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## FOLLOWING A POLISH TRAIL. POLAND'S MILITARY COOPERATION WITH THE MOVEMENT OF REVISIONIST ZIONISTS BEFORE WORLD WAR TWO

### Introduction

The recovery of Poland's independence in 1918 and the proclamation of Israel's independence in 1948 are almost thirty years apart. However, the roads to these two events started under comparable circumstances and followed a very similar course until the end of the First World War. For both nations, the turn of the twentieth century (albeit for radically different reasons) saw the almost complete demise of ideas of armed action and an unprecedented surge in political activity. For both Poles and Jews, the breakthrough came in 1914 with the formation of the first armed units, both commanded by leaders named Joseph: Józef Piłsudski's 1st Cadre Company and Trumpeldor's Zion Mule Corps. There were similarities in the years that followed as well – the Polish Legions and the Jewish Legion fought on the fronts of the Great War. Their patrons and strongest personalities (though no longer commanders) were Józef Piłsudski and Vladimir Jabotinsky. Moreover, both Poles and Jews tried to seize all possible opportunities on their way to their hoped-for independence. Therefore, from 1914 to 1918, smaller and larger armed formations were established alongside almost all the belligerent great powers. The shared path was separated by the caesura of 1920,

when the army, called to life from the Polish Legions and commanded by the Head of State, rescued the young nation at the gates of Warsaw. At the same time, a small, two-company Jewish force led by Jabotinsky – as far as their very modest capabilities permitted – successfully repelled Arab attacks during the Nabi Musa riots.<sup>1</sup> A few months later, the British disbanded the last subdivisions of the Jewish Legion, with Jabotinsky and his closest associates ending up in a British prison.

After 1921, when all hope for establishing the “Jewish national headquarters” promised in Lord Balfour’s declaration<sup>2</sup> had been dispelled, Zionist activists began to divide over the question of choosing a path towards building their own state. The trend for political action continued to dominate, with Chaim Weizman taking the lead. Socialist Zionists, among whom David Ben-Gurion was a leading figure, also postponed the question of sovereignty until the future, concentrating on expanding the *Yishuv*<sup>3</sup> and its economic capacity (not forgetting also the implementation of socialist ideology). Other currents of Zionism either abandoned the issue of independence or treated it as a challenge for future generations. It is worth mentioning that the majority thought the same way about using armed struggle – in the pacifist world after the First World War, representatives of the dominant current of Socialist Zionism were the vanguard of the anti-militarist movement.

One of the few Jewish politicians who constantly took both the issues of the army and the creation of their own state as their goal was Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880–1940). In 1925, he began to form his political base, establishing the Union of Zionists–Revisionists at a convention in Paris. Initially, it was a party within the Zionist movement. The Revisionists participated in successive Zionist congresses, actively joining their deliberations. At the 14th Congress in 1925, the Revisionists were represented by five delegates; at the 15th Congress in 1927, there already were ten, and at the 16th Congress in 1929, they won twenty-one seats. The peak of their popularity came with the 17th Congress held in 1931, at which the Revisionists were represented by fifty-two delegates, accounting for 21% of the total number. At

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<sup>1</sup> D.K. Heller, *Jabotinsky’s Children: Polish Jews and the Rise of Right-Wing Zionism* (Princeton–Oxford, 2017), pp. 32–34.

<sup>2</sup> B. Regan, *The Balfour Declaration: Empire, the Mandate and Resistance in Palestine* (London–New York, 2018), pp. 49–81.

<sup>3</sup> *Yishuv* – a term used to describe a Jewish community in Palestine before the proclaiming of Israel’s independence.

the 18th Congress in 1933, a trend of departing from the ineffective World Zionist Organisation, in the view of the Revisionists, was already evident – 45 revisionist delegates attended, accounting for 14% of the participants, against 138 socialist envoys (44%).<sup>4</sup> However, due to growing conflicts, contradicting aspirations and, above all, the conservatism of the General Zionists and Socialists, in 1935, the Revisionists ceased cooperating with other groups within the World Zionist Organisation altogether.<sup>5</sup> In August 1935, they organised autonomous elections for the New Zionist Organisation. The active right to vote was given to all Jews of both sexes who had reached the age of eighteen and had signed the following declaration: “I demand a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan River. I demand social equality without *Yishuv*’s class struggle.”<sup>6</sup>

Even before the revisionist movement became independent, it sought allies in the struggle to establish a Jewish state. Jabotinsky looked for the possibility of forming armed units even at the side of Ataman Symon Petlura, who had a reputation for being a bloody persecutor of Jewish communities in Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> As it turned out in the following years, the natural and very good choice for him was the Second Republic of Poland. A large part of the supporters of Jabotinsky’s ideas came from Poland. The Revisionists made no secret that they wanted to emulate the Polish road to independence; the insurgent tradition and the Polish culture influenced a large part of their elite. Revisionist leaders – especially Jabotinsky – were also heavily influenced by the legend of Józef Piłsudski.<sup>8</sup> Most important, however, was that the Polish government had the same goal as the Revisionists: the voluntary exodus of the Jewish population from Poland. Both sides could base their cooperation on these grounds, which Laurence Weinbaum splendidly summarised as a “marriage of convenience.”<sup>9</sup>

By far, the most interesting page of the history of Polish-Jewish cooperation is one that remains basically unknown – strictly military cooperation. The Repub-

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<sup>4</sup> Y. Shavit, *Jabotinsky and the Revisionist Movement 1925–1948* (Tel Aviv, 2005), p. 384.

<sup>5</sup> R. Medoff, C.I. Waxman, *The A to Z of Zionism* (Toronto–Plymouth, 2009), p. 221.

<sup>6</sup> W. Żabotyński, *Nowa Organizacja Syjonistyczna* (Cracow, 1935), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> B. Avishai, *The Tragedy of Zionism: How Its Revolutionary Past Haunts Israeli Democracy* (New York, 2002), p. 124.

<sup>8</sup> Heller, *Jabotinsky’s Children*, p. 146.

<sup>9</sup> L. Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience. The New Zionist Organization and the Polish Government 1936–1939* (New York, 1993).

lic – mainly for political reasons – was careful not to publicise its participation in the training and arming members of revisionist organisations. Their main goal was to create a Jewish state in the Middle East, which had to happen at the expense of the British colonies in Palestine and Jordan. The covert nature of this cooperation means that both sources and studies on this subject are scarce and incomplete. Weapons exports to Palestine before 1939 have been covered by such authors as Jerzy Łazor,<sup>10</sup> Marek Deszczyński and Wojciech Mazur,<sup>11</sup> while Poland's participation in the training of members of the Haganah, Betar and Irgun can be read about in studies by Laurence Weinbaum,<sup>12</sup> Eliyahu Lankin,<sup>13</sup> Łukasz and Mateusz Sroka,<sup>14</sup> Aleksander Klugman,<sup>15</sup> Edward Kossoy,<sup>16</sup> Daniel Kupfert Heller,<sup>17</sup> and Colin Shindler,<sup>18</sup> among others, as well as in contributory studies authored by young Polish researchers.<sup>19</sup> In addition, because of its sensational aspect, the subject often appears in articles published in popular history magazines.<sup>20</sup> Also helpful in delving into the topic of Polish-Jewish military relations are the memoirs

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<sup>10</sup> J. Łazor, *Brama na Bliski Wschód. Polsko-palestyńskie stosunki gospodarcze w okresie międzywojennym* (Warsaw, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> M. Deszczyński, W. Mazur, *Na krawędzi ryzyka. Eksport polskiego sprzętu wojskowego w okresie międzywojennym* (Warsaw, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience*.

<sup>13</sup> E. Lankin, *To Win the Promised Land. Story of a freedom fighter* (Walnut Creek, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Ł. Sroka, M. Sroka, *Polskie korzenie Izraela* (Cracow, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> A. Klugman, "Pomoc Polski dla żydowskiego ruchu narodowego w Palestynie," *Więź* 5/463 (1997), pp. 133–151.

<sup>16</sup> E. Kossoy, "Żydowskie podziemie zbrojne w Palestynie i jego polskie powiązania," *Zeszyty Historyczne* 3/157 (2006), pp. 62–100.

<sup>17</sup> Heller, *Jabotinsky's Children*.

