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The German Unit of the *Palmach*: a suicide commando in the Second World War Palestine Mandate

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ABSTRACT
In 1942, the Special Operations Executive (SOE) partnered with the Haganah to provide irregular forces to defend the Palestine Mandate. One force, known as the German Unit, was remarkable – it was a suicide unit and required its members to shed their liberated identities and assume the personas of their former oppressors. This article examines how the unit, trained by both organisations, prepared for their task. By employing a combination of traditional sources and interviews, it explores the role of identity and restores this little known story to the historiography of the Second World War while recovering the voices of the unit.

Introduction

Suicide missions and suicide commandos are, despite popular imagination, more often the province of Hollywood films than history. Despite their prevalence in film tropes, true suicide units rarely had a place in Allied forces during the Second World War. An exception to this rule, the German Unit of the *Palmach* existed as a suicide unit which ultimately survived but its survival was far from the only factor which made it exceptional. Examining this unique unit, how it prepared for its task, and its postscript will help build understanding of how the experience of preparing for a specific type of battle shaped and was shaped by the experiences of the individuals who trained for it. Despite the relevance of this unit, it remains all but neglected in the broader historiography – a mere curiosity. Investing the unit, the historical context that brought it into existence not only enriches the broader historiography of the Second World War by restoring neglected voices, but provides lessons on the preparation of

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suicide units. It demonstrates that while the preparation for battle may occupy a particular moment in time, its effects outlast its duration.

In the midst of a period of crises and invasion scares in 1941 and 1942, the British Empire and the *Haganah,* the primary Jewish paramilitary organisation in the Palestine Mandate, cooperated in establishing a number of contingency plans for use in the event of an Axis invasion of Palestine Mandate. The German Unit was one such contingency, among others which included the Palestine and the Friends Schemes to create other stay behind units to destroy both the critical infrastructure of the Mandate territory and create combat capable auxiliaries. The mission of the German Unit was deceptively simple: infiltrate the advancing German Army as individuals or small teams, make it to critical locations or people, and destroy or kill them. There was no exit plan. Those behind the Unit assumed that the members of the German Unit would be killed undertaking their mission.

The scarcity of literature on the subject of irregular indigenous forces including the German Unit, and especially on their use in Palestine Mandate, results in part from difficulties in obtaining sources. The structure of the cooperation between the *Yishuv* (the primary organised Jewish community at the time of the Palestine Mandate) and the British Empire was such that few written records have yet been discovered that provide detailed accounts of the daily activities of cooperative units. Many documents employed in this examination were declassified only recently. The secrecy, organisational complexity, and internecine bureaucratic warfare of the Special Services, including the Special Operations Executive (SOE), its predecessors, and other organisations such as the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), means that much went unrecorded and many records were lost or not filed logically. Additionally, officers received orders to 'destroy all incriminating documents,' which meant that many documents and details were forever lost.[1] Even where documents exist, there is a question as to their veracity. There is evidence that the politics of special operations and the internecine bureaucratic warfare was such that personnel were willing to falsify the war diaries, which indicates a general willingness to write misleading official documents and reports.[2] This necessitates handling any official documents with care and a healthy dose of scepticism.

[1]The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) HS 7/86 *SOE History 53, History of SOE in the Arab World*, 1944-1945, *'Telegram to RWW'*, 09 September1945.
[2]Leo Marks, *Between Silk and Cyanide: A Codemaker's War, 1941-1945,* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 588.

Most of the archival documents employed come from two archives, the UK National Archives and the *Haganah* Archives in Tel Aviv.[3] The personal papers examined largely replicate the information in the operational documents. As a result, the project research focus remained on the documents the unit generated, and the broader cooperation between the *Haganah* and SOE which generated items such as meeting minutes, telegrams, financial documents, and reports from the field. Collectively, these sources provide some understanding, not just of the overall scheme of cooperation and its political dynamics, but details of how this cooperation functioned on the ground and at the tactical level. The recent declassification, and the remote location of many of the documents, means that other researchers have yet to examine many of the documents generated.

To compensate for missing material, this paper employs oral history, which allows the inclusion of new indigenous perspectives and information on those aspects of cooperation unobserved by official British sources.[4] Potential interviewees were identified through their participation in formal and informal social networks such as veterans of the German Unit as well as those who participated in other aspects of the cooperation between the SOE and *Yishuv*.

Oral history is an imperfect medium where there is margin for error and problems with memory. The author personally conducted all of the interviews cited in this article and the interview process was designed to identify inconsistencies. In most cases, interviews began with general narrative questions before switching to interrogative questioning in order to expose discrepancies. When possible, the interviews occurred over multiple hours with a break between the forms of interview. In some cases, this process was repeated with the same interviewee on several occasions in order to incorporate information gained from other sources. Beyond approaching the interviewees through trusted networks, non-targeted questioning, such as questions about unit marching songs, helped build trust and make for productive sessions. Although it was not always possible to employ the full interview method, the balance between narrative and interrogative questioning remained. In many ways, the interview process provides verification superior to that available to the researcher who engages solely with official sources, as there tend to be very few ways to determine whether an official report suffers from an author's lapses in memory or intentional obfuscation. Whether its origin was documentary or oral, information critical to the analysis was considered substantiated only if it was possible to verify the information, at least in principle, through cross corroboration and critical analysis.

[3]The author was also able to access a number of personal files of kibbutz members held in various kibbutz archives, but due to issues of permissions they cannot be cited but have been employed solely for the purpose of verification.

[4]All Interviews were conducted by the author.

