

BEN-GURION'S ARMY: HOW THE IDF CAME INTO BEING (AND ALMOST DIDN'T)

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On the eve of Israel's statehood in 1948, with the massed forces of five Arab nations threatening invasion, David Ben-Gurion picked a fight with his own army. Why?

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The Jewish general, his visage grim and his words deliberate, spoke as follows:

If I wanted to sum it all up and be cautious, I would say that at this moment, our chances are very much equal. If I am to be more candid, the [Arab armies'] advantage is large, if they bring all their fighting force to bear.

This statement, one of the most dramatic in the history of Israel, was uttered in Tel Aviv on May 12, 1948 by Yigael Sukenik. Already known by his code name Yadin, he was the head of operations of the Haganah, the underground military organization of the yishuv, the Jewish community in pre-state Palestine. His audience: ten members of the People's Administration, Israel's cabinet-in-waiting, who had assembled under the chairmanship of David Ben-Gurion to debate their options in the midst of war.

The British mandate for Palestine would end in only three days. What would fill the ensuing vacuum? Back in November, the UN General Assembly had recommended the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states; the Jews had agreed to partition, the Arabs had refused. Ben-Gurion now guided the feverish preparations for statehood.



Maj-Gen. Yigal Allon, Lt-Col. Shimon Avidan, Maj-Gen. Yigael Yadin, David Ben-Gurion, and Lt-Gen. Yaakov Dori reviewing the Givati Brigade in 1948. Fred Chesnick, IDF Archive.

Since November, Jewish forces had won major victories over Palestinian Arab irregulars who had attacked the yishuv while the British lingered. But now five regular Arab armies, awaiting the British departure, had massed on the borders of Palestine, with the intent of invading and crushing the Jewish state at birth.

The United States, alarmed at the prospect of a larger war, had withdrawn its support for partition and floated a last-minute proposal: Washington would promote a three-month truce, or ceasefire, if the Jews took “no steps . . . to proclaim a sovereign state in a part or all of Palestine.”

Ben-Gurion wasn't interested. As the People's Administration assembled on May 12, he had no intention of entertaining any delay in statehood.

During the afternoon session, about halfway through deliberations that would last thirteen hours, two men, presented by Ben-Gurion as “military experts” from the Haganah, entered the room. Ben-Gurion had tasked them with briefing the members on the military situation.

One was Yadin, only thirty-one yet already the Haganah's acting chief of staff. The Jerusalem-born son of an archaeologist (who months earlier had just retrieved the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls), Yadin joined the Haganah at the age of fifteen and came up through its ranks, only to head off to university studies. Ben-Gurion brought him back when statehood loomed.

The other military expert was Yisrael Galili, age thirty-seven. Galili had also joined the Haganah as a teen, helped found a kibbutz, and devoted himself to acquiring arms and reorganizing personnel. By 1947, the eloquent Galili had risen from a messenger to being appointed by Ben-Gurion as the civilian head of the Haganah's national command.

Yadin spoke first. According to the minutes of the session, Ben-Gurion posed a direct question: “Do you assess that we can hold firm, if our strength grows over time?” In response, Yadin soberly gave the Arabs an equal chance of defeating the Jews, if not a “large advantage.”

His reply induced a general panic—or so, at least, is the story that runs like a thread through nearly all of the major accounts in English of the session.

For instance: in her 1973 memoirs, Golda Meyerson (Meir), who also reported to the session that day, would describe the Yadin briefing as “terrifying.” The journalist Dan Kurzman, in his 1970 book *Genesis 1948*, writes that Yadin's estimate—of “a fifty-fifty chance to survive”—sent “a chill wind of desperation through the room” and prompted “a horrified gasp.” Most recently, David Makovsky, in his book with Dennis Ross on Israeli leadership, *Be Strong and of Good Courage*, describes Yadin's briefing as both “breathtaking” and “devastating.”

According to most of these accounts, Yadin caught Ben-Gurion off-guard and put him on the spot. Ben-Gurion, claims Kurzman, had to struggle to exclude from his own mind the “stuttering, painfully revealing ambiguity” of Yadin's assessment. The journalists Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins, in their book *O Jerusalem!* (1971), write that “Ben-Gurion grimaced at the stunned gasp” of the assembled members. Even Yadin's biographer, Neil Asher Silberman, describes Ben-Gurion as “silently furious” over Yadin's performance.

As for Galili's briefing, it lacked the emotional punch of Yadin's. But when the question of a three-month ceasefire came up, he, too, gave an ominous answer:

If we were in the middle of a real invasion by those five [Arab] countries, in my opinion, without entering into politics, a ceasefire for a specific period would be most useful and would give us a great advantage.

Golda Meir would later describe Galili's assessment as "virtually identical" to Yadin's.

Ben-Gurion now had to persuade the assembly to disregard the briefings of his top experts. Seizing the initiative, he delivered a spirited, morale-lifting speech. His conclusion: "Given our moral values and on the condition that our manpower is wisely used and equipment is increased, then we have every prospect of success." This, miraculously, turned the tide—although Ben-Gurion's motion to reject the proffered ceasefire and declare statehood immediately passed by only a narrow vote.

So there we have the traditional narrative of May 12. Yadin, and to some extent Galili, were worrying doubters who spread their apprehensions to the yishuv's political leaders. Fortunately, Ben-Gurion rose to the occasion, pushed back against his "military experts," and carried the day.

