malicious hand" article on the *Patria* explosion ten days before. The two conspirators then ran off to Zionist Executive headquarters. One of those who had witnessed the attack chased after them, reaching Motke just as he was entering the building. Yosef Harit and Yitzhak Sadeh, who were standing there, instructed him to let the cornered man be.<sup>45</sup> Harit, a former member of Ha-Shomer (The Guardsman, the Jewish self-defense organization of the early settlements) was the one who had chosen the two men for the action, whose "guiding spirit," so he claimed, had been Golomb.<sup>46</sup> Sadeh had briefed them, in the presence of Galili. Amos Ben-Gurion subsequently testified that he had been selected to be a part of the "action" because its planners had hoped that the slap in Lofban's face would resound afar in the ears of Ben-Gurion, who was, as noted, in the United States at the time.<sup>47</sup> The choice of Ben-Gurion's son was probably meant to guarantee that no harm would come to the perpetrators. Yaakov Dostrovski (Dori), chief of staff of the Haganah, took responsibility for the decision, arguing that the person responsible for the article "deserved a slap in the face."<sup>48</sup> Dostrovski took the blame, since he was politically unaffiliated, unlike the others involved in the action. If the political intention of those behind the slap was to bring about changes on the editorial staff of *Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir*, they nearly succeeded. Lofban and Cohen tendered their resignations, but were persuaded to reconsider.<sup>49</sup>

Sprinzak raised the question the same day in the Mapai Political Committee. He stated that for several days he had been plagued by a sense of personal insecurity. He upbraided the leaders of the activists: "this education of inflaming passions and raising the temperature necessarily leads to catastrophe, to an outburst, if not against external forces then against those within our ranks."<sup>50</sup> Galili responded angrily that the "malicious hand" that had pushed Jews to desperate measures and led to the tragedy was that of the British; he denounced Lofban's aim to present the activists "as evil, as persons who justify the murder of women and children."<sup>51</sup> It was generally agreed that the event was the result of the way members in the movement were educated, the product of a certain state of mind. At the end of the discussion, it was

decided to arrange a meeting between Sharett, Katznelson and the heads of the youth organizations.<sup>52</sup>

The internal committee that the Mapai Central Committee set up to examine the incident failed to discover who had given the order, despite an apology by the perpetrators. Finally an investigative committee was set up by the Haganah National Command, comprised of Sneh, Hoz and Yohanan Ratner. Dostrovski admitted his responsibility before the committee and was sentenced to one day in prison.<sup>53</sup> Just a day before he met an untimely death in a road accident, Hoz talked about the incident to detention camp prisoners interned in the Mizra jail. One of the prisoners, Noah Dagoni, recorded his impressions in his diary. He described the slap as a “curious incident” that had been caused by an article in *Ha-Po’el ha-Tza’ir* “against the criminal hand that had perpetrated this deed [the sabotage of the *Patria*], an article full of praise for the noble British who had demonstrated their generosity and put their own lives at risk in order to rescue the immigrants from death.” Hoz told the prisoners that four persons had opposed the general strike against the deportation of the *Atlantic* immigrants: “Lofban, Lubianiker, Kaplan and Sprinzak.”<sup>54</sup> Evidently, the message that the political leaders wanted to convey to their subordinates was not yet being absorbed. Moreover, the delegitimation of the moderates continued.

The discussion on the slap was not published. Santor and Hugo Bergmann, professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University, protested to Katznelson that *Davar*, the Histadrut paper, had chosen to remain silent instead of telling the story and denouncing the action. They viewed this as an ostrich policy that gave encouragement to the criminals and their actions. Katznelson replied that out of “a burning sense of shame,” the slap to Lofban had not been made public: there were ugly deeds whose publication did not prevent their repetition, but rather led to further deterioration. The episode of the slap was mentioned in public only once, in an article in *Moznayim* by R. Binyamin (the pen name of Yehoshua Redler Feldman), who wrote that the slap symbolized the corruption of the generation and the era. The *Yishuv* had known contention and rivalries, but now “men with ‘positive military qualities’ have appeared, introducing a new trend ... that of slaps in the face...” From now on, people should know that they should either refrain from expressing their opinions or be prepared for trouble. He concluded: “the pestilence is indeed very deep.”<sup>55</sup> Dov Stock (Sadan), a member of the editorial board of *Davar*, reconstructed the episode in 1948, a few weeks after Lofban’s death, in what could be interpreted as a kind of homage to the dead. At the start, he quoted lines from a popular song: “There in the pleasant land of our fathers, all our hopes will be realized, there we will live and create, a life of splendor and freedom.” The emphasis, he explained, was on the word *freedom*.<sup>56</sup> The slap to Lofban reflected a blurring of the boundaries between what was morally

permitted and what was forbidden, which cast doubt on the *Yishuv's* ability to maintain a democratic system while striving for sovereignty.

The episode was not merely a passing incident but expressed a prevalent mood in the youth movements. Tabenkin complained about inaction springing from the loyalty of the Haganah to the political leadership. In the Ascending Camps (Ha-Mahanot ha-Olim, a pioneering youth movement associated primarily with Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad), the conclusion was voiced that the leaders were betraying the task to which they had been elected.<sup>57</sup> The mood emanating from Tabenkin's remarks and the youth movement where he was regarded as a spiritual mentor hardly contributed to bolstering the civil authority over the military organizations. As will be seen below, it was not until another such incident occurred that the lengthy discussions in the two committees resulted in meting out justice to at least one of those responsible for the decision to slap Lofban.

*Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir* ceased publication for three-and-a-half weeks because of the incident. After the paper resumed publication, Lofban wrote that to caution people to act wisely was always thankless, but was the only means for weathering the present storm. He warned that at the moment, all errors, "even a slip of the tongue, could unleash evil spirits, whose possible harm was incalculable. And any deviation from the path of wisdom and accountability can turn into something so distorted it cannot be set straight."<sup>58</sup> This discourse signaled his intention to continue to resist political moves incompatible with the proclaimed Mapai line, but also constituted an acknowledgment that the way the paper had reported on the explosion may have been exaggerated.

The Mapai Central Committee convened two days after the ship's sabotage. The discussion centered on failure, but of a totally different kind. A committee that had been intended to settle organizational frictions in the party stemming from its factionalization had reached a dead end. Its chair, Ben-Zion Yisraeli, stated darkly that the movement which had transformed the face of Palestine and the image of the Jew, creating "a new Jewish type, the Jewish worker and agriculturalist, was now crumbling."<sup>59</sup> From that point on, Mapai ceased to function as a single united organization. Even beyond the political debate on organizational splits and the leadership's difficulties in imposing its authority, an ideological crisis emerged over the ways of realizing constructive Zionism.<sup>60</sup> The *Patria* affair had laid bare a deep layer of conflict between the moderates and the activists, which was essentially over the definition and description of the "ideal type" of individual which the labor movement wished to shape at that particular juncture, as was reflected in comments that both Sprinzak and Tabenkin made at the time.