The region at the focus of this study is marked by contested language and narratives. To avoid becoming overly involved in the regional politics of narrative, ownership, and belonging, this article employs, in most cases, the nomenclature (though not always the spelling choices) of the British records. Throughout, the mandate territory is referred to as Palestine or the Palestine Mandate. This does not imply any legitimacy to any given claim or historical attachment to the territory. It is shorthand for the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine that was awarded to Britain in 1920, and which was the full, legal description of the territory at the time. This study does not endorse or deny the narrative of Arab or Jewish people within the territory that was the Palestine Mandate. Except in direct quotations from sources, this article refers to the Arab population of Palestine as the British records do, and the Jewish population is referred to as the *Yishuv*. The term Britain or British also includes British Imperial forces such as the British Indian Army, the Australian Army and New Zealand Army, and associated air and naval forces.

The German Unit existed as a result of cooperation between the *Yishuv* and the British Empire. By the Second World War, the relationship between the *Yishuv* and the British Empire had gone through a number of interactions that helped establish the specific historical moment during which the German Unit could come into existence. As a result of the First World War, the British Empire gained control over the territory of the Southern Levant.[5] In 1920, military rule ended, and in 1923 the governance of the region fully transferred to the British as part of a League of Nations mandate. Almost as soon as the Mandate began so did a series of violent disturbances, which extended through the 1930s.[6] In each, the targets of violence were the Jewish community and in each case the British did not have enough personnel on hand to respond with enough rapidity. During the 1936-39 riots the British had little choice but to reach out to local Jewish organizations to supplement the internal security and defence of the mandate territory.[7]

In Mandate Palestine, the primary Jewish armed organisation with which the British cooperated was the *Haganah*, the dominant Zionist paramilitary in the Mandate. The Jewish communities in the Palestine Mandate set up the *Haganah* in 1920 as small part-time volunteer defence force which the individual settlements and cities themselves

[5]Benny Morris, *1948, A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*, (London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 11.
[6]Ibid., p. 12.
[7]Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence*, (London: University of California Press, 2008), p. 244.

funded.[8] These forces proved insufficient to respond to the attacks that came in the 1920s and 1930s.[9] By the time of the Arab Revolt of 1936, the *Haganah* was under the authority of the Jewish Agency, which functioned both as the shadow government of the *Yishuv,* and as the primary official representation of the *Yishuv* to the British. During the 1936 Arab Revolt the *Haganah* for the first time established a unified national command, a standing field force, and first entered into organised cooperation with the British.[10]

It is hard to estimate the exact number of members of the *Haganah* as it was thoroughly integrated into society and the majority of its members served locally in a reserve capacity. Good estimates of the scale of the *Haganah* and the numbers from which it could draw to supply special units are even more elusive when it comes to the period of the German Unit. For example, Benny Morris cites an MI6 report from 1942 to arrive at the number of roughly 31,000.[11] This would mean that roughly one in sixteen of the overall population of the *Yishuv* were in the primary paramilitaries. Other estimates suggest Morris may have undercounted and indeed there is evidence to suggest moving the count higher.[12]

As war broke out, the *Haganah* found itself in a complicated relationship with the British. As the violence of the Arab Revolt died down the British Government changed its policies towards the Palestine Mandate by banning all immigration and Arab land sales to Jews. With this change in policy, Britain now viewed the *Haganah* as a threat not a partner. As a result, on one hand, the *Haganah* continued its cooperation with the British even as the British turned against it and arrested its members; on the other hand, it organised protests and worked to undermine British policies within Palestine. This complicated relationship with the British would shape the experience of those who served in the German Unit, and how the German Unit saw its role.

The tense situation in Palestine worsened as the war progressed. By the end of 1940, the mandate administration had introduced restrictions on the sale or transfer of land

[8]Edward N. Luttwak and Daniel Horowitz, *The Israeli Army 1948- 1973,* (Cambridge, MA: ABT Books, 1983), p. 7.

[9]Ibid., p. 9.

[10]Ibid., p. 11.

[11]Morris, *1948,* p. 28.

[12]Others, such as an SOE estimate from the period put the number closer to 60,000 while others have put it still higher – see: TNA HS 3/146, *Memorandum on Jewish Settlement Police*, 06 September1941.

to Jews.[13] This led the mandate administration, among others, to object repeatedly to the employment of indigenous forces recruited from within Palestine, and especially from the *Yishuv*. Through 1942 the British maintained a bifurcated approach to working with the members of the *Yishuv* in indigenous force schemes. Although they actively sought opportunities to leverage the skills and capabilities offered by the *Yishuv,* they were also deeply concerned about the long term and after-effects that such cooperation would bring, especially in terms of the transferability of skills. This reflected not only a genuine debate within British imperial agencies but also competition between them. As late as June 1942, Security Intelligence Middle East (SIME) in Cairo was concerned that allowing the *Haganah* to form a home guard would endanger the security and stability of Palestine, especially after the war, and considered this danger might be so great as to outweigh the benefits of having additional forces to resist an Axis invasion.[14] The High Commissioner for Palestine (HC Palestine) was particularly concerned about this issue, terming the *Haganah* 'a menace to security'.[15]

Some of the Palestine government's objections to the use of indigenous forces by special operations and the military may have had more to do with inter-organisational politics than with real concerns. For example, in a meeting with the local heads of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), Moshe Shertok, head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency (JA), noted that he 'failed to see why authorities which themselves employed tens of thousands of men supplied by the JA should develop an obsession with the sinister purpose when a handful of similar men were employed by SOE.'[16] Prior to the Second World War, the number of members of the *Yishuv* authorised by the mandate administration to carry weapons reached about 23,000, the bulk of whom were *Haganah* members.[17] While the administration may have had some discomfort with the employment of the *Haganah* by SOE, it also employed large numbers of *Haganah* members itself. It would appear, then, that either this was a case of the right hand not knowing what the left was doing on the part of the mandate administration, or that, given the antagonism between the administration and the SOE, the objections to the employment of indigenous forces were, for the most part, a way to assert the administration's authority. The relationship between the SOE, the administration (and the British Army), and the *Yishuv* as well as a lack of trust between the *Yishuv* and the various British authorities would have a profound effect on the German Unit and its eventual preparation and employment.