The first problem with this account is that some of it has already unraveled. Most notably, it's now apparent from closer scrutiny that the May 12 meeting wasn't a true decision-point on statehood. Certainly there were worried souls at the table. But after so many years of dreams, plans, and sacrifices (1,200 killed since November 1947), no one could deny the yishuv its independent state.

That is why it's no wonder that the minutes of the meeting do not record a vote. As I showed in an [earlier essay](#) for *Mosaic*—and in line with the current consensus of leading Israeli historians—a vote never took place because the die had already been cast. And this also conforms with the recollection of Ben-Gurion himself, who would later maintain explicitly that "there was no vote" and that declaring independence enjoyed "absolute unanimity among all of my colleagues" in the People's Administration.

But another aspect of the usual account—the one concerning the Yadin briefing—also seems frayed. At the time, Ben-Gurion and Yadin were meeting almost every day to plan strategy and tactics. Ben-Gurion must therefore have been perfectly acquainted with Yadin's assessment of the situation—which, if so, raises a question: why did he allow him to brief the People's Administration in the first place?

In a 1973 interview, Yadin was asked exactly this question: "If Ben-Gurion had already decided to declare independence in two days, what purpose could he have had in inviting Galili and you to the consultation?" Yadin's answer:

I don't know. Ben-Gurion had already decided—that's clear to me. That was one of the sources of his strength, aspects of his power—he'd decided. Perhaps other members of the People's Administration wanted to consult us, as military experts. Perhaps the

doubters, who supported a delay, thought they would find support in our assessments. I don't know exactly.

But this, from the point of view of the conventional narrative, only deepens the mystery. Did Ben-Gurion make a mistake by putting Yadin and Galili in the room? Might not that move have risked the very prospect of establishing the state?

Or, alternatively, might Ben-Gurion have been up to something else? Could it be that he *wanted* to unsettle the People's Administration—not to the point of panic, and not to cause them to fear statehood, but for some other purpose altogether?

I. Yadin's Briefing

In what follows, I intend to answer these questions. But first, and in fairness to Yigael Yadin, it should be noted that he himself always pushed back against the depiction of him as a doubter. The People's Administration had met under a cloud of bad news: the imminent fall of Gush Etzion to the Arab Legion, with a reported loss of 70 lives. (The actual count would be much higher.) According to Yadin, this news had deeply affected the members; Golda Meir had openly wept. In light of this reaction, Yadin would insist that the actual effect of his May 12 briefing was to *boost* everyone's morale.

About Meir's description of his odds-are-against-us estimate as "terrifying," Yadin said:

That's her personal reaction to the assessment. I think, for Ben-Gurion, this wasn't a "terrifying" answer. I think he saw it as a pretty encouraging answer, because the sense of some of the members of the People's Administration, who had no clue as to what was happening, was that there was *no* chance, or that the chances were so very slim. If I gave that [even-odds] opinion, I think that, for some of them, it was pretty encouraging.

On another occasion, Yadin would claim that he (and Galili), by displaying some optimism, advanced the cause of declaring statehood without delay:

Today, looking back, I think, objectively speaking, my optimism was a bit exaggerated. But on the basis of my words (and those of Yisrael Galili), [the People's Administration]—including Ben-Gurion—decided to declare the establishment of the state. Not one person decided, but the entire People's Administration, headed by Ben-Gurion.

In later years, defending this assessment of his briefing as encouraging and optimistic, Yadin was careful to pair his odds-against-us estimate of the military situation with another statement in his presentation. True, the Arab armies would have a purely military advantage, he had said:

more guns, more armor, more planes. But that wasn't the whole of his argument. From the minutes:

There can be no pure military consideration of weapon against weapon and unit against unit. We lack these arms and these armored cars. The consideration begins with the extent to which our people will overcome this force, with our morale and capability, with our plans and tactics. It has been proven that in certain cases not the formation and the numbers determine, but something else.

Moreover, Yadin would insist, his statement about the odds favoring the Arabs was conditioned on their "bring[ing] all their fighting force to bear." But he assured the People's Administration that he didn't see much prospect of that: "It's as clear as day that they won't succeed in concentrating all this force in one place. They have no plan" to do so.

Ideally, someone would have asked Ben-Gurion about the military briefing, but no answer appears in anything he ever said or wrote.

In sum, Yadin thought he had given an answer that was perfectly "truthful" if also "perhaps a bit subjective" in its tilt toward optimism. If that was his purpose, however, the effect on at least some members of the People's Administration seems to have been otherwise. One, Felix Rosenblueth (later Pinhas Rosen, New Aliyah party), a jurist and future minister of justice, found both briefings unsettling, and said so on the record. "I have the impression," Rosenblueth remarked of both Yadin and Galili after they'd left the room, "that these two good, informed, and responsible people don't have much faith in our ability to withstand invasion." Another, David Remez (of Mapai), concluded from the briefings that "the military situation requires a ceasefire."

Where lies the truth? Ideally, one would have asked Ben-Gurion, but no answer appears in anything he ever said or wrote. On one occasion, he did note, somewhat cryptically: "Yadin spoke with very great caution. He did not say that we would be able to stand." He made an even more ambiguous statement to a biographer: "I was not in agreement with everything these two [Yadin and Galili] said." Beyond that, he never related anything, from his own angle, about the effect of Yadin's briefing either on the audience or on himself.