As noted, Dov Hoz was a member of the committee appointed to investigate the incident at the editorial offices of *Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir*. On 29 December 1940, he and his family were killed in a road accident on the way to

a meeting of the committee, along with Yitzhak Ben-Yaakov, a founding member of Kibbutz Degania and Hoz's partner in establishing the flying club which laid the basis for the development of aviation in the *Yishuv*. At that time, Sprinzak was apparently on the verge of resigning from all his duties in Mapai. His daughter Naomi asked him to reconsider that decision and stay on. His letter of response to her, in which he yielded to her plea, must rank as one of the most poignant descriptions of the painful struggle of the moderate camp:

I see before me the figure of Yitzhak Ben-Yaakov, noble, bold, highly cultured, a man who conquered labor and subdued the Jewish impulsive nature. That is the figure that [the moderate camp] wished to raise in the people to oppose the people's impulses. Once [in 1929] ... I proclaimed the "unity of the united." But that concept of the "united" clashed with reality and the fundamental approach was drowned in the vortices of the Jewish impulse for war, the hunger for imaginary achievements, incitement to rebellion and radical victory. My response to that reality and its agents has nothing to do with compensation for personal injury, even if [that injury] is sometimes aimed at someone personally. That response arises from a fear of future events, emanating from the profound awareness that such a path will not lead to Israel's redemption, will not give rise to a new responsible generation or bring about the necessary change in the character of the people or contribute to its firm strength.<sup>61</sup>

At that time, the councils of Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad would open their meetings with words of eulogy for kibbutz members who had died since the previous meeting. At the January 1941 meeting, after several speakers eulogized Dov Hoz, Tabenkin took the rostrum. He noted that "it is no accident that such conferences open with words of remembrance. Those who chose our path knew it harbors the danger of untimely death." For Tabenkin, such a choice was "a new phenomenon in Jewish life," and those who chose that dangerous path embodied "a new generation of Jews ... a new Jewish type, a new Jewish human being, new Jewish life, and a new Jewish death." He chose to begin the recitation of the names of the dead with the unknown, with those of whom nothing remained but their names, the victims of the *Patria*. Tabenkin called them the "unknown Jewish soldier." In their fate and death, he saw a pledge and promise that the new Jew in the Land of Israel, his way of life and death, opened up fresh possibilities for a new heroism. Perhaps the Gentiles had many Sturmans, Trumpeldors and Doves, "but against our background, there is a kind of new beginning here, some kind of new prospect for the man of the future ... we need the certainty that there can be such Jews ... and I see such Jews in the nameless souls of the *Patria* as well."<sup>62</sup>

The contradiction between Sprinzak and Tabenkin was composed of several layers. While Sprinzak was fearful of the serious damage that Zionism could suffer from going down the bloody path embodied by the *Patria*, Tabenkin welcomed what he believed was the opening of a new horizon for its realization. For Tabenkin, the ability to internalize the awareness that Zionism necessitated Jewish sacrifice and death was an element of new strength, while for Sprinzak it was a destructive urge that had to be suppressed. Yet as earlier noted, more than anything else, the difference between them lay in their conception of the "ideal human type" according to which they sought to interpret the reality revealed in the *Patria* affair. Sprinzak singled out Yitzhak Ben-Yaakov, an actual individual, whose personal qualities exemplified the moderates' approach. In a memorial on the first anniversary of Ben-Yaakov's death, he emphasized the vital connection between politics and its practical realization, as represented by the Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir Party: "Once I was not ashamed to say that along with Hanukkah candles, there is a need for a 'shamash' [auxiliary candle], for lighting them. But the main thing is the candles, which give light, and it gladdens the heart even after they are extinguished."<sup>63</sup> Tabenkin cited the "unknown soldier" and the "Sturmans," a multitude of basically faceless individuals, products of a conceptual world in which the masses are enlisted to serve the aims of the people.<sup>64</sup> The difference between them lay in the historical opposition between the two parties that had united in 1930 to form Mapai, Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir and Ahdut ha-Avodah, in regard to the pace and methods of realizing Zionism: on one side, adherence to the gradual path of caution, devoid of glory and fostering the individual deed; on the other, faith in the "shortcut" and readiness to mobilize the masses to concerted action in a bid to accelerate social and political processes. The contrast between these opposing political views had blurred with the course of time under pressure of current exigencies. But once the issue of the resort to force was placed squarely on the agenda of the Zionist movement, they were exacerbated anew. At the same time, the shift from the image of the pioneer to that of the fighter was ridden with contradiction. Hoz was reckoned among the activists, Ben-Yaakov was considered a moderate. Each in his own way was endowed with courage and heroism. Together they helped father Jewish aviation in Palestine. The use made of their death revealed the increasing difficulty in integrating the resort to force within the constructivist outlook.

An incident connected with Hoz's funeral emphasized that the dispute in the labor movement over the nature, uses and implications of force was not just a passing phenomenon. A group of members of the Ha-Po'el sports organization entered Jewish Agency headquarters in Jerusalem and demanded to hang a banner as a sign of mourning for Hoz. At first, there was opposition to the gesture since Hoz had not worked on the staff of the Jewish Agency. After a few hours though, Kaplan changed his mind and gave his consent.

Shlomo Eisenberg, secretary of the Jewish Agency Executive, who was not aware of this decision, ordered the banner removed. Several days later, the group of activists returned to Jewish Agency headquarters and attacked Eisenberg verbally and physically. The paper *Davar* denounced the incident as a “shameful deed.” The Histadrut Executive set up an investigative committee and dismissed Levi Yitzhak, who had been responsible for the sorry episode, soon given the epithet the “Jerusalem affair.” On 15 January the Mapai Central Committee convened to deliberate on the attack. Before they met, a quarrel erupted between Sprinzak and Golomb. An angry Sprinzak argued that the attackers were “despicable hooligans,” and stormed out of party headquarters. During the meeting, Golomb contended that the violent entry to Jewish Agency headquarters was a sign of the “weakening of moral authority in our ranks.”<sup>65</sup> Despite the passing emotional tempest, both currents in Mapai were agreed that the resort to force internally was an alarming phenomenon whose destructive character should not be minimized.

A week later, the Executive dealt with the conclusions of the committee investigating the “Jerusalem affair.” Zalman Rovshov (Shazar) warned against young people’s misconception of the rules of the game when it came to the use of arms and violence. Just as someone with a cut on his finger could not be a sharpshooter, so in these critical times someone with confused ideas could not be allowed to command a weapon. Golomb demanded punishment for those guilty: “when other avenues are forcibly closed to you ... it’s permitted to use terror. But when alternative paths stand open, the resort to force is forbidden.” He felt that the incident “pointed to serious pathology. In place of the sacredness of defense, concepts of using force against each other had taken root.” While the activists feared that the eruption of violence would limit their ability to use force in a time of need, the moderates directed their criticism to the system of decision-making. Remez contended that the essential problem in regard to the use of force was the absence of a proper formula appropriate for the labor movement. Although the labor movement’s path was based on a rejection of violent means, the absence of an agreed formula generated a problem in regard to authority: who could rightfully employ such means? Whoever had the authority to employ violent means, he argued, in effect determined the formula for the use of force in internal and external political struggles.<sup>66</sup>

The committee set up by the Mandatory government to investigate the sinking of the *Patria* did not solve the affair. The committee, as quoted by *Tzror Mikhtavim*, expressed a sense of “condemnation and disgust over the distressing deed, and the absence of conscience which had led to the death of 156 persons and the loss of a ship dear to Great Britain.” In a manner replete with innuendo but obvious to all, the responses in *Tzror Mikhtavim* on the investigation’s findings found close parallels between the British position and

the moderate viewpoint.<sup>67</sup> The word “malice” (*zadon*) became a key term in the dispute on the *Patria*. Resolutions in the Central Committee of the Ascending Camps stated that the victims of the *Patria* had met their death “by accident and the malice of the law.” Bracha Habas wrote that the *Patria* affair “constituted the first attempt in the history of the use of force against the malice at the heart of the Mandatory government.”<sup>68</sup> The fact that the accusation of malicious intent had emanated from the party’s own weekly (Yisrael Cohen’s article) only reinforced the desire to reject it as distorting the ideological-educational and political image of the labor movement. The *Patria* and *Atlantic* affairs were a serious test for the tradition of democratic life emerging in the *Yishuv* at that time.

### *Lessons and Ramifications*

The principal topic that weighed on the mind of Mapai leaders in the weeks after the *Patria* sabotage was “how that chapter would be recorded by history, how Jewish history would evaluate it.”<sup>69</sup> The polemic was imbued with the recognition that something significant had transpired in the realization of Zionism. Katznelson was the first to pass judgment. When the sabotage had first become known, he had applauded the action, contending it was “the greatest single deed of Zionism in recent times.”<sup>70</sup> The morning after the tragedy, he confided to Avigur: “Mark my words: the day of the *Patria* is for us like the day of Tel Hai.”<sup>71</sup> Katznelson did not repeat this analogy between the *Patria* and the 1920 battle of Tel Hai, which had become one of Zionism’s foundational myths, in his public speeches or writings, even though he had a suitable, seemingly nonpolitical platform at his disposal. During the days of mourning for Hoz, Yitzhak Ben-Yaakov and those who had perished with them, Katznelson was working on the introduction to the *Book of Valor* (*Sefer ha-gvurah*), the first title of the Am Oved publishing house. He noted that “Jewish sobriety from the days of the Zealots [in the times of the Second Temple] to self-defense in our own times” refuses to recognize the latent strength of defeated Jewish heroism. “‘No purer blood had ever been shed in any generation than that of the plowers of Tel Hai.’ But the plowers and defenders in Palestine do not die as desperate rebels or torn to pieces by the Inquisition,” but for Israel’s freedom.<sup>72</sup> In his historical assessment of Jewish heroism over the ages, Katznelson avoided any direct mention of the *Patria* affair, which hardly exemplified victorious heroism.