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[13]Norman Bentwich and Helen Bentwich, *Mandate Memories: 1914-1948,* (London: Schocken Books, 1965), pp. 165-166.

[14]TNA KV 5/34 *Extract from Security Summary, SIME Cairo, M.E. No. 51*, 04 June1942.

[15]TNA CO 733/448/15, *Cypher Telegram to SOS Colonies*, 01 April 1942.

[16]TNA HS 3/207 *Minutes of Conference of Palestine Scheme*, 09 November1942.

[17]TNA HS 3/146 *Memorandum on Jewish Settlement Police*, 09 May1941.

The crises and invasion scares of 1941 such as a coup d'état in Iraq and the perceived threat of invasion from Lebanon and Syria were exacerbated by the German advance towards El Alamein in 1942. These events unfolded against a backdrop of rivalry, mistrust, and competition within the Mandate territory. By the end of April 1941, many believed that an Axis invasion through Lebanon and Syria was imminent. The fall of Greece and the Axis conquest of Crete magnified those fears with the mandate administration quickly becoming more willing to collaborate with the *Haganah*. The General Officer Commanding (GOC) Palestine made several recommendations to the HC Palestine during the invasion scare that previously would have been both unthinkable and certainly opposed. Included in these recommendations was a far greater level of para-militarisation of the *Haganah* controlled Jewish Settlement Police (JSP) than had been the case even at the height of the Arab Revolt. The GOC proposed converting Jewish settlements into strong points and training the JSP for anti-paratrooper work, to engage in tank hunting, to adopt guerrilla tactics, and to protect settlements against Arab attack, and all without British assistance.[18] Furthermore, he suggested overlooking the possession of illegal arms by members of the Jewish community.[19] HC Palestine agreed in principle to all of these proposals; in his initial response on the question of arms, he wrote, 'in view of urgent need for additional equipment for defence purposes I am prepared to acquiesce in this procedure.'[20] This relaxation of restrictions was critical for the establishment and training of the German Unit. Under the pre-1941 conditions it would have been difficult for the German Unit to conduct the wide ranging and open training required for its mission. Moreover, it would have been far more difficult for SOE to provide resources and work with the Unit as openly as it did.

The crises of 1941 and Operation Exporter (the British invasion of Syria and Lebanon) lent support to the argument that the British Empire should take better advantage of the resources available through the *Yishuv*.[21] For example, during Exporter, cooperation with the *Haganah* alleviated the British manpower shortage to some extent as the continued expansion of the JSP freed up British forces to be sent to the elsewhere and the provision of scouts from the *Palmach (Plugot Machatz* or Strike Companies – elite forces within the *Haganah*) – augmented the strength and capabilities of the reconnaissance elements of British forces. The SOE's unpublished official history mentions that cooperation with the *Haganah* during 1939-1941 was 'to some extent necessitated through the lack of suitable personnel to undertake their

[18]TNA CO 968/39/5, *Cypher Telegram to SOS Colonies*, 02 May 1941.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

[21]TNA SOE History 53, *History of SOE in the Arab World,* p. 2, pp. 1944-1945.

requirements.'[22] The weakness of the Army and SOE in preparations for the invasion of Syria led those in the SOE who favoured cooperation to comment that the situation might be 'for the first time, a real opportunity to use Friends Organization (*Haganah)*', partially because the various British stakeholders would now finally countenance their employment.[23] This meant that when the next crisis came soon after, the SOE was primed to help establish *Haganah* and *Palmach* units to address the crisis, and they had a better set of conditions to train such units.

This next crisis, which would see the establishment of the German Unit, was not long in coming. In May 1942 the tide of battle in North Africa turned against Britain and preparations began to establish contingencies in case the Palestine Mandate was overrun by the advancing Axis forces. The British authorities began to anticipate this possibility some time earlier. In April 1942, HC Palestine wrote that he recognised 'that circumstances may arise in which the training in arms and discipline given to individuals by these organisations may be capable of utilisation in the country's defence.'[24] This helped give the SOE and *Haganah* the space they needed to establish units, such as the German Unit, as part of the 'Palestine Scheme', the title given to a series of plans developed in case of a German invasion. This planning became even more urgent when, in July 1942, reports began to filter back to London of the possibility that Palestine might be overrun in a matter of weeks.[25] At this moment of crisis the German Unit was born out of the *Palmach*.[26]

The *Palmach* itself was an organisation created out of cooperation between SOE and the *Haganah* and was central to all the SOE's plans for raising indigenous forces from the Zionist paramilitaries of Palestine in1941. The *Palmach* was the wellspring from which most cooperative arrangements flowed. It provided recruits for the German Unit and provided most of its supportive infrastructure. By 1942, the SOE could count on at least 600 members of the *Palmach*, organised into six companies. The *Palmach* received a high level of training from other elements of the *Haganah* which the SOE

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[23]TNA HS 3/201, *Report to A/D*, 11 September1940.

[24]TNA CO 733/448/15, *Cypher Telegram to SOS Colonies*, (01 September1942).

[25]TNA HS 3/207, *Telegram to AD/H*, (12 July1942); Edward Horne, *A Job Well Done: Being a History of the Palestine Police Force 1920-1948,* (Tiptree, Essex: Palestine Police Old Comrades Association, 1982), p. 249.