Also in fairness to Yadin, and even more so to Galili, it's important to correct the impression that they themselves *wanted* to delay statehood. The most recent version of this supposition appears in the chapter by Makovsky in his book with Ross:

On the one hand, Ben-Gurion wanted to declare a state, but Yadin and Galili . . . clearly wanted a truce. . . . [B]oth military leaders were explicit that a ceasefire for a "certain time would be of great benefit for us." There is no doubt that Yadin's overarching point was that a truce would give Israel more time to prepare militarily, to arm itself, and hopefully to integrate weaponry that would come from abroad. *He thought a delay would make the Zionists stronger.* [emphasis added]

In fact, although both men did tell the People's Administration that, under certain conditions, a temporary truce might be advantageous, neither one of them had any way of knowing that a truce would also mean delaying Jewish statehood. That's because the details of the U.S. proposal weren't public, and neither of them had been in the room for the prior discussion of it.

In fact, Galili, who told the meeting that a ceasefire "would be most useful," at the same time *opposed* any delay in declaring statehood. Very much a party loyalist, Galili and his recently-formed far-left Mapam party were firm in demanding immediate statehood. Right after a meeting with Ben-Gurion two days earlier, on May 10, Galili had reported to his Mapam superior that he had "encouraged [Ben-Gurion] against postponement."

Nor had Galili and Yadin been told by Ben-Gurion that they would be briefing a session where delaying independence might be on the agenda. True, Galili may have suspected as much: Ben-Gurion had told him about "pressure from abroad" to postpone statehood and "doubts" among colleagues in his own centrist Mapai party.

So, as one who opposed any such delay, Galili decided in advance that, should the ceasefire question come up, he would give an equivocal answer. Together with Yadin, he crafted a strategy. As he explained in a 1973 interview, the two would acknowledge the advantages of a breather and ceasefire but "report the military situation exactly as it was, not to push for a ceasefire or recommend it, because of the political dangers associated with it."

And what were those "political dangers"? In a 1970 statement, written for an official Haganah history but never published, Galili would spell them out:

There was reason to fear that from a political perspective, a ceasefire could be exploited against us, and pressure could be placed on us to postpone declaring the state and so on. There wasn't any assurance that a ceasefire would obligate the Arab states to desist from hostile actions. I also feared that a ceasefire would extend the British blockade of the ports or even postpone their departure, "temporarily" as it were.

In speaking with Yadin about this, Galili recalled, he had reiterated his concern "that our words not be interpreted as a military request to agree to a ceasefire, or as the army pressuring for a ceasefire." Yadin replied that he himself would evade the question altogether if it were posed to him, since answering it would constitute a "deviation into the political sphere." To which Galili would recall agreeing but also going a step farther:

If there were a discussion in the session of a ceasefire, I'd observe, cautiously, that we can't disregard the political situation, and that a ceasefire could be exploited to dash all our achievements and even the declaration of the state.

And that, significantly, is more or less what Galili said when Rosenblueth asked him about a ceasefire. It could, he said, be useful "from a military standpoint," but was "likely to undo everything we have achieved, including our military gains." And then, upon leaving the room,

Galili passed two identical notes, one to Moshe Shertok (Sharett, of Mapai), the other to Aharon Zisling (of Mapam): “You should know that we do not seek a ceasefire.”

Thus, to say that Galili and Yadin “clearly wanted a truce” leading to a “delay” is unfounded and misleading.

But what about the impression that they had spread some degree of despair in the room? We’ll never know exactly what transpired on May 12; nearly all of the testimony dates from well after the fact, and some of it is contradictory. Still, on close examination, the story of the “military experts” spreading despair looks exaggerated. It’s more likely that they fed the existing doubts of a couple of members but left the others unmoved.

II. Ben-Gurion’s Plan

Now, however, I propose to go still farther. My contention, in a nutshell, is that not only was Ben-Gurion unconcerned about the doubts aired by Yadin and Galili but that, in some respects, he actually encouraged them.

Why?

Ben-Gurion himself wanted to shake up the People’s Administration. He wasn’t overly worried about declaring statehood—for him, that needed some finessing, but no one was dead-opposed to it. But he had a much more contentious battle on his hands. To win that battle, the two military briefings, far from posing a problem, were just what he needed.

At the very top of Ben-Gurion’s mind on May 12 was the condition of the army, which he thought wasn’t up to the next, greatly expanded phase of the war. Something, therefore, had to change, and he knew what the change had to be.

Remarkably, most accounts of May 12 omit or elide the dramatic debate over this issue that had unfolded parallel to the matter of declaring the state. That debate—over the readiness of the army for battle—pitted Ben-Gurion against the Haganah command. With the passage of the years, it’s been forgotten, eclipsed by the celebrated spectacle of the declaration. But at the time, it weighed heavily on Ben-Gurion, animated his critics, and consumed the yishuv.

What was the background? The Haganah and its strike force, the Palmah, had grown up as voluntary, underground formations. They relied on the spirit, ideology, and grit of a dedicated few. They fought hard, shot straight, and never retreated. In 1948, many if not most of their commanders belonged to the Mapam party. Disdaining formal discipline and ranks, they exalted the fraternal comradeship of the worker and the farmer under arms.