The Haganah’s shift in 1938 from defense to attack involved a psychological change even beyond the one signified by Tel Hai, indicating a sense of real authority over the land. But the moderates repeatedly opposed any attempt to infuse new content into the myth of Tel Hai, to make it relevant to the needs of the hour. Speaking in the Mapai Council in April

1939, Kadish Lozhinski (Luz) cautioned that “some words resonate with more than just their literal meaning.” Citing Joseph Trumpeldor’s reputed last words at Tel Hai, “it is good to die for our homeland,” he noted that “in our own days, when people speak of ‘being killed’ and ‘dying’ ... these words resonate differently: it’s not just dying but causing the death of others. It’s not just being killed but also killing. And here it is necessary to pause for reflection.”<sup>73</sup>

The time for reflection arrived in the session of the Mapai Political Committee held on 12 December 1940. Sprinzak called for an investigation of the catastrophe of the *Patria*. He supported his demand by pointing to the fact that “there are those who would draw parallels between the tragedy and the defense of Tel Hai. I for one do not regard the day of the *Patria* as a sacred day, and most certainly not as a day of prudence.” Sprinzak denounced the analogy as a “propaganda of lunacy.”<sup>74</sup> The actual question on the agenda was whether the *Patria* should be added to the complex of myths that gave ideological basis to the construction of Jewish force.

The dispute flared with full vehemence in the Mapai Central Committee convened on 15 December 1940. Sharett argued that Jewish history would render future judgment: the eagerness of the *ma'apilim* and the *Yishuv* for immigration to Palestine had generated a storm of emotion “until there had occurred what had occurred on the *Patria*. Things had developed to the point that something like that was actually able to occur!... It is utterly vital for our struggle in the future ... that we make this assessment.”<sup>75</sup> The historian Jacob Talmon later commented on that eagerness, with oblique reference to the *Patria* affair: “the *Yishuv*, gripped by despair, descended into madness.”<sup>76</sup>

Lubianiker objected to Sharett’s formulation of “the theses for the future historian to write on the *Patria* incident and its place in Jewish history.” He contended that if Sharett were the author of that history, perhaps it would be written like that, but that he, Lubianiker, would write it quite differently: “It will depend on the historian. We know how legends are created in the life of a nation. There’s not always a necessary link between the legend and the truth as it really was. It’s possible to create a legend.” Lofban radicalized the debate: “I feel a powerful sense of shame and moral disgrace when they compare this with Tel Hai or any other manifestation of valor and Jewish self-sacrifice.” It was painful for him to see how the concept of “martyrdom” was being twisted and distorted. “Jews sanctify the name of the Lord by killing other Jews? When was there ever such a thing in Jewish history?! Nowhere in the annals of our history is there any such crime!” Galili, infuriated by Lofban’s remarks, retorted: “How do you know there isn’t some young Trumpeldor, some Jewish Hirsh Lekert, who will risk his life to save his brothers being expelled from all the corners of the earth?... Do you wish to eradicate Masada from Jewish history? Stamp out Tel Hai?”<sup>77</sup> Katznelson had described the Bundist Lekert’s attempted assassination of the governor of the Vilna district in 1902, in revenge

for the army's brutal treatment of Jewish workers in a First of May demonstration, as "something great, in national terms as well."<sup>78</sup> Katznelson had been Galili's mentor from the very outset of his political career. Later Galili, despite his affiliation with Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad, was one of his loyal protégés among the Haganah leadership and it is clear that without Katznelson's full backing the sabotage of the *Patria* would not have taken place. Galili's comments revealed the activists' fear that their action on the *Patria* might be viewed as a mere act of terrorism, divorced from the context of independent Jewish defense, as well as their recognition that in certain circumstances a people had to respond and to be prepared to pay the ultimate price for that response. His words expressed a continuation of the idea expressed by Ber Borochov in 1916: "a proper and fitting successor to the executed Jewish terrorist has been found — in the Jewish guardsman." This sentiment was echoed in the subsequent claim in the Palmah's newspaper, *Alon ha-Palmah*, that the "*Patria* action was an expression of Jewish desperation, but also of militant fearless Jewish struggle prepared for any sacrifice."<sup>79</sup>

Eliezer Liebenstein (Livneh) acknowledged there were several differences between the two events. While the people of Tel Hai had lived and been educated in Palestine and had drawn their inner strength from its soil, the passengers on the *Patria* and *Atlantic*, by contrast, had "displayed a hidden Jewish strength whose sources we have not yet fathomed, and for which we are not responsible." Livneh contended that it was incumbent upon the labor movement to transform the *Patria* and *Atlantic* into a national educational symbol, as in the case of Tel Hai in an earlier generation. In response, Sprinzak proclaimed that just as he had no part in encouraging the legend of Sarah Aaronsohn, so would he resist any attempt to glorify the *Patria* affair as akin to Tel Hai.<sup>80</sup>

The moderates totally rejected any parallel between the *Patria* and Tel Hai. They refused to legitimate the use of force as a means for overcoming political obstacles. They rejected any construction of the *Patria* as a moral or pedagogical guideline. Despite the prevailing mood, in the midst of a world war that reinforced the sense that force was the only way of achieving political objectives, the moderates adhered to the line of constructivism. They emphasized that the bombing of the *Patria* was a deviation from the path of the labor movement: even if the sabotage had not resulted in tragedy, they still would have repudiated it as a departure from the proper course. They contended that since the deportation of the *Atlantic* immigrants had been unavoidable, it was superfluous to struggle against it or fan emotional reactions that might ignite into political violence.

Another immigrant ship, *Salvador*, sank in a storm in the Sea of Marmara as it left the Dardanelles in Turkey on 12 December 1940. Over 200 passengers lost their lives. An official of the British Foreign Office observed

that “There could have been no more opportune disaster from the point of view of stopping this traffic.” And indeed, the *Patria* and *Salvador* sinkings, compounded by the change in German policy on emigration from the Reich, led to a virtually total blockage of the sea route.<sup>81</sup> In March 1941, another immigrant ship, *Darien*, became the first ship to reach Palestine’s shores since the *Patria* in November 1940. As it approached, a renewed clash between the moderates and activists seemed imminent. In a meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive, Kaplan insisted that:

In my view, the *Patria* affair was a tragedy. [*Dr Santor*: The only Jewish action! *Mr Ben-Gurion*: That was a Zionist action!]... In Tel Hai, a small group decided it would take a stand to defend the place, even if they had to die there. But here 195 souls did not know or imagine their fate. They did not think and were not asked... You cannot create an ideology around that, a theory that’s more dangerous than the tragedy itself.<sup>82</sup>

Haganah members came to an agreement with a group of pioneers from the *Darien* that they would sabotage their ship if the British tried to deport them from Palestine. The *Patria* did not seem so exceptional an event after all. In a meeting of the Mapai Central Committee, Sprinzak announced that he had returned home dismayed after hearing of the ship’s arrival: “Woe to us if we have a repeat performance of the *Patria*, in whatever form. Should, God forbid, such a thing recur, I will consider myself as relieved of all my duties in the Zionist movement.” Katznelson stated that although he was at variance with Sprinzak’s view of the *Patria* affair, he agreed with him on one thing: “whatever action is taken in such matters, it has to be through the secretariat, and there will be accountability for whatever is done or not done.”<sup>83</sup> This was a clear admission that the activists were wrong in assuming they could maintain collective responsibility solely on the formal level. Opposition by the moderates forced them to accept that the existing political frameworks in the party should not be circumvented.