[26]There were other units that made use of German Jewish refugees, the majority of these were part of the British Military and neither a form of indigenous force nor formed from direct cooperation with the *Palmach*, they included the SIG which served in the Western Desert, Number 3 Troop of 10 Commando, and the Secret Listeners from MI19.

could then use.[27] In 1942, a SOE officer on a tour of Palestine reviewed the *Palmach* and pronounced them to be suitable for all of the SOE's purposes. The officer stated that he was 'much impressed by their bearing and obvious determination no less than by their remarkable efficiency' and quoted the remark allegedly made by the Duke of Wellington, 'I do not know what the enemy will think of them, but by God they frighten me.'[28]

When reporting on the suitability of members of the *Haganah* for the requirements of SOE and its training, the SOE Commander explained his opinions by noting:

> The men selected for training speak a number of different local and European languages…no better human material could exist for our purpose; these are honourable fanatics who will stick [sic] at nothing, physically and mentally tough, highly disciplined and used to guerrilla warfare.[29]

Although he was speaking of the *Haganah* in general, this quote applied particularly well to the members of the German Unit. Indeed, their personal backgrounds in many ways helped to ready them for each of the three aspects of the arduous training they undertook. The commander of the Unit was Shimon Avidan. Avidan was born in Germany but moved to Palestine Mandate in 1934 and his various combat experiences included service in the Spanish Civil War.

While not all members of the German Unit had Avidan's level of combat experience most had gone through periods of life that helped prepare them. Hayim Miller was from Vienna and had as young teenager taken part with his family in the Austrian Civil War of 1934.[30] Avigdor Cohen was born in Austria, had entered Palestine illegally, bypassing British attempts to stop immigration.[31] He was eventually arrested – not as an illegal immigrant – but because the British feared he and other German Jews were Nazi spies. He was held in detention and upon his release spent time in the *Palmach* before joining the German Unit.[32] As part of the early *Palmach* he had experience evading capture by the mandate administration's Palestine Police. Even before joining the German Unit, he had been injured and had and lost members of his unit fighting dissident Jewish paramilitaries.[33]

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[27]Author's interview with Hayim Miller, 14 January 2010.

[28]TNA HS 3/207 *Situation Report for October*, 1942, (24 October 1942).

[29]TNA HS 3/207, *Report to D Section Cairo*, (05 August 1940).

[30]Author's interview with Hayim Miller, 14 January 2010.

[31]Author's interview with Avigdor Cohen, 06 September 2010.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

Oreon Yoseph had not seen significant combat by the time he entered the German Unit but had faced severe deprivation.[34] Yoseph had been a talented athlete before escaping Europe to Palestine.[35] On arrival in Palestine he joined a work collective which lived outdoors and split the pay and resources they gained among the collective. In this group, five workers a day fed a group of around fifty people. In practice they starved.[36] These conditions lasted for several years. Many of the members the Unit had similar stories. Thus, when they entered the German Unit they were in some ways already prepared for the intensity of training as well as the physical and psychological challenges it entailed. In addition to these qualities the members of the Unit had certain other demographic similarities. Most if not all were secular but identified Jews; all were Zionist; and all were recent arrivals from Germany or Austria. This gave the Unit a series of common experiences and identities on which to build a cohesion that extended beyond hatred for the enemy.[37] At the same time their experiences at the hands of the Nazis cannot be discounted; almost all had personally suffered from the activities of the Nazis and their allies.

Preparing the Unit

In order to achieve the objectives of the German Unit its members required three distinct forms of preparation with each relating to a different component of the mission. Looming in the background was the suicide nature of the unit. This required its own distinct form of preparation – one for which the members of the unit were already well primed. The unit also needed to ready itself for the physical and combat related tasks that would be incumbent on members of the unit. This aspect of training in some ways closely resembled that of other elite combat units. Perhaps most difficult issue was the members of the unit had to learn to blend effortlessly into the German Army.

Preparing for Suicide

Readying for a suicide mission might appear to be the most difficult aspect of preparation for the German Unit; however, neither the training curriculum itself nor the veterans' memories of the Unit emphasised the suicide nature of the Unit. Interestingly, unlike the culture and training of Japan's kamikaze pilots or the more modern suicide bombers, there is no evidence that the German Unit developed any culture, identity, or ritual of martyrdom. Not only was there little direct preparation

[34]Yoseph had seen some combat – just not as much as many of the others - interview with Oreon Yoseph (Lux), 15 September 2010.
[35]Author's interview with Oreon Yoseph (Lux), 15 September 2010.
[36]Ibid.
[37]This is worth noting as it was not the case with other attempts to create units out of German Jewish refugees such as the SIG or No. 3 Troop 10 Commando.

or instruction given about the suicide nature of the Unit, at least according to one veteran, it was neither discussed nor particularly emphasised in the thoughts of the men.[38] Rather than demonstrating a lack of preparation for their anticipated death, this may reflect a larger cultural acceptance of the possibility of death in combat among certain important subcultures within the *Yishuv* during this period. If this was the case, then specific preparation was unnecessary since the broader cultural moment prepared them for the results of their mission.

Two important factors might have encouraged the personal acceptance of the mission and the nature of the Unit among its members: ideology and historical contingency.[39] Historical contingency influenced ideology and became a means through which history was interpreted in a reinforcing cycle that led individuals including those in the German Unit to accept or, more accurately, self-enforce discipline and adherence to mission. The personal experiences of the members of the Unit amplified these already powerful trends.