In the next stage of the war, the Haganah and the Palmah wanted to scale up their model while keeping the existing units intact as an elite vanguard. But, to Ben-Gurion's mind, these forces were undisciplined, ragtag militiamen who might be good enough to scatter Palestinian Arabs but were no match for regular Arab armies, trained and armed by the British.

The Haganah fighters "weren't organized into military formations," complained Ben-Gurion. "Their task was to defend their homes. There was no country-wide control." He therefore proposed to break them apart and meld them into a machine-like, professional army. His model—in the analogy drawn by the journalist Jon Kimche, channeling Ben-Gurion's thoughts—was the British Eighth Army that had defeated the Germans at El Alamein in late 1942 (a victory that also saved the Jews of Palestine from the fate of their European brethren). Many Palestinian Jews had served in this and other British armies during the war, and Ben-Gurion idealized them, too. To win, he believed, the Jewish fighting forces would have to be reorganized along British lines, in an army defined by strict discipline, sharply delineated ranks, and large formations.

Above all, such an army would have to be directly answerable to the Jewish equivalent of Winston Churchill: in other words, himself.

Where did Ben-Gurion gain the self-confidence to see himself as commander-in-chief? After all, his own military experience amounted to basically nothing.

Where did Ben-Gurion gain such self-confidence? After all, his own military experience amounted to service as a corporal in the British-run Jewish Legion in 1918, and at that late point in the Great War he'd missed all the action. Thereafter, he made his career as a labor organizer and politician, and was a complete outsider to the Haganah and the Palmah.

But by 1946, even before the UN partition plan, Ben-Gurion had concluded that the British were indeed destined to leave Palestine, and that, when this happened, the Arab states would invade. He had asked the Jewish Agency, the operating arm of the World Zionist Organization, for the security portfolio, and with that in hand proceeded to conduct a systematic interrogation of the key leaders in the Haganah and Palmah. By the end, he regarded himself as an expert. True, he admitted, "war is not my profession"—but, "in security affairs, everything is details. The only thing I need to address is the details." In that exercise, he thought, he was second to none.

Needless to say, the Haganah and Palmah regarded this development with trepidation. Also, by now they had scored some real victories. In April 1948, they had gone on the offensive, taking the mixed-population cities of Tiberias, Haifa, and Safed. They hadn't lost a single Jewish settlement to the Arabs or abandoned any position. And the Haganah was on its way to becoming a proper army: more than 30,000 soldiers had already been enlisted, and nine brigades had been formed. The yishuv's confidence in the Haganah as a fighting force was growing.

The credit went partly to Galili. He, too, had no military experience to his name; he wasn't a commander but a political officer, a commissar. His talent lay in gaining the trust of the commanders of the Haganah's disparate branches, who turned to him for overall coordination of

their actions. Some took to calling Galili “the little Ben-Gurion,” and Mapam members began to propose him as a future defense minister or deputy defense minister in the government-to-be.

For Ben-Gurion, all of this posed a danger to his plan for reorganizing the Haganah and giving himself direct control over the armed forces. The popular Galili had already blocked his past proposals for reorganization. Now that actual statehood loomed, he might become an even more entrenched obstacle. And so, on May 3, nine days before the all-important meeting of the People’s Administration, Ben-Gurion summarily abolished Galili’s position and dismissed him in a terse letter.

It was a bold move, and it sent shockwaves through the yishuv. The very day of the dismissal was one on which the People’s Administration was scheduled to convene, and Ben-Gurion’s action topped the agenda. There he presented his step as a bureaucratic necessity.

The group’s two Mapam representatives exploded. “This [new] arrangement is unacceptable,” announced Zisling:

This administration was established first and foremost to conduct the war. But Ben-Gurion didn’t bring this issue [to us] for discussion, and today he’s confronted us with a fait accompli. . . . This is not the way to do things. Each one of us isn’t just a representative of his party, he is a representative of the people and the people’s war.

Zisling’s bottom line: “I demand that the existing [prior] arrangement be extended, and that [Galili’s] authority be confirmed by the [People’s] Administration.”

His Mapam colleague, Mordechai Ben-Tov, also joined the fray:

This change means dismissing a man who’s been at the center of [military] affairs for ten years, and who, since the start of the war, has been its director and coordinator. He was effectively the commander of the army. This change, at this tense moment, can have serious consequences. . . . Thousands of Haganah soldiers see the position [of Galili] as that of their commander. . . . Everyone should remain in position until further notice.

Ben-Gurion, who had tried to cloak his move in formalities, was plainly on the defensive. Even his Mapai colleagues failed to rush to his aid: while they may have accepted his logic, the timing seemed ill-considered.

For now, Galili’s supporters had fought Ben-Gurion to a draw, and it was agreed to defer the issue to the next meeting, to which Galili himself would be summoned. On May 6, however, a more formidable challenge emerged from the Haganah general staff. Threatening to resign en masse, all of the branch commanders issued an ultimatum demanding Galili’s reinstatement within twelve hours.