<sup>18</sup> C. Shindler, *Israel, Likud and the Zionist Dream. Power, Politics and Ideology from Begin to Netanyahu* (London–New York, 1995); *idem*, *The Land Beyond Promise: Israel, Likud and the Zionist Dream* (London, 1995); *idem*, *The Rise of the Israeli Right. From Odessa to Hebron* (New York, 2015); *idem*, *The Triumph of Military Zionism* (London–New York, 2006); *idem*, *Ploughshares into Swords? Israelis and Jews in the Shadow of the Intifada* (London–New York, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> D. Flisiak, "Ideologiczne podstawy organizacji młodzieżowej Betar działającej w II Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej," in *Endecja wczoraj i jutro. Studia z zakresu myśli nacjonalistycznej XX i XXI*, ed. by K. Kofin and M. Kofin (Lodz, 2017); D. Flisiak, "Memorandum organizacji Irgun Cwai Leumi dotyczące stworzenia państwa żydowskiego w Palestynie: przyczynek do badań nad działalnością syjonistów-rewizjonistów w powojennej Polsce," *Studia Żydowskie. Almanach* 7/8 (2018), pp. 143–158; *idem*, "Polityczna działalność Włodzimierza Żabotyńskiego do lat dwudziestych XX wieku: ideologiczne podstawy syjonizmu rewizjonistycznego," *Almanach Historyczny* 19 (2017), pp. 109–120; A. Sołtysik, "Uwagi na temat koncepcji politycznych Bejtaru," *Studia Żydowskie. Almanach* 6/6 (2016), pp. 45–56; J. Ochman, "Polski rodowód 'wojowniczości' syjonizmu," *Res Polticae* 7 (2015), pp. 163–197.

<sup>20</sup> *Uważam Rze, wSieci Historii, Uważam Rze Historia, Polska Zbrojna Historia* etc.

of Menachem Begin,<sup>21</sup> Wiktor Tomir Drymmer,<sup>22</sup> Melchior Wańkowicz,<sup>23</sup> and General Władysław Anders.<sup>24</sup> Some sources can be found in archives and museum institutions: the Central Archives of Modern Records and the Central Military Archives, as well as in Israel's Jabotinsky Institute, the Begin Center in Jerusalem, the Beit Lohamei Ghetto Fighters Archive and the Lehi Museum in Tel Aviv. It is worth noting that the subject of the Second Republic's relations with the revisionist movement is receiving increasing interest from researchers and even artists, both Polish and foreign. Two excellent examples of this are the award-winning documentary film directed by Jan Grzyb, *Izrael zaczął się w Polsce* [Israel began in Poland]<sup>25</sup> and *Betar* [The Betar] by Robert Kaczmarek.<sup>26</sup> Also, in Israel, museums presenting the Revisionists' achievements display Polish exhibits proudly, for instance, documents bearing a Polish seal with a crowned eagle or Polish weapons.

Based on these sources and studies, I will try to formulate an answer to questions concerning the forms of Polish military support for Jewish independence aspirations and how it influenced Israeli irredentism. The main limitation, I assume, is to focus on the revisionist movement and only mention the support provided by the Second Polish Republic to representatives of other Zionist currents. Therefore, starting from the general contacts of the Polish government with the Revisionists, I will move on to Polish material aid and then training aid. The final part of this analysis will attempt to identify Poland's influence on Israel's independence process.

### A Marriage of Convenience – the Republic's Cooperation with the Revisionist Movement

As mentioned earlier, the author of the term "marriage of convenience," coined to describe the informal alliance linking the Second Republic with the Revisionist-Zionist movement, was Laurence Weinbaim. In his pioneering book of 1993, *Marriage of Convenience. The New Zionist Organization and the Polish Government*

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<sup>21</sup> M. Begin, *Czas białych nocy* (Cracow, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> W. Drymmer, *W służbie Polsce* (Warsaw, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> M. Wańkowicz, *Ziemia za wiele obiecana* (Warsaw, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> W. Anders, *Bez ostatniego rozdziału* (London, 1950).

<sup>25</sup> *Izrael zaczął się w Polsce*, dir. J. Grzyb, TVP, Warsaw 2018.

<sup>26</sup> *Betar*, dir. R. Kaczmarek, TVP, Warsaw 2010.

1936–1939,<sup>27</sup> he was the first to successfully attempt to describe the relationship between the two entities. Importantly, neither side lacked the rationale for cooperation.

The search for allies and protectors in the form of governments of external powers had been one of the most important policies of the Zionists (later defined as political Zionists) since the First Zionist Congress. Theodor Herzl tried to convince the Kaiser's Germany, as well as Britain and Turkey, of his vision to create a Jewish state. Subsequently, Zionists knocked on French, American, Italian and many other doors.<sup>28</sup> Vladimir Jabotinsky also believed that, without external help, the project to revive Israel stood a poor chance of succeeding. However, he thought it was worth talking primarily to governments of European countries with large Jewish minorities – Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the Baltic States. After the establishment of the Trumpeldor Union (Betar, an acronym for Berit Josef Trumpeldor – 1923), the Union of Zionists-Revisionists (1923) and then the New Zionist Organisation in 1935, he gained serious arguments in the form of a mass social movement, which meant he could start negotiating independently with the governments of Central and Eastern European countries.

In Poland, these aspirations coincided with the return to power of Marshal Józef Piłsudski after the May coup of 1926. From a Jewish perspective, this was a perfect change – Józef Piłsudski was widely regarded as a protector of religious and national minorities. In addition, the Revisionists were undoubtedly fascinated by the Marshal's character. Jabotinsky wrote of him as follows:

For Piłsudski, patriotism was an austere and ascetic religion, far removed from any emotions [...], for Poland, Piłsudski had none of that nonsense that makes a man a slave, none of those golden dreams of prosperity for all, none of those mystical cries that sound like thunder but are in fact just a dull snore. His Poland was to be neat, clean, punctual, efficient, decent, simply “Western.”<sup>29</sup>

The first official contacts between the Polish government and the Revisionists were established in 1936. Admittedly, as early as 1927, Kazimierz Młodzianowski

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<sup>27</sup> Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience*.

<sup>28</sup> S. Beller, *Herzl* (London, 2012), p. 182.

<sup>29</sup> W. Żabotyński, *War and Jew* (New York, 1942), pp. 83–84.

(then Pomeranian Voivode) pledged support for the Zionists on behalf of Poland, and in 1933 Jabotinsky proposed an anti-Hitler alliance to Warsaw. Still, these were only verbal assurances that did not entail any serious attempt to start any actual cooperation.<sup>30</sup>

Mutual contacts definitely accelerated and took institutional form from 1935 onwards. At that time, all undertakings concerning “Jewish matters” began to be coordinated by the Consular Department of the MFA, whose director from 1933 was Viktor Tomir Drymmer.<sup>31</sup> He was responsible for organising emigration, internal and foreign policy towards Jews and, most importantly, for contacts with Jewish organisations. As early as 1935, Drymmer’s department worked vigorously to find new emigration destinations for Poles and minorities in the Republic.

In April 1936, Jabotinsky and Jakob Damm met with the Polish Ambassador in London, Edward Raczyński, while members of the New Zionist Organisation (NZO) paid a visit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw. The outcome of both meetings was the opening of the NZO office in Warsaw in June 1936.<sup>32</sup> At the opening ceremony, on 9 June 1936, Jabotinsky met with Józef Beck for the first time to present his Ten-Year Plan (which assumed mass Jewish emigration to Palestine) as a solution to Poland’s overpopulation problems. The Zionists maintained regular contact with Raczyński in London, and Jabotinsky met with Beck again in July of that year, this time in Geneva during a League of Nations session. Evidence of Beck’s lively contact with Jabotinsky can also be found in two letters that the NZO chairman sent to the Polish foreign minister on 21 June and 1 July 1936 concerning Jewish emigration (or, as Jabotinsky called it, evacuation) to Palestine and the Revisionists’ cooperation with Poland.<sup>33</sup>

The Revisionists were surprised by the pace of the cooperation with the Polish government and even more by the fact that it produced tangible results. Against the backdrop of the previous attempts to cooperate with the British or Italian

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<sup>30</sup> Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience*, p. 60.