Ideologically, the participation in self-defence, even at the cost of one's life, was a key principle within the ideology of the *Yishuv*. As Meir Chazan noted in a study of Kibbutz women and guard duty, by the late 1930s, even the most strident pacifists of the *Yishuv* believed ideologically in the necessity of armed self-defence.[40] For most of the members of the German Unit, who were more ideologically associated with Labour Zionism (a revolutionary, socialist leaning ,and often agrarianist stream within Zionism), armed self-defence was a means to an end, a means to throw off the taint of the old world and become 'a new Jew'. Taking part in defence and security was, especially for the *kibbutzim*, a part of the revolutionary nature of the Zionist project to make the individual worthy and overcome their Diaspora background.[41] Further, taking part in self-defence was integral to building a socialist utopia.[42] The society of the kibbutz and its ideological youth movements, did not see taking a role in self-defence as an act of bravery as much as failing to do so was seen as an act of cowardice.[43] This to some extent may explain the absence of martyrdom narratives,

[38]Author's interview with Avigdor Cohen, 06 September 2010.

[39]Historical contingency is an often overused phrase with a plethora of meanings – in this article it refers to collective memory and experience of past events.

[40]Meir Chazan, 'The Struggle of Kibbutz Women to Participate in Guard Duties During the Arab Revolt, 1936–1939', *Journal of Israeli History: Politics, Society, Culture*, 1 (2012), p. 92.

[41]Ibid., p. 98 & p. 87.

[42]Ibid., p. 98 & p. 87.

[43]Ibid., p. 90.

both within the memories of the veterans of the German Unit, and within their training curriculum.

Being part of an ideological oriented community is one thing, accepting the ideology another, but the members of the Unit were not ideological automatons. Rather, their adherence to the mission and its ultimate outcome reflected their individual agency. That they accepted the ideology was based at least in part on historical contingency, which the ideological organisations selectively interpreted and presented to members. The ideological and historical context that set the conditions for the acceptance of the suicide mission may not have begun entirely with the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903, but the pogrom and its aftermath were critical.

For the Zionist movement as a whole the Kishinev pogrom and the pogroms that followed it resulted in widespread calls for self-reliance in the form of self-defence.[44] In the immediate aftermath of Kishinev, the calls for self-defence organisations arose from across the more secular segments of the Jewish community of Eastern Europe. Even the cultural Zionist, meaning one against the establishment of a political state in the Levant but a supporter of the establishment of a national home, and its leader Ahad Ha'am argued for the necessity of armed self-defence. In widely distributed writings immediately following Kishinev, Ahad Ha'am wrote that 'it is a disgrace for five million human souls to unload themselves on others, to stretch out their necks to slaughter and cry for help, without as much as attempting to defend their own property, honour and lives.'[45] The anti-Zionist, socialist Jewish organisation known as the Bund responded to Kishinev with calls for the creation of Jewish self-defence organisations. The labour Zionist movements reacted similarly and thus began establishing self-defence groups in Jewish population centres in Eastern Europe.[46] Those who formed these groups – formed the ideological antecedents for and, in some cases were members of the leadership of the *Yishuv* during the Second World War. In the German and Austrian context such self-defence groups were not widespread in the immediate aftermath of Kishinev, however the communities formed similar groups following the First World War. In Germany, Jewish First World War Veterans banded together to create the Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten (RjF) which fought to protect Jewish property and people, and to honour the Kapp Putsch

[44]Inna Shtakser, 'Self-Defence as an Emotional Experience: The Anti-Jewish Pogroms of 1905-07 and Working Class Jewish Militants', *Revolutionary Russia*, no. 2 (2009), p. 164.
[45]Monty Penkower, 'The Kishnev Pogrom of 1903: A Turning Point in Jewish History', *Modern Judaism,* no. 3 (2004), p. 194.
[46]Ibid., p. 193.

(1920) and the riots of November 1923.[47] Many members of the German Unit had fathers who were First World veterans in the areas where RjF was active, while others had families who participated in similar self-defence groups organised around the protection of workers.

The Kishinev pogrom might have had less of an impact on members of the *Yishuv* such as those went into the German Unit had it not been for the inclusion of two poems, *City of Slaughter* by Hayim Nahman Bialik and *He Told Her by* Yosef Haim Brenner, which were on the compulsory reading list of all labour Zionist affiliated educational organisations during the period.[48] This means that most if not all of the members of the Unit would have been intimately familiar with them. The ideological movements used the poems as a lens through which the youth were to understand the collective experience of the pogroms and their current reality. Bialik's work is accusatory, attacking those who did not rise to take part in self-defence and implies that, because they failed to take part in defence, their deaths, like their lives, were pointless.[49] Anita Shapira, one of the foremost scholars of the *Yishuv*, noted that Brenner actively argued for self-defence but with an emphasis on revenge.[50] The marching song of the German Unit echoes Brenner's call for vengeance. Brenner argued that 'the desire for revenge demarcates the young New Jews from their forebears'. For Brenner, vengeance was part of the healthy emotional fibre of a nation in renewal, whereas to shrink from vengeance is a symptom of disease, not a lofty moral quality.'[51]

As Shapira noted, Brenner's poem both established and reflected the *Yishuv*'s understanding of the role of self-defence:

> A worthy versus a pointless death became a cardinal question for the crystallizing Zionist-national ethos. It found expression in the distinction between dying in defence of Jewish life, honour, and property in the Land of Israel and dying in a pogrom in exile. And note not only Jewish life and property,

[47]Derek Penslar, 'The German-Jewish Soldier From Participant to Victim', *German History,* 3 (2011): p. 439.

[48]Anita Shapira, "'In the City of Slaughter" versus "He Told Her"', *Prooftexts*, 1-2 (2005), p. 86.

[49]Hayim Bialik, "The City of Slaughter" in *Complete Poetic Works of Hayyim Nahman Bialik*, ed. Israel Efros, (New York: Histadruth Ivrith of America Inc, 1948), pp. 129-143

[50]Shapira, "In the City of Slaughter," p. 101.