This “generals’ rebellion,” as it would come to be called, was a mutiny in the midst of war, and Ben-Gurion had to beat a temporary retreat. According to his authorized biographer Michael Bar-Zohar, “he was never again so isolated and on his own as on that May 6.” Angry and resentful, he

agreed to restore Galili to Haganah headquarters, albeit in a position stripped of defined responsibilities. On May 9, the two men signed a joint note to the Haganah commanders: “Until [the People’s Administration] determines a security regime, we both will continue to work with you.” The People’s Administration would decide.

III. The Power Struggle

To read accounts of the ensuing struggle is to wonder how the young state managed to fight a war smack in the middle of this tug-of-war between Ben-Gurion and the Haganah command. The answer is partly to be found in the mediation of Yigael Yadin.

Unlike Galili, Yadin was professional and apolitical: just what Ben-Gurion valued in a military officer. He wasn’t a field commander, but he’d taken a keen interest in strategy and claimed to be a disciple of the British military theorist Basil Liddell Hart. This bit of higher strategic knowledge gave him an edge over his peers, who had none. Ben-Gurion also regarded him as someone who stood apart from the Haganah’s insiders but still commanded their respect.

And he was loyal. True, Yadin had thought it a grave mistake to dismiss Galili, and joined the other Haganah commanders in demanding that Ben-Gurion reinstate him. But, as he later said, Ben-Gurion “also felt and knew that I was loyal to him.” In particular, he shared Ben-Gurion’s belief that the Jewish fighting forces needed to be restructured. Armed Jews would have to reform under a disciplined and centralized command, subordinate to the government. Only thus could enough force be built and deployed to fend off invading Arab armies and secure the state.

In the meantime, though, Ben-Gurion had been thwarted in his attempt to take personal control. His legalistic arguments had been dismissed. Against such relentless opposition, how could he make headway? The answer: by warning that the invading Arab armies might overwhelm the yishuv completely, and that the only way to avoid such a fate was by empowering him to overhaul the Jewish forces, starting at the top.

Until now, as we have seen, Ben-Gurion had handled security affairs at the behest of the Jewish Agency. But for the new state, the People’s Administration would be the body assigning the defense portfolio. To give his demand greater urgency, Ben-Gurion now threatened that, if he didn’t get his way, he’d shun all responsibility for defense. He had already hinted strongly at this in the May 3 meeting. Now he had to add another plank by undermining confidence in victory without him.

Ben-Gurion first deployed his two-pronged plan on May 10, when he briefed the executive committee of the Histadrut (the yishuv’s national trade union), composed of the top leaders of Mapai and Mapam. “The great question,” he announced, “is whether we are prepared for the [Arab] invasion.” His answer: “Generally it seems to me that it would be correct to say that we aren’t prepared.” And then the bombshell: “At present, we don’t have the force needed to withstand a possible invasion.”

Here, then, was Ben-Gurion himself warning that the yishuv could be overrun. To qualify this dread scenario, he followed with a series of “ifs” that might yet avert disaster: “if we mobilize forces that we haven’t yet mobilized, if all the inhabitants of settlements who have weapons join the battle, if we succeed with some of our efforts to increase our armaments.” If all these conditions were met, then, “as someone who isn’t an expert, it seems to me that there are no grounds for despair . . . or even panic,” just “very deep worry”: words seemingly calculated to alarm his Histadrut listeners while not altogether demoralizing them. Indeed, some told him that he had “spread gloom.” Dramatically (and correctly, as it turned out) he ended by predicting that Tel Aviv itself might be bombed from the air.

The effect? If he’d hoped to drive his political rivals into his arms, he miscalculated. The Mapam leaders simply brushed his warning aside and came out swinging:

- Yitzhak Ben-Aharon, a Mapam firebrand: “There are no grounds for dismantling and reorganizing in the middle of battle. It was a serious mistake to shake the structure of command only a few days before the end of the British mandate.”
- Yaakov Hazan, Mapam chairman: “For a full year, you and Galili worked well together, as you yourself concede. Wasn’t it possible to postpone this whole matter to May 20, since on May 15 there could be an invasion? Why cause the gears to grind seven days before the invasion?! . . . I’m in awe at the resilience of the Haganah. . . . Why destroy this force? It will just bring troubles.”
- Yitzhak Tabenkin, a towering figure and mentor to the Palmah: “This undermines confidence, it undermines my confidence. I don’t believe you have any permission or authority. . . . In any event, why now? Is this the moment when Galili should leave his position. . . . when the Haganah is there and [we are at] war?”

Not only had Ben-Gurion failed to frighten his rivals with the specter of military defeat, but Mapam was clearly confident of the Haganah and Palmah’s ability to pull off a victory. So he played his other card: resignation.

“The [previous] status quo will not be,” he announced,

because I won’t be part of it. That wouldn’t be a disaster. I didn’t run the Haganah all these years, and it functioned without me. I’m sure the yishuv will stand, that it will win, but as long as the status quo stands, I won’t be there.

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The minutes of the session read like a battle of gladiators, with Ben-Gurion standing alone against a line of challengers, each more formidable than the last. He’d held his own, but the result was still a deadlock. This was a fight that would go down to the wire.

Two days later, on May 12, it was at the top of the agenda. That morning, the Mapam newspaper *Al Ha-Mishmar* launched a blistering front-page attack on Ben-Gurion over the Galili affair. Another enraged opinion piece, calling Galili's dismissal a "palace coup," compared Ben-Gurion's bid to take over the army with actions by Franco and Hitler on their roads to dictatorship.