<sup>31</sup> Z. Trębacz, *Nie tylko Palestyna. Polskie plany emigracyjne wobec Żydów 1935–1939* (Warsaw, 2018), p. 56.

<sup>32</sup> Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience*, p. 61.

<sup>33</sup> Jabotinsky Institute Archive (hereinafter JIA), Jabotinsky Ze’ev, Letters to Various Individuals, A 1-2/26/1, Ze’ev Jabotinsky to Jozef Beck, 21 June 1936; *ibid.*, Jabotinsky Ze’ev, Letters to Various Individuals, A 1-u2/26/2, Ze’ev Jabotinsky to Józef Beck, 1 July 1936.

governments, the Poles were proving to be much more verbal and eager to represent the interests of the Revisionist Zionists in a real way. In September 1936, Ambassador Raczyński met with the British Foreign Minister, Anthony Eden, to communicate to him that Poland attached great importance to emigration to Palestine.<sup>34</sup> That same month, Jabotinsky attended two important meetings. On 9 September, he participated in a dinner with dignitaries from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (mainly from the Consular Department) – Michał Łubieński, who was present at the meeting, explained this “downgrading” of contacts in the following way: “Ministers come and go, but these officials are almost a permanent feature of the ministries, cooperation with them is just as important as with the ministers themselves.”<sup>35</sup> In addition to Michał Łubieński and Vladimir Jabotinsky, the dinner was attended by Wiktor Tomir Drymmer, Apoloniusz Zarychta, Jan Wagner, Jan Kowalewski (the chief of staff of the National Unification Camp [*Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego*, OZN]), Meir Kahan, and Jakub Spektor. It was then that, as Edward Kossoy writes, “the crossovers were set.”<sup>36</sup> Two days later, Jabotinsky met with the Prime Minister of the Polish Government himself – General Felicjan Sławoj Składkowski.<sup>37</sup> During the meeting, Składkowski declared his support for the Revisionists: “The Polish government would like to help the Zionist cause, not because it would like to get rid of Jews, but rather because Zionism is a noble and humanitarian idea.”<sup>38</sup>

Jabotinsky wanted to induce Poland to apply more pressure on Britain to revoke its emigration restrictions to Palestine. He knew it was in London and not in Warsaw, where the key to the restoration of the Jewish state lay. However, the successes the Revisionists undoubtedly enjoyed in their talks with the representatives of a foreign government, and the spontaneous surge in activity in Poland, meant that the heart of most revisionist organisations began to beat specifically on the Vistula. Not surprisingly, the Revisionist-Zionists began to see in the Republic of

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<sup>34</sup> Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience*, p. 61.

<sup>35</sup> J. Schechtman, *Fighter and Prophet: The Vladimir Jabotinsky Story*, vol. 3: *The Last Years* (New York, 1961), p. 354.

<sup>36</sup> Kossoy, “Żydowskie podziemie zbrojne.”

<sup>37</sup> JIA, Jabotinsky Ze'ev, A 1–4/35, Meeting between Jabotinsky and Polish Prime Minister, General Felicjan Sławoj Składkowski – Minutes in Polish, 1936.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.



Poland the possibility of creating a substitute for their own armed forces, so Poland was to become the Piedmont of the Jewish state.

The Polish view of cooperation with the Revisionists finds a perfect reflection in the words of Viktor Tomir Drymmer:

Our position coincides in its entirety with that of the Revisionist-Zionist Jews and organisations close to them. It was contained in the sentence: a Jewish independent Palestine, as large as possible, with access to the Red Sea. [...] the efforts of the independence organisations should be supported comprehensively, with money and combat training.<sup>39</sup>

In September 1938, a meeting of the leadership of the revisionist movement was convened in Warsaw. The main topic of the discussion was the rumours that the British would bow to Arab pressure and set up a government in the Mandate for Palestine composed of Palestinian Arabs. At the time, Jabotinsky made a statement to the effect that such a step on the part of the Mandate administration would force an unprecedented increase in revisionist military activity in Palestine, dubbed by the revisionist leader as a “war against the British.” The Revisionists also decided to intensify their work on the military preparation of Jews, and to do so both in the Mandate and the Diaspora. One consequence of this decision was the establishment of close combat training cooperation between the Revisionist organisations and the Polish Army.<sup>40</sup>

The contacts initiated in 1936 were maintained until September 1939. Over time, the two sides began to work together with great fondness and goodwill. The Revisionists were fascinated by Piłsudski’s ideology of action (Abraham Stern was known to quote whole passages from the Marshal’s works by heart). In contrast, the Polish side approached its Jewish partners’ plans with friendliness and understanding of the Jewish partners’ plans. Moreover, Jabotinsky himself received recognition and became an object of fascination – Michał Łubieński recalled that he greatly admired Jabotinsky’s works and criticised him at every

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<sup>39</sup> Drymmer, *W służbie Polsce*, p. 141.

<sup>40</sup> Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience*, pp. 123–164.

opportunity for abandoning Kalliope for politics.<sup>41</sup> These ties survived the catastrophe of September 1939, with Felicjan Sławoj Składkowski recalling with a sense of nostalgia the semi-secret meetings of the decrepit remnants of the revisionist organisations in Palestine in 1942,<sup>42</sup> in which he had the opportunity to participate. In addition, the Revisionists tried to revive the idea of creating their own armed forces alongside the Polish Armed Forces in the East, known as the Anders Army.

## Polish Material Support

The intensification of Jewish-Arab antagonism in the second half of the 1930s forced Jewish organisations to hastily rearm self-defence units in the Mandate for Palestine. Between 1936 and 1939, an Arab uprising took place in the Middle East, during which more than 250 English, 300 Jews, and 5,000 Arabs were killed.<sup>43</sup> The Jews also needed armaments and equipment to fight the British, who in the 1930s were no longer a support but an obstacle to the work of rebuilding Israel. Polish supplies were twofold: illegal and legal. Weapons and ammunition were smuggled in, whereas aircraft and gliders were imported into Palestine legally and were then used to train future aviation cadres, even being used in combat during the First Israeli-Arab War of 1948.<sup>44</sup>

The first attempt to purchase armaments was made by Jewish organisations back in 1933, when the Polish SEPEWE Defence Industries Export Company<sup>45</sup> received an offer to sell 1,000 rifles, 100 hand-held machine guns, 1,000 defensive and offensive grenades and 1.2 million cartridges to Jewish sports unions.<sup>46</sup> This

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<sup>41</sup> M. Łubiński, "Włodzimierz Żabotyński," *Zeszyty Historyczne* 8 (1968), pp. 165–167.

<sup>42</sup> F. Sławoj-Składkowski, *Kwiatuszki administracyjne i inne* (Łomianki, 2001), p. 325.

<sup>43</sup> M. Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine. The British Army, the Colonial State and Arab Revolt, 1936–1939* (Cambridge, 2019), p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> P. Rapiński, "Polsko-czechosłowackie początki Sił Powietrznych Izraela," in *Relacje polsko-żydowskie w XX wieku. Badania – kontrowersje – perspektywy*, ed. by T. Domański and E. Majcher-Ociesa (Warsaw–Kielce, 2021), pp. 105–126.

<sup>45</sup> The SEPEWE Eksport Przemysłu Obronnego (Defence Industries Export Company) dealt with the export of armaments from Poland; in 1937 it became a joint stock company and changed its name to SEPEWE Eksport Wytworów Polskiego Przemysłu SA.

<sup>46</sup> The members of Bejtár consciously referred to the Polish history of the Riflemen's Unions formed before the First World War, which became the nucleus of the reborn Polish Army. Jabotinsky wanted to follow the same path.

transaction did not occur for unknown reasons, although it had even received the approval of Poland's state authorities.<sup>47</sup>

Another attempt, this time successful, was undertaken in 1939. Jabotinsky and Abraham Stern, supported in their endeavours by Henryk Strassman and his wife Lili, asked the Polish government, on behalf of the Revisionists, for a loan to purchase weapons and organise military training. Interestingly, at the same time, representatives of the Haganah, linked to the World Zionist Organisation, applied for a loan.<sup>48</sup> The Polish government decided it would support the Revisionist-Zionists, with whom it had been developing cooperation since 1936. Besides, the Poles believed that the Haganah, a larger organisation with a more extensive network of foreign contacts, would manage without Polish support.