A year after the *Patria* affair, the press published criticism on the manner in which the immigrants rescued from the ship had been absorbed in the *Yishuv*. The Jewish Agency published data to refute the impression that no effort had been made to find employment for them. Nonetheless, a *Davar* editorial felt the need to urge its readers to try to make those who had been rescued feel at home, to create a sense of comradeship and brotherhood — an atmosphere of acceptance that was not merely lip-service but a necessary and vital obligation. As the opposition paper *Ha-Mashkif* sought to remind readers in an article banned by the censors: “The *Yishuv*’s official leadership is especially obligated to the *Patria* survivors.”<sup>84</sup> One public body that felt a particular responsibility for the *Patria* immigrants was Ha-Kibbutz ha-

Me'uhad, whose leaders had played a substantial role in urging the public to take action to prevent the *Patria's* departure, the decision to plant the bomb and the call to struggle against the deportation of the *Atlantic* immigrants. The movement attempted to absorb those rescued in its kibbutzim and a small number of immigrants from the three ships joined its ranks, attracted by its philosophy and political outlook, which supported the resort to force for attaining specific Zionist objectives. This was the sole public body that viewed the *Patria* affair as having educational value, as a justifiable act worthy of identifying with, despite its horrific outcome. But Galili was compelled to note in bitter sadness that "this nation, which, in its hour of twilight, when its national freedom collapsed, presented us with a symbol such as Masada, is unable to thread *Patria*, in unity and full recognition, on the glorious necklace of Hebrew heroism."<sup>85</sup>

In the course of deliberations on the "Lofban affair" and the "Jerusalem affair," Eliyahu Golomb and Golda Meirson (Meir) said that their daughters opposed any acts of internal violence. Meir argued that if they did not know how to preserve a sacred and innocent approach in the youth, there was little if any doubt that they had lost. She noted that in a meeting of the leadership of the Palmah someone had sent a special greeting to Ha-Po'el, counseling that a strong "fist" was now imperative (the raised fist was the symbol of the organization). That term, she pointed out, had particular connotations in Palestine, and it would be very bad if the labor movement could not learn to distinguish itself from the Revisionists who regarded the "fist" as an ideal and believed that the end sanctified the means. Yaakov Uri, one of the Mapai moderates and leaders of the *moshav* movement, remarked that the symbol of Ha-Po'el might imply a desire to inculcate the young with an admiration for the use of violent means. He added: "I know that I put myself at risk by saying this."<sup>86</sup> Recent events had shown this was no mere apprehension.

An interesting, more intimate perspective on the attitude of the labor movement's leaders to the resort to force, its objectives, cost and limitations, is given by the numerous responses of their sons and daughters to the *Patria* affair. For example, Tabenkin's son, Moshe, directed his wrath towards the deportation in a poem filled with pathos:

More searing than the disgrace of the slaughter,  
more agitating than the memory of the fires,  
than the horror of the bodies pulled from the water  
terrifying,  
burning in shame and rage,  
blazing with cries for retribution,  
is the humiliation of the exiled of Atlit.<sup>87</sup>

These lines, written in the same spirit as the slap delivered by Amos Ben-Gurion, contrast with Sarah Meirson's and Dalia Golomb's reservations regarding the use of violence in internal conflicts. Although they do not necessarily reflect what their parents believed, they do point to heightened concern among the leadership about the concepts and values used by the young to evaluate events such as the *Patria*. There would seem to be no similar event in the *Yishuv*'s history where discourse between parents and children spilled over from the domestic sphere to the public arena to become part of the historical record. It pointed both to the imminent emergence of a new generation on the Zionist stage and to the leaderships' personal agony and moral crisis. More and more people felt that their views on the resort to force, which had been correct for a specific time, had been shaken and had lost their relevance.

An interesting insight into the views of the youth is provided by their magazines. The first issue of *Ba-Ma'aleh*, published by the youth movement Ha-Noa'ar ha-Oved (Working Youth), which appeared after the *Patria* tragedy, opened with a story in the style of the *Aggadah* (homiletic passages in Rabbinic literature). It contained a description of Moses standing on Mount Nebo, receiving the commandment that he shall not enter the Land of Israel and asking forgiveness for his personal fate, if only the People of Israel shall be allowed to survive. Alongside, the magazine printed the story of the *Patria*, written in aggadic style. The issue also contained the outlines of a play to be performed during the movement's social activities, in the form of a dialogue between immigrants aboard a ship gazing towards Palestine and members of the *Yishuv* observing their bitter fate from the safety of the shore. The latter declare: "The prisoner is helpless to save or redeem / But your bodies and blood are bridges over hell / You are prisoners like us, *ma'apilim* of Israel / Only strive, press on, and together we will be redeemed."<sup>88</sup> An impassioned article, suffused with the aspiration for self-sacrifice for the sake of the nation's renewal, appeared in the Ascending Camps' newspaper:

We will shout "Hear O Israel" before we are sacrificed on the altar. We will go to the altar. There is no doubt ... each and every one of us. But not like our fathers. Our fathers shall know: their sons will come and say *kaddish* [prayer for the dead], for many generations after them ... as for us, we do not know that ... we shall not wait until they cast us on the altar ... even if we hurl ourselves into the pit, maybe the last of those still remaining will tread upon the bodies — and pass over!<sup>89</sup>

There was a huge distance between the passive acceptance of one's fate and vague hopes for a better future contained in *Ba-Ma'aleh* and the characteristically activist response of the Ascending Camps, as though they were not affiliated with the same party and movement. The conclusion from being "the last ones on the wall," i.e. the defenders of Jewish national revival,

was to rebel against Jewish fate, though not in the way Yosef Haim Brenner had meant 35 years earlier.<sup>90</sup> The young in that earlier period had been fired by another spirit, as expressed by Remez, who saw pioneering and settlement as the most important goals. But now, there was a greater sense of genuine physical danger, accompanied by an awareness of the reservoirs of strength that had been built up in Palestine over the previous decades. At the same time, one of the results of the detachment from traditional Jewish life in the diaspora became evident, the notion that the time had come to harness the power of Jewish desperation for the sake of the present, rather than for an abstract Jewish future. Even now the moderates contended that this was very far from giving legitimization to actions that could be interpreted as some kind of martyrdom.

Avigur subsequently said that the "historical truth was that we wanted to sabotage the ship and delay its departure. But what happened was something else entirely, a great tragedy."<sup>91</sup> From this perspective, the *Patria* deviated even from the activists' accepted notion of struggle. The result portended a step over a threshold that even they hesitated to cross. They had not intended the sense of desperation as a motivating force to go beyond the ideological discourse on the "last ones on the wall," which was meant to serve as a pedagogical means for accelerating preparations for the future, and not as a call for concrete action in the present. The *Patria* affair poignantly revealed the burden of responsibility entailed by the choice of resorting to force to achieve political ends. Avigur explained the method of struggle chosen as one

entailing a minimum of bloodshed. It was meant to achieve its objective without any bloodshed. If I had thought there was no other way but to spill blood, I would not have recoiled. But when I saw another way I opted for it. And I believe that was also Berl's consideration ... to try to go to the furthest possible limit without shedding blood.<sup>92</sup>

A boundary had indeed been overstepped in the *Patria* affair, albeit unintentionally, which is why Sharett believed that it was crucial for the Zionist project that it remain an exceptional event and not embody a shift to a new way of life and tactic of struggle. He thus hoped to forestall any possibility that this type of operation would cease to be regarded as exceptional, as something forbidden to imitate. Katznelson's parallel between the *Patria* and Tel Hai seems to have had a similar motive. In other words, the *Patria* was acceptable as a symbol or legend, but not as a way of life except under severe restrictions. At the same time, from the activists' point of view, elements of a new norm of behavior had emerged. Just as Tel Hai had established the principle that "a place once settled is not to be abandoned,"<sup>93</sup> the *Patria* affair laid the foundation for recognizing the willingness to sacrifice life for the sake of advancing illegal immigration.