Later that same morning, Ben-Gurion presided over another meeting, this time of the multiparty security committee. There he again came under direct attack by a Mapam member, and again retorted by suggesting he might not take up the defense portfolio. From his diary:

I still hadn't [formally] received the defense portfolio from the [People's Administration] and I wouldn't accept it unless I was certain that: (1) our army is subordinate to the people, and only the people; (2) that everyone in the defense forces will operate according to a clearly-defined, officially-appointed chain of command; and (3) that defense considerations will be the deciding factor in all defense matters.

He also informed the committee that he was being subjected to "blackmail and lies," but that "security considerations force me to keep silent"—a guarded allusion to the nasty vitriol that had infused the affair.

Straight from this tumult, he went to the fabled meeting of the People's Administration. Although the minutes don't reflect it, and most accounts omit it, the atmosphere must have been thick with anticipation when Yadin and Galili entered the room. The "generals' rebellion" was the talk of Tel Aviv, and now it would be up to the People's Administration to decide.

How could Ben-Gurion prevail, and what could he do differently to stoke just the right amount of worry, something he'd conspicuously failed at two days earlier in the Histadrut forum? He could arrange to have the gloom spread not by himself but by objective "military experts" who couldn't possibly be suspected of being in his pocket. For this role, Yadin and Galili were perfect.

Having brought Yadin back to active service, and having sat with him daily perusing maps and plans, Ben-Gurion knew exactly what to expect from him. Rather than a pep talk, his briefing would be divided evenly between pros and cons, and it would frankly spell out the perils awaiting the yishuv. For his part, Ben-Gurion went out of his way to ensure that Yadin didn't prettify the picture. "People here are worried," Yadin would recall him saying,

and I want you to give a totally objective assessment of our chances to stand in battle, even if you think they are slim. Speak the truth as you know it.

Translation: cause them to worry even more. A sobering prognosis was exactly what Ben-Gurion needed Yadin to deliver—otherwise, why bring him in and deliberately prompt him to be frank? Ben-Gurion would never get his way in the struggle over control of the army without shaking the confidence of at least some members of the People's Administration.

A closer reading of Ben-Gurion's own remarks following those of Yadin and Galili confirms his purpose. Those remarks, as we've seen, are said to have saved the day by reassuring enough members of the People's Administration of victory. And indeed, Ben-Gurion himself said that the

yishuv could triumph. But along the way, he made the situation seem almost as touch-and-go as did Yadin.

The yishuv, he worried aloud, didn't realize the extent of the danger, because it had grown overly confident:

This may sound paradoxical, but one of my fears is that we've become too spoiled. The enemy hasn't succeeded until now to take a single place. Not a reason to be sorry, but it hasn't steeled our morale. It just gave us a basis for pride, and justifiably so. But should it happen—and it almost certainly must (as I've always thought)—that we will lose some places and suffer heavy losses, . . . this is liable, without doubt, to shake morale.

If this wasn't sufficiently clear, he repeated it:

If we see things as they are, and not "as if," but as they are, then we face a difficult battle, and we must be ready for heavy losses of both positions and people, and severe public shocks throughout the yishuv. . . The yishuv hasn't been steeled. Deep down, it has many strengths, but it hasn't been steeled. This is one of our weaknesses. . . . Our morale isn't guaranteed under all conditions. It is likely to be shaken under certain conditions.

Then he used a word bound to alarm everyone present. "There will be panic," he predicted. "This feeling we've had over the past weeks, of huge superiority—moral and military—I'm very, very fearful for it, it should be treated very cautiously."

Nor would the panic be limited to the civilian population. Yadin had warned that the morale of the fighting forces was fragile. Ben-Gurion backed him up: "What Yadin said about morale of our armies—he hasn't exaggerated. Our armies, too, are liable to be shaken in certain circumstances." He concluded by driving the point home. "The position is difficult and fraught with dangers," he told the meeting. "No one hears this. They only listen to what's positive, which mustn't be counted on."

But there was a narrow way out. If it were possible to bring in the weapons stored on ships offshore, and the immigrant recruits being held in foreign detention camps, the yishuv could win. Obviously, only a sovereign state could open the ports that were being kept closed by the British, so in that sense victory rode on independence.

"It won't be a picnic, to which the yishuv has become accustomed," Ben-Gurion warned,

but from the perspective of our dynamics, our strengths—and if manpower and weapons arrive. . . . We must be ready for losses, for severe shocks, but we can overcome.

The message was clear: victory depended not only on guns and men but also on a supreme commander who would serve as a shock absorber, banishing panic, instilling confidence, and showing the path forward.

And the model was no less obvious. Every biographer of Ben-Gurion has speculated that he sought to emulate Churchill. Ben-Gurion had been in London during the evacuation of Dunkirk in June 1940. “I saw defiance growing daily in the expressions and actions of the people,” he recalled years later.

“We can take it” was their slogan at the time, though any rational analysis of the respective strength of Germany and Britain would have shown that they did not have a chance. Few of them could have told you how they would win, but they were utterly certain that they would.

They were “utterly certain” in part because of Churchill’s bold but blunt candor. During that “darkest hour,” Ben-Gurion in London wrote to his wife Paula to express his admiration for Churchill’s “refusal to find reassurance in false consolations. Only a great man who believes in his strength can allow himself to say such bitter words.” Offer only blood, toil, tears, and sweat—and yourself as the only sure guide through the perils. On May 12, Ben-Gurion did just that.