The loan was granted in 1939 and amounted to 212,000 zlotys. Jabotinsky confirmed this in a letter to Apoloniusz Zarychta dated 11 May 1939.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, the Revisionists were also given a grant of 125,000 zlotys by the Romanian banker Klage Markovici.<sup>50</sup> Both subsidies were used to purchase arms and organise combat training in Poland. Some historians have alleged that the Israelis never repaid the "Polish loan" – and this is true, but it is also true that the Polish government never demanded its repayment, treating it from the start as a grant rather than a loan.

The total value of the arms orders, both those from the Revisionists and those carried out for the Haganah, had totalled 1.5 million zlotys by 1939. It should be noted, however, that much of the arms purchased for this amount of money did not reach Palestine due to the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>51</sup> In 1936, Jews purchased 1,677 Mauser carbines *kbk wz. 29* and 20,000 7.92 mm calibre cartridges. In 1937, 126 Browning hand-held machine guns *rkm wz. 28e* were sold to Palestine, together with 7.92 mm calibre ammunition and spare parts. In

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<sup>47</sup> Deszczyński, Mazur, *Na krawędzi ryzyka*, p. 260.

<sup>48</sup> Haganah (Hebrew: "Defence") – a Jewish paramilitary organisation, active in the Mandate for Palestine from 1920 to 1948. Initially a self-defence organisation, it gradually expanded its operations to include retaliatory actions against attacking Arab gangs, eventually evolving into a typically military organisation. After the Second World War, it organised the illegal immigration of Holocaust survivors. In 1948, in its activity it also used terrorist methods. After the creation of the independent state of Israel, it became the foundation of the Israel Defence Forces.

<sup>49</sup> JIA, N.Z.O., Presidency, London, Correspondence with Various Individuals, G 4-5/13, A Letter of V. Jabotinsky to A. Zarychta, 11 May 1939, p. 17.

<sup>50</sup> S. Katz, *Jabu. Biography of Ze'ev Jabotinsky* (Jerusalem, 1993), p. 1005.

<sup>51</sup> Deszczyński, Mazur, *Na krawędzi ryzyka*, p. 195.

1938, exports included 40 *rkm* Browning hand-held machine guns and 250,000 cartridges. The largest batch of armaments was ordered by the Zionist organisations for 1939. This order included 20,000 Berthier rifles *wz. 16* with bayonets, 250 heavy machine guns 14 Hotchkiss and 20 million French 8 mm cartridges (for French rifles and heavy machine guns) – all these armaments came from military stocks (warehouses with obsolete, unused weapons and equipment), so this did not deplete the mobilisation potential of the Polish Army.<sup>52</sup> In addition, several hundred Nagant Model 30 revolvers were ordered.

All the Zionist purchases accounted for less than one per cent of Polish arms exports by 1 September 1939. Certainly, the Polish side did not make money on these transactions – the political support of the Zionist organisations was far more important to it than the economic consideration. All of the arms transferred (some of which did not go to Palestine) could have armed (not equipped):

- 18 complete rifle companies;
- or 28 rifle companies without support weapons (without hand-held machine guns);
- or 144 rifle companies without carbines and support weapons;
- 13 heavy machine gun companies (without mortars);
- or 20 heavy machine gun companies (without mortars, armed with a machine gun instead of a carbine).<sup>53</sup>

Polish aircraft also entered Palestine, importantly by a legal route. Between 1936 and 1939, three RWD-8s, two RWD-13s, and one RWD-15 found their way to Palestine. In addition, Jewish organisations received an unknown number of Wrona-bis training gliders, which were later built under a Polish licence in Palestine. At the outbreak of the Second World War, half of the aircraft in Palestine came from Poland. The Polish RWDs were used in combat during the 1947–1949 War of Independence as the first Israeli aircraft. All the purchased planes were machines designed for sports and tourism, but they made it possible to train the first generation of Israeli pilots.

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>53</sup> For more, see M. Przybylak, “Polsko-żydowska współpraca w przygotowaniu działań nieregularnych przed rokiem 1939,” in *Działania nieregularne w dziejach wojskowości polskiej*, ed. R. Parafianowicz (Warsaw, 2018), pp. 193–216.

Weapons, however, were smuggled to Palestine illegally. The atmosphere of secrecy surrounding this venture meant that problems with the weapons began already in Poland. Kossoy, citing Kahan, gives an example of a shipment from Gdańsk:

During this period, the attitude of the military leadership turned out to be very positive. One day a parcel from Gdansk, declared to be candy, was found to contain several dozen revolvers. Thanks to the intervention of the alerted Kahan, the recipient, Dawid Król, a non-commissioned officer of the Polish Army and a member of Brit Hahayal, was only symbolically fined twenty zlotys, but the revolvers were confiscated. Kahan reported the event to Marshal Rydz-Śmigły's adjutant, Colonel Strzelecki. Following a brief conversation and duly briefed by Strzelecki, Rydz-Śmigły ordered the return of the confiscated weapons. Upon receiving it, Król found the addition of a generous gift – the latest Polish heavy machine gun model and two hand-held machine guns with spare parts and a considerable amount of ammunition, including for the returned revolvers.<sup>54</sup>

Apart from the inaccuracies that are apparent at first glance, this story may contain a grain of truth – it is possible that Polish customs officials once found arms shipments to Palestine, but this discovery was swiftly and discreetly deleted from the official reports thanks to the intervention of the military authorities.

The Poles realised that, without arms, Jews would not win independence. By deciding to support the Revisionists, Warsaw was indirectly undermining the *Pax Britannica* maintained in the Middle East. Sooner or later, Polish arms exports to Palestine were bound to be involved in the British-Jewish fighting. The question arises whether the British were aware of the existence of a Polish-Jewish agreement. According to the version presented by Jerzy Łazor – they definitely were.<sup>55</sup> From London's perspective, the supplies from Poland were small (London supplied the Haganah with weapons itself) and consistent with a policy of balancing Jewish and Arab potential, especially since, at the same time, the Arab insurgents were

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<sup>54</sup> Kossoy, "Żydowskie podziemie zbrojne," p. 70.

<sup>55</sup> Łazor, *Brama na Bliski Wschód*, p. 196.

supported with arms supplies and funds by the Third Reich.<sup>56</sup> It must be admitted that, before the Second World War, the Polish government was much more aware of the divisions within the Zionist movement and consciously gave more support to one side, while the British treated the Jews almost *en bloc*.<sup>57</sup>

### Polish Support in Terms of Training

Military relations between Poland and Jewish organisations were complemented by combat training organised by the Polish Army, including Division II of the General Staff.

Generalising, it can be pointed out that military training covered three groups:

- members of the Polish Betar units,
- members of the Haganah, whose fighters came to Poland for the training period; an agreement with the Haganah having been concluded in 1937,
- members of the Irgun (treated as independent of the Polish Betar and the Haganah).

From the perspective of supporting Jewish independence aspirations, the most important part of the training assistance was that of the Irgun. The fighters of the National Military Organisation had already participated in the battles against the British and the Arabs, and constituted the strict organisational leadership at a local and regional level in Palestine. In addition, they were subject to strict selection by the command, so they were not only the best of the candidates but also had the highest hopes. In hindsight, it can be pointed out that this was not a miscalculation.

For the Betar, the training carried out by the Polish Army was only a minor part of the training and education activity. It was organised at a central level, as a special training, singling out selected Betar members. The entire training activity in the Trumpeldor Union was based on Polish models, and in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the organisation was already trying to prepare future military and civilian cadres for the reborn Jewish state.<sup>58</sup> The daily work with young people fol-

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<sup>56</sup> F.R. Nicosia, *The Third Reich and the Palestine Question* (Austin, 1985), pp. 168–192.

<sup>57</sup> B. Golany, *Statehood and Zionism. What the Herut-Revisionist Movement Stands for* (New York, 1958), pp. 3–4; Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience*, pp. 54–60.