*Conclusion*

The *Patria* affair was one of the most shocking events in the history of the British Mandate. In contradistinction to Tel Hai and *Exodus*, it did not become a symbol or an inspiring myth. It was only the opening scene in a long series of dramatic events that came to pass in Palestine and the Jewish world during the 1940s. The determination and power of desperation it represented did not become an emblem of the struggle of the Jewish people for sovereignty, neither at the time nor after the founding of the state. Nor did most *ma'apilim* feel they were bold emissaries of the people. Their representative, Erich Frank, who had had a personal hand in the planting of the bomb, observed that “the passengers on board the *Patria* were not heroes. If we had foreseen the disaster that came to pass, and had acted in spite of that, perhaps then it would have been possible to place upon our heads a crown of valor.” He drew a parallel between the *Patria* and the Boston Tea Party, enshrined as a central milestone in the struggle of the American colonies for independence, noting that “there are horrors from which we can learn a lesson: that the bow should be strained only to a certain point — in its time, the incident in Boston fulfilled its mission.” Frank acknowledged that many of the *Patria* survivors themselves had grave doubts in view of the consequences of the sabotage.<sup>94</sup>

The *Patria* was one of those searing failures that are the lot of every national movement aspiring to independence. The success in gaining entry to Palestine for the bombing's survivors was clouded by the deportation of the *Atlantic* immigrants. The loss of life made it difficult to identify with what the *Patria* was supposed to symbolize. Its ideological, moral and pedagogical consequences were likely to place formidable obstacles in the path of a national political movement aspiring to realize its objectives in the given reality. Nonetheless, in the violent and desperate atmosphere of the early 1940s, it was not at all clear that the *Patria* would remain an isolated incident. As the intense political polemic flared up and subsided, the accepted rules regarding decision-making were becoming blurred. Had the “unknown soldiers” of the *Patria*, to use Tabenkin's term, paid the price for erecting the barriers against a struggle that was not meticulous about the principle of preserving human life?<sup>95</sup> The lesson was hard to ignore. It was not easy to forget the sight of bodies being cast up by the sea every day for months. Both the moderates and the activists were horrified by the human toll exacted by the dream of realizing the Zionist vision. Although the two streams in Mapai adhered to their previous positions regarding the nature of the struggle, they both became acutely aware of the possible harsh consequences of their hope to witness the establishment of Jewish independence in their day. The awareness that they tried to repress, that blood would play an operative future role in the realization of Zionism, was forced to the surface. From the

perspective of the activists, as Galili later noted, “that chord of *Patria* established a certain degree of tension, a mood for war, for struggle.”<sup>96</sup> In other words, beneath the surface, the events of the *Patria* continued to reverberate in the political disputes over the directions for future policy.

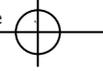
The dispute in Mapai centered on the operational decision-making methods, on how the young should be taught about the deed and its consequences, and the values that should guide the *Yishuv*'s struggle. The various sides agreed when evaluating the particular instances of the use of force in internal disputes, but disagreed to what extent the aggressive atmosphere of the struggle provoked such violence and how to curb it. Since this was not a dispute about practical political or organizational steps, and did not involve personal rivalry over leadership, it was possible to delay the decision on the resort to force in the Zionist struggle.

The controversy between the moderates and activists, which waned and was forgotten in the course of 1941, would be rekindled in full intensity in 1943 and after. Nonetheless, the *Patria* incident played an important part in perpetuating the two opposing currents within Mapai in regard to the resort to force. The intensity of the debate demonstrated that the topic would be a central bone of contention in future confrontations over the conduct of Zionist policy. The existence of a moderate current — in the sense of a group that would come together to present an independent position whenever a question with political and military implications arose — was now a fact. The bombing of the *Patria*, the shock in the wake of the huge toll, the displeasure over the way the decision-making apparatus had been circumvented, the sense of personal humiliation — all these factors combined to shape the reality of the two factions as an abiding element in Mapai throughout the 1940s.

## NOTES

This is a revised and shortened version of my article, “Oi artzi moladati: Parshat ‘Patria’” (Woe to My Homeland: The “Patria” Affair), *Tziyon*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (2001), pp. 495–530.

- 1 The original reads: “be-kum aleinu adam ... azai avar al nafshenu ha-mayim ha-zeidonim.” The Hebrew *zeidon* (seething, raging) here also has a connotation of “evil,” “wicked,” “malicious.”
- 2 Nicholas Bethell, *The Palestine Triangle: The Struggle between the Jews and the Arabs, 1935–48* (London, 1979), p. 95; *Davar*, 11 September 1940.
- 3 Yigal Elam, *Memalei ha-pekudot* (The Executors) (Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 93–125; Shabtai B. Beit-Zvi, *Ha-tziyonut ha-post-ugandit be-mashber ha-shoah* (Post-Ugandian Zionism in the Crucible of the Holocaust) (Tel Aviv, 1977), pp. 301–13; Munya Mardor, *Shlihut alumah* (Secret Mission) (Tel Aviv, 1957), pp. 35–77; Yehuda Slutsky, *Sefer toldot ha-Haganah* (History of the Haganah), Vol. 3, Part 1 (Tel Aviv, 1973), pp. 152–7; Bracha Habas, *Portzei ha-she'arim: Sipur koroteha shel aliyah-bet* (Breaching the Gates: A History of Aliyah B) (Tel Aviv, 1957), pp. 261, 274–83.
- 4 Shtorper was the head of the Committee for Sending Jews Overseas, an emigration office for deporting Jews from the Berlin, Vienna and Prague communities, which operated under



- Eichmann's supervision.
- 5 Arieh L. Avneri, *Mi-"Velos" ad "Taurus"* (From "Velos" to "Taurus") (Tel Aviv, 1985), pp. 278, 284–6; Slutsky, *Sefer toldot ha-Haganah*, p. 152; Dalia Ofer, *Derekh ba-yam* (Illegal Immigration during the Holocaust) (Jerusalem, 1988), p. 50; Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945* (London, 1979), pp. 60–76.
  - 6 Minutes of the Executive, 7 November 1940, Labor Archives, Tel Aviv (hereafter LA); minutes, Mapai Political Committee, 21 November 1940, Labor Party Archives, Beit Berl (hereafter LPA).
  - 7 Minutes of the Smaller Zionist Executive Committee, 10 November 1940, Central Zionist Archive, Jerusalem (hereafter, CZA).
  - 8 Ofer, *Derekh ba-yam*, p. 52; Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe*, pp. 66–7.
  - 9 "Protest Strike of the *Yishuv* in Palestine" (Hebrew), file of secretariat, Kibbutz Beit ha-Shitah, 20 November 1940, in Yitzhak Kafka'i, *Shnot ha-Mahanot ha-Olim* (The Years of the Ascending Camps), Vol. 2 (Tel Aviv, 1985), pp. 260–61.
  - 10 Minutes, Mapai Political Committee, 21 November 1940, LPA.
  - 11 Mardor, *Shlihut alumah*, pp. 63, 67; Berl Katznelson *Ktavim* (Collected Writings), Vol. 9 (Tel Aviv, 1948), p. 352.
  - 12 Letter, Yisrael Galili to detention camp prisoners of the Haganah (Hebrew), 19 November 1940, in diary of Noah Dagoni, Archive of Haganah History, Tel Aviv (hereafter AHH), box 80, folder 301, file 4. The details that appear in his diary were omitted from Dagoni's book, *Dapim min ha-kele* (Pages from Prison) (Tel Aviv, 1976). See also Slutsky, *Sefer toldot ha-Haganah*, pp. 217–21.
  - 13 Moshe Smilansky, "Min ha-havai" (From Daily Life), *Ha'aretz*, 19 November 1940.
  - 14 Mardor, *Shlihut alumah*, pp. 56, 58; Slutsky, *Toldot ha-Haganah*, p. 154. Although Meirav (Avigur) changed his family name during the 1940s, as did Sharett (Sharett) and Kleinboim (Sneh), for the sake of clarity I employ their new names consistently throughout the present article.
  - 15 Ofer, *Derekh ba-yam*, p. 55.
  - 16 From remarks by Avigur quoted by Ofer, *ibid.*, it appears that Sharett did not know about the decision, but this seems to be an attempt to protect Sharett's reputation. It is improbable that the "norm" of circumventing Sharett via the security apparatus, which prevailed later in the 1950s, was possible at the beginning of the 1940s, when the four brothers-in-law were all part of the decision-making apparatus in regard to security questions. Long before his testimony to Ofer, Avigur himself wrote that the "national institutions decided on bombing the ship." Shaul Avigur, *Im dor ha-Haganah* (With the Generation of the Haganah) (Tel Aviv, 1970), Vol. 2, p. 195. This statement implies that Sharett authorized the action, which is also substantiated by the testimony of Monya Mardor, *Yediot Aharonot*, 7 November 1980.
  - 17 On the decision-making apparatus in regard to questions of policy and security, see the interview with Aharon Zisling, 3 September 1950, AHH, box 106, file 118.7; Berl Reptor, *Lelo-heref* (Without Stopping) (Tel Aviv, 1973), Vol. 2, pp. 71–2; Yehuda Bauer, *Diplomatiyah u-mahteret ba-mediniyut ha-tziyonit, 1939-1945* (Diplomacy and Underground in Zionist Politics 1939–1945) (Tel Aviv, 1966), pp. 84–6; Habas, *Portzei ha-she'arim*, p. 280; Avneri, *Mi-"Velos"*, p. 290; Uri Brenner, *Le-tzava yehudi atzma'i* (For an Independent Jewish Army) (Tel Aviv, 1985), pp. 44–6; Slutsky, *Toldot ha-Haganah*, pp. 153, 218–19; Yosef Heller, *Bama'avak le-medinah* (In the Struggle for a State) (Jerusalem, 1985), pp. 38–40; Elam, *Memalei ha-pekudot*, pp. 94–102; Eli Shaltiel, *Tamid be-meri* (Always in Revolt) (Tel Aviv, 2000), p. 109.
  - 18 Ben-Gurion commented to Sneh: "I know you're in favor of a state for the Jews, and it won't be established without an armed struggle with the British. It was necessary to engage in that struggle now. They didn't allow me. There are too many 'Zionists' in Palestine — your man Grinboim, Sprinzak, they're Zionists from the diaspora." Testimony, Moshe Sneh, AHH, box 80, folder 158, file 2.
  - 19 Letter, Moshe Sharett to Rabbi Haim Bloch, 28 March 1962, CZA, S65/378. It is not clear why Sharett thought it proper at that specific time to disclose the apex of the command chain in the *Patria* affair to this particular correspondent. On the day Hoz visited prisoners in the