IV. The Threat of Resignation

And he did something else. It came at the end of the day, long after the “military experts” had left the room. Zeev Sharef, the cabinet secretary, makes a passing and evasive allusion to it in his first-hand account, *Three Days* (1959; English translation 1962): “David Ben-Gurion then made a statement on the conduct of security affairs. It was, however, agreed not to discuss the topic at that meeting.” This enigmatic reference concealed, still years after the fact, the explosive nature of his “statement.”

Everyone in the room knew that Ben-Gurion had earlier been compelled to capitulate to an ultimatum by the generals. Some knew he had threatened resignation. He now formally delivered his ultimatum to the People’s Administration:

This body hasn’t yet assigned the defense portfolio. I ask that you announce who holds the portfolio—and that it be assigned immediately. . . . There is public incitement [against me]. I’m not affected by incitement. It’s not the first time. All sorts of groundless things are laid at my door. This time, though, I do care, because this incitement is directed toward soldiers, who are told that [I] “threw out the commander” and made a “palace coup.” . . . This body has the authority to make any arrangements it wants regarding security. . . . One thing is not within [your] authority: to burden me with any responsibility when I think that I can no longer assume it (and on that I’m the sole judge). And I want you to know: I will not assume this responsibility, if at least two things aren’t done, to my satisfaction. . . .

(1) The army and all parts of the army will be subject to the rule of the people and only the people (or the regime that presently exists, which is the People’s Administration and, in a few months, I hope, an elected government); (2) whoever acts in the

framework of defense or the army . . . will act only within his designated authority, as conferred by the government, no more and no less, whether he is the commander of a squad or a division.

This [defense] portfolio has been offered to me. I haven't accepted it yet. I want you to know: I won't accept it if the future order doesn't fully conform to these two things.

Clarifying further, Ben-Gurion specifically referred to the militias that would have to submit:

I won't be partner to any defense order that won't guarantee that everyone—all the soldiers or Haganah members, or Palmah members, or whoever—is subject to one and only one authority, and equally so, and acts only within their authority as defined and not according to some "higher calling."

Proceeding to lay down a time frame "to sort out the matter," he allowed that

things are crazy and we have May 14 and that comes first. I'm not pressuring you. You can delay until next week—I won't pressure you. But every day now is decisive. This sabotage must stop.

Finally, he made it clear that his position wasn't negotiable: "This is the last time I'll return to this subject, . . . my last word."

Ben-Gurion would become famous for getting his way by threatening to resign. "Some were afraid of him," recalled Shimon Peres. "But they were more afraid of being left without him."

In later years Ben-Gurion would become famous for getting his way by threatening to resign. "Some were afraid of him," recalled Shimon Peres. "But they were more afraid of being left without him. That's why, time and again, he would resign! Whenever he resigned, they voted for him to come back." This was the card he had just played—a late-hour ultimatum, on the very brink of independence—and it must have set the members on the edge of their seats.

One of them, Haim-Moshe Shapira (of the religious-Zionist Mizrahi), tried to dissipate the tension. "There is no place for disagreements now," he said. "We will discuss this when we discuss the defense portfolio." Zisling (of Mapam) asked that Ben-Gurion's statement be struck from the record and held over for the next meeting. Otherwise, it would go down as having been accepted, and Zisling could not concur. Ben-Gurion replied sharply: "Even God can't make something not happen that has happened. I made this statement *today and not next week*" (emphasis in the original).

So the statement entered the record, and the meeting then moved on to naming the state. A majority chose "Israel."

V. The Real Drama

All of this leads to the conclusion that on May 12, the real drama for Ben-Gurion revolved not around independence but around his ultimatum threatening to resign if his demand for total control of the war were rebuffed. This explains an anomaly that has long baffled historians. Ben-Gurion's diary entry for that day, May 12, makes only the most abbreviated mention of the proceedings of the People's Administration meeting:

In the afternoon, a meeting of the People's Administration. It was decided to declare statehood and a provisional government at four in the afternoon on Friday. Only [Peretz] Bernstein [of the General Zionists] suggested that we declare only the [provisional] government. Rosenblueth and [Bechor-Shalom] Sheetrit [of the Sefardim] proposed demarcating the borders [in the declaration]—we rejected this.

That's it. Historians have observed that the brevity of this entry bears no relation to the significance or duration of the May 12 meeting. No relation to its duration, yes—it was a thirteen-hour meeting. But the brevity perhaps does reflect Ben-Gurion's own original estimate of the deliberations' significance. For it was in this very same diary entry that Ben-Gurion also carefully and at length recorded the terms of the ultimatum he'd laid down earlier that same day to the security committee and that he would present again to the full People's Administration in the evening—that is, twice on the same day.

For Ben-Gurion, defending independence was of greater concern than declaring it. He'd just lived through a decade when dozens of states had lost theirs.

For Ben-Gurion, *defending* independence was of greater concern than declaring it. On May 9, in a public speech anticipating independence, he explained why that was so: "Our declaration of a state, and designation of some people as Jewish ministers in the express name of the state. . . won't do us any good if we all don't make the supreme and unified effort so that we can pass the military test." The declaration, once done, he saw as secondary, for "as far as I am concerned, the state does not exist so long as the war goes on."