<sup>58</sup> D.K. Heller, *The Rise of the Zionist Right: Polish Jews and the Betar Youth Movement, 1922–1935* (Stanford, 2012), p. 150.

lowed the instructions and documents such as the *Podręcznik Przysposobienia Wojskowego* [Manual of Military Training],<sup>59</sup> *Terenoznawstwo i kartografia wojskowa. Podręcznik dla organizacji wojskowych i drużyn skautowych* [Terrain Science and Military Cartography. Handbook for Military Organisations and Scout Teams],<sup>60</sup> *Sygnalizacja. Podręcznik dla harcerzy* [Signalling. Guide for Scouts],<sup>61</sup> and *Harcerz w polu. Ćwiczenia w terenie* [Scout in the Field. Field Exercises].<sup>62</sup> In addition, the Betar produced its own publications covering mainly the ideological and spiritual sphere; in Polish, these included: *Regulamin Bejtaru* [Regulations of the Betar],<sup>63</sup> *Zarys nauki o państwie* [Theory of State. An Outline],<sup>64</sup> and *Praca kulturalno-wychowawcza w Bejtarze* [Cultural and Educational Work in the Betar].<sup>65</sup> The training practice did not differ from other youth organisations operating in Poland at the time. Furthermore, it is worth adding that the Betar, and more broadly, the entire revisionist movement, was primarily pro-state. It advocated allegiance to the states in which it was active until the establishment of reborn Israel. This is exemplified by the above photograph from the Central Betar Training Camp organised in Lodz in 1938. Zionist ideology is represented by the organisational uniforms, while the state ideology is represented by the Polish flag and the portraits of Marshals Józef Piłsudski and Edward Rydz-Śmigły, as well as President Ignacy Mościcki.

When training the Betar members, a breakthrough came in 1927 when the organisation established mainly local cooperation with the State Office for Physical Education and Military Preparation (*Państwowy Urząd Wychowania Fizycznego i Przysposobienia Wojskowego*, PUWF i PW, hereinafter PW). The PW aimed to create cadres for the new, healing state – youth education was crucial in this area. In December 1927, a convention in Warsaw approved the idea of the Betar members joining the PW cells. The greatest gain was the opportunity to participate in training organised by soldiers of the Polish Army at shooting ranges. Learning how to use

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<sup>59</sup> *Podręcznik przysposobienia wojskowego*, ed. L. Kolbuszewski (Warsaw, 1928).

<sup>60</sup> J. Lewandowski, *Terenoznawstwo i kartografia wojskowa. Podręcznik dla organizacji wojskowych i drużyn skautowych* (Warsaw, 1916).

<sup>61</sup> W.J. Śliwiński, *Sygnalizacja. Podręcznik dla harcerzy* (Warsaw, 1921).

<sup>62</sup> Z. Wyrobek, *Harcerz w polu. Ćwiczenia w terenie* (Lvov, 1926).

<sup>63</sup> J. Chrust, *Regulamin Bejtaru* (Lvov, 1939).

<sup>64</sup> T. Staending, *Zarys nauki o państwie* (Lvov, 1933).

<sup>65</sup> J. Schelles, *Praca kulturalno-wychowawcza w Bejtarze* (Lvov, 1934).



A Central Training Camp of the Betar, Lodz, 1939. Source: Jabotinsky Institute Archive in Tel Aviv, PH-5221, <http://en.jabotinsky.org/archive/search-archive/>

weapons and shoot live ammunition (partly financed by the Polish state budget) was as attractive to the organisation as a whole as it was to most of its young members. Another benefit was the possibility to carry weapons during patriotic ceremonies and official addresses – not only Polish ones. From the perspective of a young and unknown NGO, it would be hard to overestimate the propaganda impact on the Jewish community in Poland of the sight of armed and uniformed members appearing under Jewish national symbols – the menorah and the Star of David – of an organisation whose authority was further strengthened by the protection of the governmental leadership.<sup>66</sup> From Warsaw's perspective, supporting the Betar in the Borderlands was particularly important – this is where most of the camps and training sessions were organised. The army and the administration trusted that this would make it possible to convince the second-largest minority in these areas to support the Polish state. The Betar strongly emphasised loyalty to Poland, so cooperation almost automatically strengthened the links between these lands and the rest of the country. In part, the Betar passed this loyalty test in September 1939, when they cooperated with the army in maintaining the internal order undetermined by Ukrainian gangs and communist subversive activity.

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<sup>66</sup> Heller, *The Rise of The Zionist Right*, p. 167.



The next step towards closer cooperation came in 1936. In July of that year, the Polish government agreed to military training for one hundred Betar candidates, most of whom came from Poland (the Polish foci of the worldwide organisation). Subsequent training courses in Rembertów, Zielonka and Międzyrzec Podlaski were held in October 1937 and January 1938, with about fifty participants each.<sup>67</sup> In August 1938, exercises were held in Trochenbrod (Polish: Zofiówka) in Volhynia, where some instructors and trainees had travelled from as far away as Palestine. This was the first officer (higher level) course organised for the Irgun members outside the Mandate territory.<sup>68</sup> In February 1939, the Revisionists, in cooperation with the Ministry of Military Affairs, began a series of courses lasting four to six weeks. These succeeded in training some 1,000 Betar members.<sup>69</sup>



A Summer Training Camp for Members of the Betar, Pinsk, 1939. Source: Jabotinsky Institute Archive in Tel Aviv, PH-15226, <http://en.jabotinsky.org/archive/search-archive/>

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<sup>67</sup> Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience*, p. 79.

<sup>68</sup> A. Bendavid-Val, *The Heavens Are Empty: Discovering the Lost Town of Trochenbrod* (New York, 2010), p. 213.

<sup>69</sup> Klugman, *Pomoc Polski*, p. 145.

By far the most important, most commented upon, and one of the most mythologised training ventures was the camp in March 1939 at Kocierz. It is this camp that Piotr Zychowicz<sup>70</sup> and Jerzy Ochman<sup>71</sup> write about in sensational tones, often preferring this sensationalism to facts. However, it should be emphasised that the story is indeed a fascinating and unique one. The participants in the training were not “commandos” but specially selected members of the Irgun operating in Palestine. In addition, the entire camp was organised at the sports centre of the Jewish Gymnastics and Sports Association Makkabi (Makkabi Warsaw) at the Kocierz Pass, so not in Andrychów itself, as studies often state. Also false is the claim that the camp was visited by Vladimir Jabotinsky or even Józef Beck.

The training at the Kocierz Pass was the most tangible evidence of Polish-Jewish military cooperation.<sup>72</sup> Contrary to appearances, it was also fraught with enormous risks the Polish state took to train the first (and, as it later turned out, also the last) group of young Revisionists. The training began in March 1939, during a dramatically heightened international tension following the German occupation of Prague. Reacting to these events, on 31 March 1939, Britain announced unilateral guarantees for Poland. While Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared in London that Britain and France would run to Poland’s rescue in the hour of trial in the Carpathian Mountains, Polish officers were teaching young Jews to blow up trains and organise irregular actions. Sooner or later, these actions had to be directed against the British ruling in the Mandate for Palestine – the biggest obstacle to an independent Israel at the time. Despite the goals of London’s grand policy, the discovery and publicity of such a fact could become grounds for withdrawing British guarantees to Poland. By training the Revisionists, the Second Republic of Poland was risking (admittedly, to a small extent) diplomatic and military solitude in the face of the imminent war with Germany.

The camp at Kocierz was organised in the then-existing infrastructure already at the disposal of Makkabi Warsaw (photo below). Eliahu Lankin describes it as follows:

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<sup>70</sup> P. Zychowicz, *Żydowscy komandosi z II RP*, <https://dorzeczy.pl/55236/1/zydowsky-komandosi-z-ii-rp.html> (accessed 2 March 2021).

<sup>71</sup> J. Ochman, “Polski rodowód ‘wojowniczości’ syjonizmu,” *Res Polticae* 7 (2015), pp. 163–197.

<sup>72</sup> Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience*, p. 148.