[51] Ibid., p. 99.

> but Jewish honour as well. Honor was an important element of the new national ethos: it was pivotal to the distinction between the New Jew and the Old.[52]

Such a sentiment also provided the answer to Bialik's challenge of how to imbue life and death with meaning. If as the conduct of their lives suggests, the members of the German Unit adhered to this ideology, then an understanding this ideology provides a window into why the issue of the suicide nature of the Unit was not of cardinal importance. For the members of the German Unit, if the situation had deteriorated to the point where the Unit was called upon to fulfil its tasks, the choice was not one between a long life and suicide rather it was a choice to determine the manner of death. On one hand was the threat of death without meaning, while on the other was the chance to imbue the inevitable with vengeance, honour, and ultimately meaning.

The personal experience and sentiments of the members of the German Unit only served to enhance the desire for vengeance and the potential for a meaningful death. It is important to note that many of the members of the Unit were more recent arrivals from Austria and Germany and therefore had already experienced life as a Jew under the Nazis. As Avigdor Cohen testified, by 1942 they knew what was going on in Europe and what the Nazis were doing to the Jews and so for the members of the Unit the war was personal.[53]

A brief analysis of the marching song of the Unit reflects the personal identification with the war. The song, a mixture of humour and seriousness, concludes with the line 'צוררינו את גרמניה', which translated from Hebrew means 'Germany you are our enemy.'[54] In Hebrew there are two words commonly translated as enemy, צר and אויב. However, there are differences between the two. Whereas אויב refers more directly to 'enemy' in a general context, in the context of the song צר (צוררינו) implies a more personal enemy, one who wishes the destruction of each Jewish person.[55] Such an

[52] Ibid., p. 95.

[53]Author's interview with Avigdor Cohen, 06 September 2010; This was not unique to the German Unit rather similar experiences were not uncommon among members of the Haganah – multiple interviewees such as Avraham Benyoseph, Yonah Hatzor, and Avraham Silverstein who all served in the same period testified to this such as Avraham Benyoseph, Yonah Hatzor, and Avraham Silverstein.

[54]Author's interview with Hayim Miller.

[55] צר comes from a root word meaning to besiege, it then seems to have developed the implication to destroy entirely. צר is used in a classical rabbinic to refer to an attacking enemy serious enough to justify holy war, it is also worth noting that among the interviewees צר was used to refer to the Germans but not the Arabs in either the context of the 1936 Arab Revolt or the 1948 War, in these cases אויב was employed.

individualised characterisation in a unit marching song both reflects and reinforces the sentiments expressed by some of the interviewees. Their war was deeply personal.

Members of the German Unit did not require a strong narrative of martyrdom to prepare them for the suicide nature of the Unit. Their acceptance of the potential outcome came from their culture and experiences before they joined. These provided an individualised hatred for the Nazi enemy and a personal identification with the war. It was coupled with a realistic understanding of the situation, again built on their experiences and aspects of historical contingency. Ideology reinforced this already powerful mixture together with concepts of a worthy death which likely rang true to the members of the Unit based on their previous experiences of the Nazis. Taken together this helps explain that while the idea of a suicide unit, and its preparation for that ultimate eventuality might be of particular interest to historians, for the members of the German Unit it was not the most salient feature of their own preparation for battle.

Becoming German

By 2010, decades after the German Unit had disbanded, two aspects of their training remained with the Unit veterans. One was a specific exercise in loading and firing pistols taught to them by an SOE trainer and the other were some of the most incongruous elements of the Nazi German identity they learned to emulate. When interviewed for this research they recalled to perfection the words of some antisemitic songs they sang such as the *Hekerleid* with its lyrics "*Judenblut vom Messer spritzt, dann gehts nochmal so gut* (the Jewish Blood sprays from the knife and once again things are so good)". They remembered the antisemitic jokes, and in some cases they even retained Nazi material and could still remember Nazi procedures. To some extent this is unsurprising for those in the German Unit as no aspect of their preparation was more important than their ability to infiltrate the German Army. Without this none of their other preparations would have been relevant and their mission would have failed. To guarantee the success of their planned operations the members of the German Unit had to develop not only a fluency in the customs, culture, and practice of the German Army but a level of innate comfort with them as well. The Unit achieved this by creating a bifurcated world and training environment.

In the forest above *Mishmar HaEmek* was a line. On one side of the line was the Palestine Mandate and on the other Germany.[56] On the German side was an immersive training world where the members of the Unit would learn to assume the identities of their personal oppressors. The difficulty of the process meant that it did not happen overnight. Initially, even though most had only been members of the *Yishuv* for a short time, they found it difficult to purge themselves entirely of their new identities and

[56]Author's interviews with Oreon Yoseph (Lux), Hayim Miller, and Avigdor Cohen.

language. They found it difficult to return to speaking German exclusively, the language that had been their native tongue a few short years earlier. Eventually, while in the camp they were able to fully return to the language of their former homes and add the slang of the German Army.[57] It was not just language that they learned to adopt. Across the line they marched as Germans, carried themselves as Germans, developed proficiency with German weapons, and familiarised themselves with the German military. In the camp they had German documents, paraphernalia (such as songbooks, passports, IDs, and pay-books), equipment, weapons, and some German uniforms.[58] In this regard the course resembled one more suited to spies than commandos.[59]

Learning the language, movements, organisation, and techniques of an adversary is one thing while seamless integration requires something more – an adoption of the culture. In the case of the Nazis this would have proven a particular challenge for the members of the Unit as it meant adopting a culture in which hatred of Jews was a central feature. This meant members of the Unit would have to seem to find antisemitic jokes humorous and originate such jokes themselves. For Avigdor Cohen this meant singing the songs, such as the *Horst-Wessel-Lied,* that less than four years earlier he had been forced to stand and sing every day in front of his class in Austria as a form of humiliation.[60] There was some irony in the fact that a tool of humiliation and oppression was relearned and recontextualised as part of a tool set to allow for vengeance and a form of redemption. It appears that these more cultural aspects of training were successful; some members even started to originate new antisemitic cartoons for fun.