detention camp at the Mizra prison, Noah Dagoni made the following entry in his diary: "They say that when Moshe Shertok learned of the *Patria* incident he stated, although I didn't know about that action, I'm happy it was done as though I'd done it myself." Dagoni's diary, 28 December 1940, AHH, box 80, folder 301, file 4. This entry suggests that one of the prisoners had asked about it. Hoz, who certainly knew about Sharett's part, behaved like Avigur, defending his brother-in-law and the organization he headed, while presenting him as a supporter of the activists.

- 20 Testimony, Dr B. Lovotski, *Patria* file, Jabotinsky Institute, Tel Aviv; testimony by unidentified individual given to Shaul Avigur, 9 May 1957, AHH, box 80, file 46; David Niv, *Ma'arakhot ha-Irgun ha-Tzva'i ha-Le'umi* (Battles of the Irgun Tzva'i Le'umi) (Tel Aviv, 1967), Vol. 3, pp. 68–70. On the 25th anniversary of the *Patria* tragedy, the right-wing press in Israel criticized the labor movement for its behavior in the affair. Yisrael Eldad went, as was his wont, quite far. He wrote that if the Etzel was responsible for the bombing, "all the water in the Mediterranean would not be able to cleanse us of the blood." Yisrael Eldad, "Sfinot nitba'u, kvarnitim nitba'im" (Ships Sank, Skippers Drown), *Ha-Boker*, 26 November 1965. For the British attitude, see John Marlowe, *The Seat of Pilate* (London, 1959), p. 171.
- 21 *Davar*; 27 November 1940; *Ha-Boker*, 2 December 1940. The Arab assistance is, as far as I can determine, not mentioned in any of the relevant studies, nor in most of the press at the time. Yisrael Cohen hinted that "many citizens, Jews and non-Jews," helped in the rescue. Alsheikh (Yisrael Cohen), "Kever ha-ahim he-hadash" (The New Communal Grave), *Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir*, 2 December 1940. Arthur Ruppin, in the meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive, suggested trying to persuade the Arabs to request the British to have mercy on the refugees. Menahem Ussishkin vehemently rejected the suggestion, arguing that it was an affront to national honor. Yitzhak Grinboim had his own interpretation: "Jewish blood has been split, and when blood has been shed one doesn't use language like that of Dr Ruppin just now, and you don't turn to the Arabs." Minutes, Jewish Agency Executive, 28 November 1940, CZA.
- 22 Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe*, p. 71.
- 23 Quoted in Bethell, *The Palestine Triangle*, p. 94, and minutes, Jewish Agency Executive, 28 November 1940, CZA. See also Slutsky, *Toldot ha-Haganah*, p. 155.
- 24 Tz. M., "Le-hof moledet" (To the Shore of the Homeland), *Tzror mikhstavim*, Vol. 5, No. 93 (158), 3 December 1940, p. 1.
- 25 Alsheikh (Cohen), "Kever ha-ahim he-hadash" (emphasis added).
- 26 Reptor, *Lelo-heret*, Vol. 2, p. 71; David Nameri, *Sipuro shel Davidke* (Davidke's Story) (Tel Aviv, 1974), p. 102. The dispute between Reptor and Sprinzak took place before the convening of the Mapai Central Committee on 27 November 1940. Reptor was on the board of Solel Boneh, the Histadrut's roadbuilding and construction company, and a veteran activist in the Haganah in Haifa.
- 27 Slutsky, *Toldot ha-Haganah*, p. 156; Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe*, pp. 73–6; Avneri, *Mi-"Velos"*, pp. 296–8; Binyamin Hochdorf, who was an eyewitness to the deportation of the *Atlantic* immigrants, described his feelings after the event: "Kishinev, the riots of the Ukraine, they're nothing compared with that pogrom in Atlit, since there poor and miserable human beings, hounded souls were brutally mistreated, those who are most harried, who suffer the most in our murky world. Where is the Bialik, where the poet, who will carry the cry of these groaning multitudes to the corners of the wider world? Where is the prophet, the mourner, who will raise his curse upon the heads of the perpetrators of this despicable murder? May all of Israel, may every human being be shaken in his humanity." AHH, box 14, file 320.
- 28 Minutes of the Executive, 9 December 1940, LA; Katznelson, *Ktavim*, Vol. 9, pp. 372–6.
- 29 LA, box 16.4, temporary no. 30.
- 30 Yitzhak Tabenkin, "Yom zikaron — yom din" (Day of Remembrance, Day of Judgment), *Al ha-Mishmar*, 1 December 1950. In 1944, Yitzhak Sadeh recalled: "Day followed day, night followed night ... and from day to day and night to night the number mounted, reaching a toll that even the pessimists, and all of us are so used to seeing the dark side of things, were amazed: 212." Yitzhak Sadeh, "Arba shanim le-ason 'Patria'" (Four Years since the *Patria*