This isolated villa was ideally located for us – there was plenty of open space to organise military activities nearby, it had a weapons store and was under the tutelage of regular army officers. It was hard to believe our luck. The villa had a lecture hall, a dining hall, bedrooms, instructors' quarters and an armoury. There was a kitchen, a pantry and staff rooms in the basement.<sup>73</sup>

In addition to the amenities, geographical factors also played a considerable role in the choice of the location. The centre was far from a nearby village, let alone larger towns. Moreover, the terrain in this part of the Carpathian Mountains resembled the Irgun's future area of operation – Galilee and Judea.<sup>74</sup>

Twenty-five mid-and senior-level commanders from the Irgun operating in Palestine were selected to participate in the training. The participants certainly included Szlomo Ben-Szlomo, Jakow Polani, Cwi Meltzer, Michał Rabinowicz, Eliahu Lankin, Jakow Eliaw, Dow Rubinstein, Jakub Melzer, Jakow Meridor, and



The Villa of the Jewish Gymnastics and Sports Association Makkabi at the Kocierz Pass, 1939. Source: Archiwum Gminy Andrychów (Andrychów Municipality Archive) (Portal AGA – [www.aga.edu.pl](http://www.aga.edu.pl), accessed on 7 March 2021), CC-BY-NC

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<sup>73</sup> Lankin, *To Win the Promised Land*, p. 35.

<sup>74</sup> W. Drymmer, *W służbie Polsce*, p. 194.

Mordechaj Sterlitz. They were selected during a clandestine meeting in Tel Aviv by David Razi'el, the then commander of the organisation in Palestine.<sup>75</sup> The participants came from Palestine to the Carpathian Mountains by several routes – from the Mandate to Romania or Greece and from there by train to Cracow. Two – Melzer and Rubinstein – flew to Warsaw from Lodz. All the course participants were deeply undercover, moving about only in civilian clothes and strictly forbidden to communicate with anyone. The letters they sent went first to Switzerland and only from there to Palestine.

The training began in February 1939,<sup>76</sup> though there is no consensus as to the exact date of its completion. According to most accounts, it lasted four months and ended just before Jabotinsky arrived in Warsaw, i.e. before 14 May 1939. The classes were conducted by Polish officers – no names of instructors have survived in either Polish or Israeli archives. However, the practice of previous training courses for Jewish organisations, and especially the use of local human resources, leads us to assume that they may have been conducted by officers of the nearby 12th Infantry Regiment with a garrison based in Wadowice. What is certain, however, is that the training itself and the trainees were supervised by officers from Detachment II of the Border Guard: Colonel Tadeusz Pełczyński, Colonel Józef Smoleński, and, from 15 March 1939, General Kazimierz Fabrycy, who was responsible for the southern border section.<sup>77</sup>

The training programme was based on the *Program Kursu Szkoły Podoficerskiej Piechoty* [Programme of the Infantry NCO School Course] issued in Osowiec in 1938 for the Central NCO School of the Border Protection Corps. This is shown primarily by the duration of the course – assumed to take four months in the programme – and the classes mentioned by the participants in their memoirs. The original programme from Osowiec has also been preserved in the collection of the Jabotinsky Institute in Tel Aviv.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Lankin, *To Win the Promised Land*, p. 34.

<sup>76</sup> *The Irgun Abroad*, <http://www.etzel.org.il/english/ac16.htm> (accessed 10 April 2018).

<sup>77</sup> Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience*, pp. 150–151.

<sup>78</sup> JIA, K 7 b-2/17, Z.Z.W. Warsaw Ghetto, Program Training Course for Non-Commissioned Infantry of the Polish Army, [1938]. Interestingly, the staff of the Jabotinsky Institute raised an argument that the programme at their disposal was used to train fighters of the Jewish Military Union in the Warsaw Ghetto (as the title given to the folder containing the programme states). However, the

Professor Laurence Weinbaum managed to reach two participants and partially reconstructed the course's curriculum based on his interviews with them. His findings show that the course was divided into two main parts, which in modern military language can be described as regular and irregular training.<sup>79</sup> The first part was undoubtedly based on the Border Protection Corps programme and included the following subjects: combat training, training in shooting, weapons and equipment training, pioneer training, terrain studies, drill, bayonet and grenade combat training, anti-aircraft, anti-gas and anti-tank defence training, observation and communication training, internal service training and information on the organisation of the army. The manual allocated a total of 240 training hours to all these subjects, with a maximum of five hours each day (in addition to classes, trainers were required to follow the course of duty and to fit meals into their schedule).

Regular military training took up about 60% of the time. The remaining days were dedicated to the irregular part, i.e. to fighting in conspiracy conditions. The programme has not been preserved, but from the testimonies of the participants of the training at Kocierz, it is possible to extract at least some of the issues, such as working in underground organisations, the principles of creating secret structures, sabotage and attacks on the enemy's live forces, the technical aspects of preparing explosives, communication in conspiracy conditions and the problems of using the force in a clash with the occupying army during a planned armed uprising.<sup>80</sup> Added to this were daily classes at a shooting range.<sup>81</sup>

The participants themselves spoke highly of the training:

The officers' course in Poland was a turning point in Irgun's instruction and training practice. Its impact was still evident long after the end of the training. I made very intensive use of the knowledge on the preparation of mines with an electric fuse and methods of planting them. In addition, we used manuals on the construction of clandestine communication networks, the organisation of track-

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description of the folder already states that it was probably a booklet used for training in the establishment of new Irgun cells.

<sup>79</sup> Weinbaum, *A Marriage of Convenience*, p. 151.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Lankin, *The Story of Altalena Commander* (Tel Aviv, 1954), p. 61.

ing, etc. At a later stage, we used skills such as platoon operations, urban warfare, engineering work and even capturing and controlling a building. The practical and theoretical aspects of training in Poland helped us in all these matters.<sup>82</sup>

Eliahu Lankin declared: “The Polish officers tried their best to teach us the most important things. The training with them was the best I have ever taken part in. Later, I took part in courses in British and Israeli armies, and I honestly have to say that the Polish training was more in-depth and intensive than all the others.”<sup>83</sup>

An unquestionable advantage (especially from the participants’ perspective) was the variety of issues discussed. The Polish Army did not make a mistake – admittedly one very commonly made while training paramilitary or underground organisations – and did not teach its charges methods of combat solely on the modern battlefield. Such a solution would not have made the slightest sense. The Irgun could not count on air or artillery support in its operations, nor could it openly fight against an opponent many times stronger – this is not how irregular operations work. This is also the reason for the positive opinions about the training at the Kocierz Pass expressed by its participants. The Polish experience from before 1918 fit perfectly into the specifics of the operation of underground revisionist organisations in Palestine in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and it was the part of the training devoted to irregular actions that was most appreciated by the trainees. Jakow Eliaw wrote admiringly of the instructors: “These were officers of the Polish army, some of them still veterans of Pilsudski’s Legions, some former members of the pre-war underground organisations, and the rest were professional officers. A few lecturers were high-ranking officials or officers at such an age that they could take part in the underground struggle for the freedom of their homeland themselves.”<sup>84</sup> The young Jewish conspirators looked with awe at the teachers who had been able to win their fight for independence. They certainly also put themselves in their place, wanting to repeat this success.

At the end of the entire training course, Abraham Stern himself paid a visit to Kocierz and, together with Polish officers (including General Kazimierz Fabrycy,

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>84</sup> Y. Eliaw, *Wanted* (New York, 1984), pp. 62–63.

the future commander of the 'Carpathian' Army), participated in the examinations and graduation ceremony. The Polish instructors stressed that it had been a long time since they had encountered such enthusiasm in their charges and wished them good luck in their fight for Israel's independence. Eliahu Lankin states that he and the others were particularly impressed by Stern's speech – delivered first in Polish and then in Hebrew.<sup>85</sup> He spoke of the Polish-Jewish alliance that had just been formed, of the need to win independence with arms in hand and the plans for an uprising in Palestine.<sup>86</sup>

After the training, some of the participants returned to Palestine, while a few stayed in Poland to take part in events related to Vladimir Jabotinsky's next visit – including his speeches in Warsaw (photo above).