The cognitive and identity challenge presented by becoming the oppressor may explain the strong identity retained by the members of the Unit. For many members it was not the first unit with which they trained. It was not a unit in which they saw combat and it was not the last unit in which they would serve. Some served later in other elite units. Yet, at least those interviewed for this research seemed in particular to retain a strong bond and sense of identity as veterans of the German Unit. This suggests that there was something specific about the experience of serving in the German Unit that shaped their identity. As already mentioned, the combat training was not significantly different from that of other units and the suicide mission of the Unit was never at the forefront of their thoughts. It seems probable that this experience of becoming

[57]Ibid.
[58]Author's interviews with Oreon Yoseph (Lux), and Hayim Miller.
[59]The German Unit's sister unit, the Arab Unit, trained near them in the forests above Mishmar HaEmek in a very similar style. That unit was, at least initially employed in an intelligence gathering fashion and is a part of the lineage of several Israeli intelligence and commando units.
[60]Author's interview with Avigdor Cohen.

German was one which bound the members of the Unit together. It was an experience not shared by other members of the *Yishuv* and was one which few others outside could identify or understand. This provides a key insight into the cognitive aspects of training as distinct but as potentially and equally important to combat focused training in shaping individual identity.

Physical & Commando Training

One of the challenges of physically preparing the German Unit for its eventual function was that no one was sure of the exact skill set the members might require. It seems that as a result the Unit received wide-ranging training in a large number of skill sets. All of it was at high level and overall, it represented some of the best that SOE and the *Haganah* could muster. Yet, it is worth noting that despite the close cooperation and level of training, the training was not conducted at an SOE facility but with the SOE coming to the *Haganah* facilities. The SOE also provided sanction and official cover for all the training conducted. This allowed the Unit to conduct training openly, which in earlier years would have been impossible. Additionally, as with all units of the *Palmach*, the training was not full time. The land for the German Unit's training as well as the food and other supplies came from *Kibbutz Mishmar HaEmek*. As a result, the members of the Unit split their time between weeks of training and weeks of agricultural and physical labour. While this may have taken away from time specifically for training it provided the resources the Unit needed to exist and was, in and of itself, physically demanding. Coupled with this work physical training included intense physical fitness training and route marches.

Preparing for the Unit's employment clearly required more than physical fitness. Their training emphasised a wide range of combat and special operations skills. For some of these courses the trainers came to the unit, but for the majority of the courses the members of the German Unit travelled to other locations, many of which were simply further up Mount Carmel from *Mishmar HaEmek*.[61] For the courses that took place away from the *Mishmar HaEmek* and during their time working in agricultural labour, the unit had to pretend to be a standard unit of the *Palmach*. The *Haganah* put the members of the German Unit through almost every course run by the *Haganah* at the time. While some courses were common to many members of the *Palmach* others were more unusual. Among the more common courses were those on small unit tactics and fighting in a built up environment.[62] The entire unit also went to the machine gunners training course where they were taught by none other than future IDF Chief of General Staff and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was already a rising

[61]Author's interviews with Hayim Miller and Avigdor Cohen.
[62]Author's interview with Oreon Yoseph (Lux).

star within the *Palmach*.[63] Throughout the courses they learned proficiency with German, French, Italian, and British weapons.[64] These were likely supplied by SOE.

Among the less common courses which the *Haganah* provided to the German Unit was one on small craft sailing and navigation.[65] Interestingly, in order to achieve a higher standard of training the *Palmach* sent the entire Unit through a squad commander course together.[66] It is worth noting that at the time the squad commander course one of the highest courses available in the *Palmach*.[67] There is some suggestion that the Unit also may have received some form of platoon commander course. There are two potential explanations for why the Unit was sent to such command courses. One possibility is that the nature of the mission meant that each member of the Unit would have to make independent command decisions. However, the command courses were in many ways the most serious tactical courses available to the members of the *Palmach* and it simply may have been an expedient way to undertake a higher level of training.

In addition to those courses taught solely under the auspices of the *Palmach*, there were courses taught by the British and curricula that were replicated by both the British and the *Palmach.* Of these courses several were directly relevant to the special tasks which the members of the Unit undertook after the *Palmach* disbanded the German Unit. One of these was the course on sabotage and demolitions. Both the British and *Palmach* took part instructing these courses.[68] Unlike some of the other courses, sabotage and demolitions were of direct relevance to the Unit mission. In these courses Unit members learned how to manufacture different types of improvised explosive, how to plant mines, and how to plan demolition for maximum effect.[69] In addition to the use of explosives, these courses also taught how to sabotage infrastructure such as railroads.[70] During these courses unit members practiced on the infrastructure that existed in Palestine.[71] Together with the sabotage courses were

[63]Author's interviews with Hayim Miller and Oreon Yoseph (Lux).
[64]Author's interview with Avigdor Cohen.
[65]Author's interview with Oreon Yoseph (Lux). This course was likely the same one undertaken by the PALYAM - the precursor to Israel's Flotilla 13 naval commanders.
[66]Author's interview with Hayim Miller, Oreon Yoseph (Lux), and Avigdor Cohen.
[67]The platoon commander course was only established in 1941.
[68]Author's interview with Oreon Yoseph (Lux).
[69]Author's interviews with Hayim Miller, Oreon Yoseph (Lux), and Avigdor Cohen.
[70]Author's interview with Oreon Yoseph (Lux), 15 September 2010.
[71]The German Unit was not the only *Palmach* Unit to practice sabotaging and infiltrating British infrastructure as a part of cooperative training with SOE. A fact that would eventually prove problematic to the British in their fight against the *Yishuv* a few years later.

ones on infiltration, reconnaissance, and surveillance. They would have direct utility to those who took part in the *Saison de Chasse* when members of the German Unit were called upon to fight to supress the *Irgun Tzvai Leumi* (IZL), a rival paramilitary within Palestine.