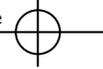


- Tragedy), in *Ktavim* (Collected Writings) (Tel Aviv, 1989), Vol. 2, pp. 126–9.
- 31 CZA, J1/4026.
- 32 Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 15 December 1940, LPA. See also Anita Shapira, *Berl: Biografiyah* (Berl Katzelson: A Biography) (Tel Aviv, 1980), Vol. 2, p. 603.
- 33 Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 15 December 1940, LPA.
- 34 The moderates also acknowledged this. Thus, for example, Kaplan commented that “we should not be frightened of victims. And we have to educate the public for that eventuality,” even if, given the world war, this was not the time for that. Minutes, Jewish Agency Executive, 16 March 1941, CZA.
- 35 Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 15 December 1940, LPA.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Minutes, Jewish Agency Executive, 28 November 1940, 15 December 1940, CZA; minutes, Smaller Zionist Executive Committee, 14 January 1941, CZA. Avraham Katznelson commented in the Mapai Central Committee: “In one of the meetings a member said that if he had been asked beforehand about the action on the *Patria*, maybe he would have agreed, but if had he known it would involve 150–200 victims, he’d have been opposed and would have rejected the operation. At that time we thought that the number of victims was no more than a couple of dozen, and the very mention of the figure 150–200 offended me deeply. Are *ma’apilim* mere ‘cannon fodder’ and ten people isn’t an enormous sacrifice? Can we regard the deaths of 150–200 in that way? After all, in [Maksim Gorky’s] play ‘The Mother’ there’s a line: those people who died belonged to somebody.” Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 9 January 1941, LPA.
- 38 Minutes, Jewish Agency Executive, 28 November 1940, CZA.
- 39 Letter, Moshe Smilansky to David Zakai, 15 December 1940, Genazim Archive, Tel Aviv, 161/73958-a. Smilansky ended the letter “with broken heart and dejected mind.” Etsel manifesto, CZA, S25/2633.
- 40 Minutes, Smaller Zionist Executive Committee, 14 January 1941, CZA. Sneh was of the view that what had transpired in Atlit was a “pogrom of the worst sort.” He argued that such an act demanded a sharp response. Grinboim rejected the comparison to a pogrom, and Sneh countered that the generation which had been educated by Grinboim himself could not accept such an act. He recalled a tale Grinboim had once told: “Every soft-hearted woman can cut up a live fish, because it’s silent, so there’s no pity for the fish.... We can’t be like a silent fish.”
- 41 Berl Katznelson, “Mah lefanim” (What Is Ahead), 10 January 1941, in *Ktavim*, Vol. 5 (Tel Aviv, 1947), p. 23. See also Shapira, *Berl* Vol. 2, pp. 604–9; *Be-hevlei milhamah* (In the Throes of War), comments by members of the World Ihud Council in Einot, 17 December 1940; minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 9 January 1941, LPA.
- 42 Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 9 January 1941, LPA.
- 43 “Im ha-ma’apilim” (With the Illegal Immigrants), in Levi Dror (ed.), *Sefer Ha-Shomer ha-Tza’ir* (Book of Ha-Shomer ha-Tza’ir), Vol. 2 (Merhavia, 1961), p. 61. Both its content and the publisher indicate that Haganah circles were responsible for the leaflet.
- 44 Reported by Sprinzak, minutes, Mapai Political Committee, 12 December 1940, LPA.
- 45 Ibid. Yisrael Cohen later described the incident as follows: “One of the Haganah entered the editorial office of *Ha-Po’el ha-Tza’ir* and slapped the cheek of its editor, Lofban. I was in the room at the time, immersed in writing and reading, and by the time I’d looked up to see what was happening, the fellow had absconded.” Interview with Yisrael Cohen, Oral Documentation Section, Institute for Contemporary Jewry, Jerusalem, A (114) 60. Even then, more than 30 years after the event, Cohen was reluctant to name the attacker, although he did note that he had fallen ill for several days after the event.
- 46 Yad Tabenkin Archive (hereafter YTA), Ramat Efal, section 15, papers of Yosef Harit, container 3, file 3, pp. 26–7.
- 47 Personal communication by Amos Ben-Gurion to the author, 5 January 2000. Amos “grew up wild,” to use Shabtai Teveth’s phrase, but it is difficult to excuse the action as some capricious act by youngsters in the light of the fact that one of the participants in the scheme, Mordechai Cohen, was 37 at the time. Amos joined the British army about a month after the



episode of the slap. For details on his biography, see Shabtai Teveth, *Kinat David* (The Zeal of David), Vol. 3 (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1987), pp. 261, 365.

- 48 Avneri, *Mi-“Velos”*, p. 303. Dostrovski wrote the investigative committee: “My sole intention was to express in a private manner, which no one else is responsible for, my protest against a searing insult to which it was impossible to respond in public. I regarded it as a great personal obligation to respond to what had occurred. To accuse a comrade of murder, to state that in public, in full knowledge that the accused has no possibility of proving his innocence, that is something that the insulted individual, as a human being, cannot simply pass over in silence. And especially when his hands are tied, and when his commanders are silent, due to an inability to respond [the first version has “and don’t respond”] in a fitting manner in public.” The letter and announcement of the verdict to Dostrovski in YTA, section 15, papers of Yisrael Galili, container 48, file 1. The letter completely exonerates all the others involved in the decision.
- 49 Yisrael Cohen, *Panim el panim* (Face to Face) (Tel Aviv, 1979), p. 248. The activists demanded that Lofban be dismissed from his position as editor. Zisling had insisted on that even before Yisrael Cohen’s article appeared. Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 27 November 1940, LPA; he was subsequently joined by Golomb. Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 15 December 1940, LPA.
- 50 Minutes, Mapai Political Committee, 12 December 1940, LPA;
- 51 Galili’s comments were omitted from the minutes of the meeting of the Mapai Central Committee held on 15 December 1940. They can be found in AHH, box 50, folder 80p, file 7. See also Avneri, *Mi-“Velos”*, p. 303.
- 52 Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 15 December 1940, LPA; Shapira, *Berl*, Vol. 2, p. 603. The first matter Ben-Gurion addressed when he returned to Palestine was the incident of the slap administered to Lofban. He expressed his sadness over what had transpired, “without any ifs or buts,” and then added: “Someone who slaps his comrade, that’s a despicable lowly act. But if that’s done by organized force, established with the intention of using force, then that’s far, far worse.” Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 19 February 1941, LPA.
- 53 Avneri, *Mi-“Velos”*, p. 303. Ratner was a professor of architecture in the Technion and served as first head of the National Command of the Haganah in 1938–39. The committee set up by Mapai was composed of Golomb, Yosef Baratz and Zisling. Golomb resigned from the committee, and in so doing prevented the continuation of its work, after he had “found” those who had carried out the action but not those behind it (as mentioned above, they were apparently headed by Golomb). Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 15 December 1940, LPA.
- 54 Dagoni, diary, 28 December 1940, AHH, box 80, folder 301, file 4. It should be noted that the scorn for the assistance of the British in rescuing the drowning passengers reflected the sense of deep bitterness towards the British who kept them behind bars and not necessarily disregard for the rescue action itself, as is also clear from additional entries in Dagoni’s diary.
- 55 R. Binyamin, “Mashehu” (Something), *Moznayim*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1941), pp. 180–81. R. Binyamin also personally consoled Lofban on what had happened, and the latter replied: “I don’t know what you heard and how. If what you’re referring to is that well-known act of hooliganism, you heard correctly. But I am not the one who should be the object of regret. I find no fault in me. What we should regret is the fact that this is merely one of the manifestations of the well-known style of life prevailing among us. Where are we headed for?” Letter, Lofban to R. Binyamin, 14 January 1941, CZA, A357/40.
- 56 Dov Sadan, “Tzenzurah” (Censorship), *Davar*, 17 November 1948. The article was devoted to the activities of R. Binyamin against censorship in the *Yishuv*. Relations between Lofban and Katznelson had remained tense since the quarrel on the editing of *Davar* in 1925. After Lofban’s death, Abba Sikra (Abba Ahimeir) surveyed relations between the two in an article published in the first issue of *Herut*, “Le-toldoteihah shel sinah tziborit ahat” (On the History of One Public Hatred), 3 October 1948.
- 57 Yitzhak Tabenkin, *Dvarim* (Speeches), Vol. 3 (Tel Aviv, 1974), pp. 27–8. Yozik, “Al ma’aseh ‘Patria” (On the *Patria* Action), speech, Conference of the Activities Council of Ha-Mahanot ha-Olim, 6 December 1940, in Kafkafi, *Shnot Ha-Mahanot ha-Olim*, Vol. 2, p. 262.