The camp at the Kocierz Pass is the best documented Irgun training venture conducted in Poland before the outbreak of the Second World War. Training camps for the Betar or Irgun members were also organised in the following towns: Tro-



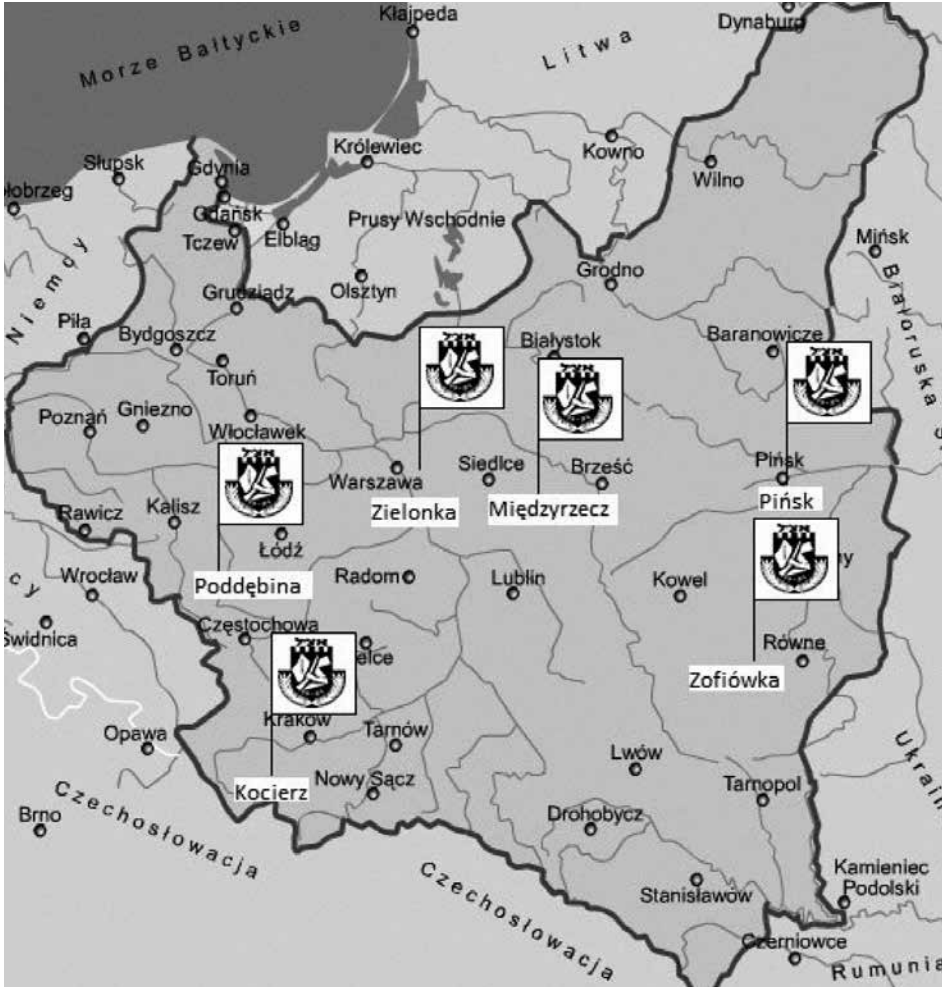
The Speech of Vladimir Jabotinsky, Warsaw, 14 May 1939. Source: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe (National Digital Archive)

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<sup>85</sup> Lankin, *To Win the Promised Land*, p. 38.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

chenbrod (Zofiówka in Volhynia), Zielonka near Warsaw (neighbouring Rembertów), Poddebie near Lodz (probably the village of Poddebice, which now lies within the boundaries of Tuszyn), Pińsk and Międzyrzec Podlaski.<sup>87</sup> Apart from these, many studies mention other locations: Warsaw, Rembertów, Lodz and Cracow. A thorough examination of this subject is not easy, primarily due to the conceptual and organisational chaos among the Revisionists themselves. Even



Places of Training Organised by the Polish Army in which Members of the Betar Participated. Source: own study

<sup>87</sup> J. Reinhartz, Y. Shavit, *The Road to September 1939. Polish Jews, Zionists, and the Yishuv on the Eve of World War II* (Boston, 2018), p. 322.



before the war, training for the Betar or other organisations was often confused in accounts given with the Irgun activities. Therefore, this issue requires further in-depth research. The places where the Polish Army organised or participated in the Irgun training (apart from Kocierz, the Irgun appeared as part of the Betar) are shown on the map above.

## The Impact of Polish Support on Jewish Independence Aspirations

September 1939 ruled out the possibility of further Polish military cooperation with the Revisionists. However, even this small amount of support proved the greatest that the Irgun and the Lehi could have hoped for. No other country chose to provide such comprehensive assistance to Jewish irredentism. Assessing the real impact of this support on the struggle against the British and Arabs is extremely difficult. For example, the author – despite strenuous efforts and searches in Israel and Britain – was not able to find even a single photograph of Polish weapons in Palestine, in particular the characteristic 28e hand-held machine gun, while such weapons certainly made their way to Palestine – after all, single copies of them are still on display in both the Jabotinsky Institute, the Lehi Museum and the Israel Defence Forces Museum (Cahal, IDF).

It is even more difficult to assess the impact of the training courses organised for Revisionist-Zionists by the Polish Army. The participants themselves claimed that these were the best courses where they had had an opportunity to learn the military craft. Moreover, they thought that they represented a turning point in the Irgun's activity: "The effects [of the training] were evident even at the later stages. At the beginning of the operation against the British, electric mines and contact mines were widely used. The knowledge [acquired from Poles] was also used in the preparation of secret broadcasts, the organisation of intelligence activities and in other techniques related to underground operations."<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the Irgun's activity definitely increased after May 1939. In the earlier months, the organisation carried out one or two operations per month, but from mid-1939, their frequency grew markedly. In June, there were seven, in July, six, and in August, Jewish militants succeeded in carrying out a successful attack on the British, killing two police-

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

men (including Ralph Cairns, accused of torturing captured Irgun members) in an improvised roadside explosion.<sup>89</sup>

Cooperation with Poland was just an element of the military training of the Revisionists. Similar courses were also organised in other countries: in Italy (naval courses in Civitavecchia), Lithuania and Latvia. However, Poland was the Revisionists' largest and most important partner. The Revisionist Zionists constructed their military, political and economic plans in connection with the Second Republic. It was from Poland that the revisionist group's planned naval invasion of Palestine was to be launched. The idea for this specific insurrection probably came from Stern, captivated by the Polish Romantic tradition. Vladimir Jabotinsky, having learnt of his idea in June 1939, called it outright illusory.<sup>90</sup> Nor were the Poles positively disposed to the plan. In fact, the plan for a naval invasion can be read as an act of desperation and a high-profile attempt to break the British White Paper's immigration restrictions to get as many Jews as possible out of Europe ahead of the war.<sup>91</sup> However, some traces survive that show that the concept was seriously considered by at least a part of the elite of the Zionist movement:

In his talks with Polish authorities, Stern assured them that the Irgun would train 40,000 young Jews from all over Europe to conquer Palestine in a one-day invasion. They would seize control of Palestine from the British hands and fly the Zionist banner over Jerusalem, thus proclaiming an independent Jewish state. We will decide the fate of Palestine in one action.<sup>92</sup>

Abraham Stern was also confident of Italian support for his cause – a calculation he based on the Italian-British colonial rivalry in the Mediterranean. In reality, however, Mussolini's support was limited to helping train the Betar members in

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<sup>89</sup> S.B. Wagner, *Statecraft by Stealth. Secret Intelligence and British Rule in Palestine* (London, 2019), p. 250.

<sup>90</sup> Archiwum Akt Nowych [Central Archives of Modern Records], MSZ [Ministry of Foreign Affairs], 9918, Notatka z rozmowy Jana Wagnera z Włodzimierzem Żabotyńskim [A Memo from a Conversation between Jan Wagner and Vladimir Jabotinsky], Warsaw, 14 April 1939, pp. 107–108: "Mr. Jabotinsky found that all forms of Jewish conquest of Palestine by force were an illusion."

<sup>91</sup> Eliav, *Wanted*, pp. 178–179.

<sup>92</sup> G. Frank, *The Deed* (New York, 1963), p. 79.