Of all the courses the one that had the most profound effect on the identities of the veterans of the German Unit was one delivered by a British instructor named Hector Grant Taylor.[72] Grant Taylor was one of the SOE's top trainers in close combat and assassination and he ran a course sometime referred to as the 'school for murder'.[73] In this course the members of the Unit learned how to identify and prioritise targets in a fluid combat environment. They learned ways to take decisive action and rapidly overwhelm their enemies. Grant Taylor instructed them in the use of a wide variety of weapons and techniques for close combat.[74] The course prioritised speed and accuracy as a critical aspect of assassination. The training regime was intense in order to develop the muscle memory and instinctive motions required.[75] Decades later when interviewed for this article, the veterans of the Unit enthusiastically volunteered to show off the motions they had memorised so long ago. These techniques, which were of clear relevance to the mission of the Unit, eventually served many of the members of the Unit in other unexpected contexts.

The wide variety of physical and tactical training that the members of the German Unit received could speak to a lack of organisation and a lack of focus on purpose. They were given training because it was available not because it was relevant. However, given the resources the training involved, another explanation is more likely. Without a clear idea of the circumstances that the German Unit would face, the SOE and *Haganah* worked together to equip it with a set of skills that would serve regardless of the specific context of the Unit's eventual employment. This, in and of itself, is one concept of preparing for battle. Rather than trying to anticipate the specific physical and tactical skills the unit needed, SOE and the *Haganah* tried to equip them with a broad skill set to cover many eventualities. The broad nature of the skill set meant it was extremely fungible to other types of operation while at the same time the elite status of the Unit, and some aspects of their training, resulted in a form a path dependency for some members in setting the stage for the next phase of their lives.

From Training to Practice

Despite years and the intensity of preparation the German Unit never performed its function. After the Second Battle of El Alamein in November 1942, the sense of crisis

[72]Author's interview s with Hayim Miller, Oreon Yoseph (Lux), and Avigdor Cohen.
[73]Gavin Morimer, *The SBS in World War Two*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 52
[74]Authors interviews with Hayim Miller, Oreon Yoseph (Lux), and Avigdor Cohen.
[75]Ibid.

waned as the Nazis retreated. For a while the German Unit lingered on as an elite unit with no purpose. Several members of the unit infiltrated Prisoner of War camps to gain intelligence from captured Germans. Their ability to do so suggests the efficacy of their training. There was talk of bringing the unit into the British force structure but the *Palmach* did not want to surrender control.[76] As of 1944 parts of the Unit remained in training above *Mishmar HaEmek*. It is here the second phase of their story began, a phase in which they made use of the training they received though not in the way it was intended.

As time elapsed members of the unit left in small numbers to other assignments, although the core remained. In February 1944 the IZL declared a revolt against the local British administration and by spring the *Haganah* had made the decision to oppose the revolt by military means which began a period known as the *Saison de Chasse*. The *Haganah's* decision risked a civil war and the *Haganah* realised it required elite forces for the task. The remnants of the German Unit proved ideal for the task. *Mishmar HaEmek* evolved from a kibbutz and training facility to an underground prison. Avigdor Cohen found himself serving first as a prison guard and interrogator of captured high value members of the *Irgun* who were held at the German Unit's base in *Kibbutz Mishmar HaEmek*.[77] However, potentially in recognition of his special training, he and several other members of the unit were sent to act as bodyguards for leaders of the *Haganah* and the Jewish Agency who feared *Irgun* retaliation.[78] He also helped to ambush and attack IZL members.[79] Hayim Miller put his training to use in more direct ways. Miller ran a team in charge of covert surveillance and the identification of high value IZL personnel.[80] He directly employed his training from the German Unit. Only by late 1944 did Hayim Miller and other members of the unit join the Jewish Brigade Group in Italy, and finally find themselves fighting the enemy against which they had trained for so long.[81] For many members of the German Unit, the Second World War was only the start of many wars to come. On return from Europe,

[76]The British had created another unit called the SIG for infiltrating the German Army in North Africa. Jews were not put in command which instead was given to a Nazi deserter who betrayed the unit on its operation. Some members of the German unit indicated that they knew of this and it must have played a part in their decision not to go under direct British Army control. This has proven impossible to verify. It is worth noting that the German Unit and SIG were two of several attempts made, including the British 3 Troop No. 10 Commando, and the American Ritchie Boys of German Jewish refugees.
[77]Authors interview with Avigdor Cohen.
[78]Ibid.
[79]Ibid.
[80]Author's interview with Hayim Miller.
[81]Ibid.

they fought the British and the skills of clandestine warfare they had learned several years earlier undoubtedly proved useful. What followed were more wars as they took part in the 1948 War and later service in the Israeli Defence Force (IDF).

The history of the German Unit demonstrates that the story of preparing for battle is longer than the period of training. What prepared the members of the German Unit for their suicide mission began many years earlier and was part of a more general cultural moment. The aspects of the training that centred on re-Germanisation may also have had lasting effects on the identities of participants. The preparation for the physical and military requirements of their task were highly fungible and proved useful in contexts never intended. The German Unit may have only existed for a short period when its members prepared for suicide but when they survived, the impact of their preparations carried on throughout their lives.