- 58 Yitzhak Lofban, "Im esrim shnot ha-Histadrut" (On 20 Years of the Histadrut), *Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir*, 27 December 1940.
- 59 Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 27 November 1940, LPA.
- 60 Meir Avizohar, *Be-re'i saduk* (In a Cracked Mirror) (Tel Aviv, 1990), pp. 332–3; Shapira, *Berl*, Vol. 2, pp. 618–25; Yael Yishai, *Si'atiyut be-tnu'at ha-avodah: Si'at B be-Mapai* (Factionalism in the Labor Movement: Faction B in Mapai) (Tel Aviv, 1978), pp. 82–4; David Zayit, *Halutzim ba-mavokh ha-politi* (Pioneers in the Political Maze) (Jerusalem, 1993), pp. 96–7.
- 61 Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 19 March 1941, LPA; letter, Sprinzak to his daughter Naomi, 7 January 1941, AL, IV-104-127-15. A letter from Naomi Sprinzak to her father has not been found.
- 62 Minutes, Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad Council, Givat ha-Shloshah, 17 January 1941, YTA, Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad Archive, box 5, container 6, file 1. Haim Sturman, one of the founders of Ha-Shomer and a member of Kibbutz Ein Harod, was killed in an Arab ambush in the Beit She'an Valley on 15 September 1938; Joseph Trumpeldor died in 1920 while defending the northern settlement of Tel Hai.
- 63 "Al kivro shel Yitzhak Ben-Yaakov" (At the Grave of Yitzhak Ben-Yaakov), *Davar*, 22 December 1941.
- 64 Eyal Kafkafi, *Emet o emunah* (Truth or Faith) (Jerusalem, 1992), pp. 16, 21, 42, 50.
- 65 "Ma'aseh mahpir" (A Disgraceful Act), and editorial, *Davar*, 9 January 1941; minutes of the Executive, 23 January 1941, LA; minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 15 January 1941, LPA.
- 66 Minutes of the Executive, 23 January 1941, LA.
- 67 Tz. M., "Tziyunei sha'ah" (Signs of the Times), *Tzror mikhtavim*, Vol. 5, No. 100 (165), 28 March 1941, pp. 1–2. 156 bodies were pulled from the water and buried, but the total number of victims, as mentioned, was far greater.
- 68 A circular to the Camps, 6 December 1940, in Kafkafi, *Shnot Ha-Mahanot ha-Olim*, Vol. 2, p. 263; Habas, *Portzei ha-she'arim* p. 280.
- 69 See Sharett's comments in minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 15 December 1940, LPA.
- 70 Testimony, Yosef Avidor, AHH, box 106, file 4325.
- 71 Correspondence between Munya Mardor and Shaul Avigur, January 1950, in Gershon Rivlin (ed.), *Alei zayit ve-herav* (Olive Leaves and the Sword) (Tel Aviv, 1990), p. 105. For Tel Hai, see Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago, 1995), pp. 39–47, 84–95, 147–77; and Anita Shapira, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881–1948* (New York, 1992), pp. 98–109.
- 72 Berl Katznelson, "Im ha-sefer" (With the Book) [1941], in Yisrael Halperin (ed.), *Sefer ha-gvurah* (The Book of Valor), Vols. 1–2 (Tel Aviv, 1940), pp. 9–12.
- 73 Minutes, Mapai Council, 14–16 April 1939, LPA. See also Shapira, *Land and Power*, pp. 251–2. Luz, who was a member of Degania Bet, was appointed to the board of the Hever ha-Kvutzot (an association of small agricultural communes) and subsequently served as Knesset Speaker.
- 74 Minutes, Mapai Political Committee, 12 December 1940, LPA.
- 75 Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 15 December 1940, LPA.
- 76 Jacob Talmon, "Milhemet sheshet ha-yamim be-perspektivah historit" (The Six Days War in Historical Perspective), in idem, *Be-idan ha-alimut* (In the Age of Violence) (Tel Aviv, 1977), p. 315.
- 77 Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 15 December 1940, LPA. For Galili's comments, see AHH, box 80, folder 50p, file 7.
- 78 Zeev Ivianski, *Mahapekhah ve-terror* (Revolution and Terror) (Tel Aviv, 1989), pp. 178–81. Lekert was subsequently executed by hanging (*ibid.*, pp. 115–16). Shapira, *Land and Power*, p. 40, notes: "That defiant act by Lekert, the first Jew to take vengeance, became a popular theme for balladry."
- 79 Ber Borochoy, "Ha-terrorist vеха-shomer" (The Terrorist and the Guardsman), May 1916, in Mendel Zinger, *Be-reshit ha-tziyonut ha-sotzialistit* (The Beginnings of Socialist Zionism) (Haifa, n.d.), pp. 406–8; *Alon ha-Palmah*, No. 45 (September 1946), p. 17.
- 80 Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 15 December 1940, 1 January 1941, LPA. Livneh was a publicist and thinker, considered one of the principal activists in Mapai and at the time editor

of the Haganah journal *Ma'arakhot*. Sarah Aaronsohn (1890–1917), was one of the leaders of the secret pro-British espionage network, known within British intelligence as “A Organization” and locally as “Nili,” which operated under Turkish rule in Syria and Palestine in 1915–17. She committed suicide after interrogation by the Turkish authorities.

- 81 Wasserstein, *Britain and European Jewry*, p. 77.
- 82 Minutes, Jewish Agency Executive, 16 March 1941, CZA.
- 83 Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 19 March 1941, LPA. In a meeting of activists convened in Haifa in March 1941, Sprinzak stated that “owing to the new dispute that has erupted — which I hope will not become public — the mood is becoming hot, like in the days of the *Patria* and the White Paper, and the old are becoming young, and their mood is so agitated that they feel the need to argue and quarrel with someone!” LA, IV-104-127-166.
- 84 Letter, Y. Bachar to Moshe Sharett, 13 November 1941, CZA, S25/2633; *Davar*, 3 November 1941; “Shanah le-ason *Patria*” (A Year since the *Patria* Tragedy), *Ha-Mashkif*, November 1941, Jabotinsky Institute, *Patria* file.
- 85 Y. G. [Yisrael Galili], “Im ‘Sefer ha-gvurah” (With the ‘Book of Valor’), *Mi-Bifnim*, Vol. 7 (May 1941), pp. 137–8.
- 86 Minutes, Mapai Central Committee, 15 January 1941, LPA; minutes of the Executive, 23 January 1941, LA. In the aftermath of the slapping incident, Lofban announced in the Mapai Central Committee that he had feared a possible attempt on his life only once: during the days of the struggle against the Revisionists (implying that this was the second time). Minutes, Mapai Political Committee, 12 December 1940, LPA.
- 87 Moshe Tabenkin, “Im ha-elbon” (Upon the Insult), *Mi-Bifnim*, Vol. 7 (February 1941), p. 88; Shapira, *Berl*, Vol. 2, pp. 474–5.
- 88 “Moshe al har Nevo” (Moses on Mount Nebo), “Mi-neged” (Standing Aloof); Michael, “Dusi’ah be-hof ha-moledet” (Dialogue on the Shore of the Homeland), *Ba-Ma’aleh*, 8 December 1940.
- 89 “Haver/Internationale” (Comrade/“Internationale”), in Kafkafi, *Shnot Ha-Mahanot ha-Olim*, Vol. 2, p. 260.
- 90 On the origins of the phrase “the last on the wall” in Zionist discourse, see Yosef Haim Brenner, “Dapim” (Pages), in *Ktavim* (Collected Writings), Vol. 3 (n.p., 1985), p. 109.
- 91 Interview with Shaul Avigur, AHH, box 80, folder 299p, file 30.
- 92 *Ibid.*
- 93 A subsequently famous phrase coined by Aharon Sher, a worker at Tel Hai, in an article two months before the clash. See Shapira, *Land and Power*, pp. 99–100.
- 94 Minutes, Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me’uhad Council, Givat Hayim, 26–28 December 1941, YTA, Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me’uhad Archive, box 5, container 6, file 4; A. Frank, “Le-parashat *Patria*” (On the *Patria* Affair), *Mi-Bifnim*, Vol. 15 (February 1951), pp. 74–81.
- 95 David Remez made similar comments in a meeting of the Executive, 29 January 1942, AL.
- 96 Comments by Galili in the “Campfire” Club, 7 June 1957, YTA, box 15, Archive of Yisrael Galili, box 171, file 1.