Civitavecchia. 'Il Duce' already had a plan for an Italian empire in the Mediterranean – in 1940, it did not envisage a Jewish uprising in Palestine.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusions

The Polish campaign of 1939 ended any possibility of Poland helping the independence plans of the Revisionist Zionists. After 1940, when Polish emigrants also found their way to the Middle East, they became a minority among the Arab-Jewish population. Between 1940 and 1947, units of the Polish Armed Forces – first the Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade, then the Second Corps – were stationed in Palestine. The Polish military authorities in the Middle East, under pressure from the Supreme Commander and the government in London, turned a blind eye to the desertions of Jewish soldiers who wanted to fight for their own homeland.<sup>94</sup> Polish servicemen and civilians also participated in the political and social life organised by the Revisionists in Palestine. The good relations established in the Second Republic thus stood the test of time. Both groups (especially Piłsudski's supporters) were brought together by a similar situation – the loss of the elite and seemingly complete powerlessness amid a neutral or even hostile majority of compatriots who thought otherwise. Although relations remained strained, and the sense of injustice on both sides grew steadily<sup>95</sup> (as exemplified by the work of Klemens Nussbaum – a witness to the formation of the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR<sup>96</sup>), a platform for Polish-Jewish understanding and cooperation had been built.

It is worth emphasising that the Polish contribution to building an independent Israel was by no means decisive – it was the Jews who won and built their state,

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<sup>93</sup> M. Przybylak, "Imperium włoskie po II wojnie światowej według Mussoliniego," *Obronność – Zeszyty Naukowe Wydziału Zarządzania i Dowodzenia Akademii Obrony Narodowej* 3/15 (2015), p. 107.

<sup>94</sup> The subject of desertion of Jewish soldiers from the Polish Army in the East and the attitude of the Polish military and civilian authorities towards this phenomenon was discussed in depth in an article by Józef Smoliński: "Sprawa dezercji Żydów z Armii Polskiej na Wschodzie w latach 1942–1944," in *Żydzi i Wojsko Polskie w XIX i XX wieku*, ed. by T. Domański and E. Majcher-Ociesa (Warsaw, 2020), pp. 265–279.

<sup>95</sup> The reasons and sources of mutual resentment between Jews and Christians fighting in Polish uniforms in the armies subordinate to the legal government in London and those formed in the USSR after the evacuation of the Anders Army are analysed in depth on the basis of K. Nussbaum's work by Przemysław Benken, "Dzieje Żydów w polskich strukturach wojskowych w Związku Socjalistycznych Republik Sowieckich na podstawie *Historii złudzeń... Klemensa Nussbauma*," in *Relacje polsko-żydowskie w XX wieku*, pp. 225–251.

<sup>96</sup> K. Nussbaum, *Historia złudzeń. Żydzi w Armii Polskiej w ZSRR 1943–45* (Warsaw, 2015).

essentially without anyone's help. IDF soldiers trained in Poland or by Poles were not the majority during the First Israeli-Arab War. Polish doctrinal solutions were overshadowed and superseded by experiences drawn primarily from the British (for example, by the soldiers of the Jewish Brigade). Nor did the supply of arms from Poland satisfy even a fraction of the Irgun's needs in Palestine. However, from the Israeli and especially the revisionist perspective, it was Poland that had proven to be the most serious partner. Not only as a military ally but also in a political and, above all, ideological sense.

However, cooperation with Poland touched on a sensitive and, as time has shown, decisive issue: irregular operations. Thanks to the skills acquired in Poland, among other things, Jews were finally able to force the British to withdraw from the Mandate for Palestine. Polish support was thus key to the creation of the Israeli way of conducting irregular operations. A large part of the clashes in the 1948 War of Independence were also fought in this form. In this area, cooperation with Poland was invaluable to the Israelis. Of the organisations fighting in the 1948 war, the Irgun and the Lehi were best prepared to carry out operations using this form of combat, and their members participated in the training organised by Polish officers. The effectiveness of attacks on the forces and means of the British security formations inside and outside the Mandate is also (though not exclusively) the result of the assimilation of knowledge acquired in Poland. The methods of conducting specific actions overlap with the issues discussed during the course organised in 1939 at the Kocierz Pass. The most important example is the use of improvised explosive charges – as Eliahu Lankin recalls, he learnt how to prepare them specifically in Poland.<sup>97</sup> And even though both the Irgun and the Lehi were weaker in terms of numbers, they imposed their way of fighting the enemy on the stronger Haganah, which also joined (albeit only temporarily) the campaign of attacks against the British and Arabs. The most famous terrorist attack – the attack on the King David Hotel in Jerusalem on 22 July 1946, prepared by the Polish Army corporal officer cadet Menachem Begin (Mieczysław Biegun) – also had the approval of the Haganah.

While talking about the support that Poland gave the Revisionists, we cannot forget the material and humanitarian aid. The Irgun and the Lehi basically lost

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<sup>97</sup> Lankin, *The Story of Altalena Commander*, p. 52.

their power base in the Diaspora after 1939. It was primarily the Revisionists who dominated Central and Eastern Europe, and who later perished in the Holocaust. Those small supplies of arms from Poland that reached Palestine before 1939 were therefore worth their weight in gold. Equally important were the ‘reinforcements’ that arrived in Palestine with the Anders Army, i.e. Polish-Jewish soldiers who joined underground organisations between 1940 and 1947.

The history of the Polish support for Jewish independence aspirations is not widely known, even among established scholars researching Polish-Jewish relations in the 1930s. Training, or even military cooperation, is not mentioned, for example, by Zofia Trębacz in her otherwise very good book *Nie tylko Palestyna* [Not Only Palestine], devoted to the Polish concepts of Jewish emigration.<sup>98</sup> Perhaps, indeed, these isolated cases of excellent, cordial and mutually respectful cooperation between Poles and Revisionists are unable to change the picture of the pre-war “Polish aversion to Jews”. Moreover, so much Revisionist-Zionist enthusiasm and militarism emphasised at every turn can shatter the image of the pre-war pacifism and alienation of the Jewish population, not only in Poland but also throughout Central and Eastern Europe. In the author’s view, it is this military cooperation that both sides can be proud of. For, to use Krzysztof Jabłonka’s words, in relation to the Revisionists, the Republic of Poland played the role of a beacon bringing the Jews out of the darkness of centuries of slavery. In this case, it was exactly what Józef Piłsudski and the Promethean movement had wanted it to be. On the monument dedicated to the memory of the Jews who fought in 1939–1945, located on the Herzl Hill in Jerusalem, there is an inscription in Polish – *Za wolność naszą i waszą* [For Our Freedom and Yours] – these words perfectly describe the small slice of Polish-Jewish history presented above.

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<sup>98</sup> Z. Trębacz, *Nie tylko Palestyna. Polskie plany emigracyjne wobec Żydów 1935–1939* (Warsaw, 2018).

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## SUMMARY

Polish-Jewish contacts have lasted more than 1,000 years. One of the most interesting yet least-known episodes is the military cooperation before and during the Second World War. Poles, who managed to win independence in 1918, became a role model for a group of Zionists gathered around Vladimir Jabotinsky, the leader of the revisionist movement.

The Revisionists, whose main aim was to rebuild an independent Jewish state on the territory of the British Mandate for Palestine, thereby creating a place for the mass emigration of Jews from the European Diaspora, were dream partners for the Polish government. The same goal – the emigration of Jews from Poland – was reinforced by an ideological community based on similar values.

Building on the Polish experience from before the First World War, the Revisionists in the Diaspora established a mass youth movement called the Betar. The task of the organisation, very similar to the Riflemen's Union, was to create a new model of a Jew and to prepare the Diaspora for gaining and maintaining its own state. The foundation of this work was an agreement with the Polish government allowing Polish officers and soldiers to participate in training the young Betars. As part of the developing training cooperation,

in 1938, members of the Irgun, the armed arm of the Revisionists in Palestine, began to come to Poland.

In addition to training, Poland provided the tools necessary for the fight for independence – weapons and ammunition smuggled into Palestine. Poland thus became a natural and, most importantly, a reliable power base for Jewish independence plans. This was confirmed by the project advanced by the Revisionists in 1939 – the idea of a naval invasion of British Palestine. However, the only real way for Jewish organisations to fight against the powerful British empire remained irregular actions, for the preparation of which cooperation with the Polish side was indispensable.

#### KEYWORDS

- Irregular actions • Polish-Jewish cooperation • Zionism
- Revisionist Zionists • Betar • Irgun-Ecel • New Zionist Organisation
- Second Polish Republic • Vladimir Jabotinsky