Ben-Gurion had just lived through a decade when dozens of declared and recognized states, including the Poland of his birth, had lost their independence to foreign invaders. A few central European and Baltic states had vanished from the map altogether. By May 12, Ben-Gurion had already pocketed statehood. Thanks to it, weapons would flow into ports, soldiers would be conscripted, and needed materials would be commandeered. But who would be entrusted with setting the strategic and military priorities of the army, without which statehood might come to naught?

On May 12, this was still undecided. Like all great statesmen, Ben-Gurion had an amazing capacity for work, even finding some spare minutes to redraft the declaration of statehood. But in

that project he had eager partners; not so, in the battle for the army. Sharef put it plainly: “There was no sphere in which the man Ben-Gurion was so alone as in this discussion.”

VI. Ben-Gurion Names His Army

On May 14, Ben-Gurion, on behalf of the People’s Council (the Knesset-in-waiting), stood before an excited crowd in the Museum of Art on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv. It was a brief civilian ceremony, and no generals were in attendance. Standing at the podium, he read:

We hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel, to be known as the State of Israel. . . .

Ben-Gurion had given the People’s Administration—after May 14, the Provisional Government—some days to meet his ultimatum. In the meantime, though, the state of Israel didn’t have an army. It was still being defended by para-military groups, pending some resolution that would satisfy Ben-Gurion.

Rosenblueth, the new minister of justice, took the first step by drafting an ordinance establishing the Israel Defense Forces. The state’s army would have a monopoly: “The establishment or maintenance of any other armed force outside the Israel Defense Forces is hereby prohibited.” Every serviceman would “take an oath of allegiance to the state of Israel, its laws, and its lawful authorities.” And the defense minister would oversee implementation of the ordinance.

This met all of Ben-Gurion’s formal conditions; he signed the ordinance as prime minister and accepted the defense portfolio. The ordinance was published on May 31, which is considered the birthday of the Israel Defense Forces—more than two weeks *after* the birth of the state. On June 27, a beaming Ben-Gurion personally administered the oath of allegiance to the army’s senior commanders. “This day,” he wrote, “had something of the status of the ‘giving of the Torah’ and the laws to the army of Israel.”

Right after he swore them in, Ben-Gurion added symbolic weight to his authority over the generals—as Zvi Ayalon (born Leschziner), deputy chief of staff, would recall:

After the swearing-in, we all convened for lunch. There Ben-Gurion stood up and demanded that each of those present immediately change his surname to a Hebrew name, and announce his new name on the spot. Some pretty amusing scenes unfolded, and there was no escape. Ben-Gurion turned to each and every one individually, and wrote down his new name. Some resisted and asked for more time. But Ben-Gurion, good-naturedly, pushed them: choose a name, or I’ll choose one for you. For those who had trouble, he helped. In the afternoon, in the news, they already announced the new names of the senior commanders.

Ben-Gurion not only named his generals, he *named* them. Even Churchill never exercised that degree of authority.

But the ordinance and the oath didn't end the debate. It's a long story, and the subject of several detailed histories in Hebrew. (The works of Anita Shapira and Yoav Gelber stand out.) Slowly and not always surely, Ben-Gurion tightened his grip on the army: he sent Galili back to his kibbutz, broke up the Palmah command, and forced out many of its commanders. Had he not done so, speculates Eliot Cohen in his case study of Ben-Gurion for his book *Supreme Command* (2002), the Palmah "could easily have become, or attempted to become, an ideological Praetorian Guard for a socialist state."

Within a few years, the pre-state "status quo" was but a memory. In 1953, Ben-Gurion resigned from the premiership and retired to the Negev (briefly—he would return to office two years later). In his farewell missive, he wrote:

When the People's Administration assigned me the defense portfolio, I set a condition that the army be unified and entirely subordinate to the command of the state and its authorized institutions. The People's Administration accepted this condition, but it wasn't easy to enforce it in practice. The fragmentation that has always plagued our people damaged the security forces, and the mutiny that preceded the establishment of the state didn't relent after its establishment. Only after many difficult and serious twists were the unity and uniformity of our security force forged, and the IDF's total and exclusive submission to the sovereign state assured.

For Ben-Gurion, this was as great a triumph as statehood, and in some ways greater. It took no special courage on May 12 to ride the crest of past decisions and the massive public tide in favor of declaring the state. Indeed, it would have taken more courage to *delay* independence. But Ben-Gurion's struggle to forge one national army from many factional militias required heroic resolve. Sharef, the cabinet secretary, explained why:

Those who rose against him spoke firmly, vigorously; those who went along with him were gnawed by doubt. It was an inter-party debate, but it also raged within his own party.

Ben-Gurion stood virtually alone in this contest, but he had a huge and hidden advantage, to which none other than Galili attested. Galili would tell the story of a person, himself, beset by a recurring nightmare: masses of Jews were fleeing for their lives, but one man, who stood firmly in their path, arms spread wide, stopped their stampede. That man, Galili said, was Ben-Gurion, adding that he himself would awaken from his nightmare "bathed in sweat."

What if the war did go wrong? What if the people did panic? Supporters and critics of Ben-Gurion alike could imagine only one leader who could hold the line or turn the tide.

What if the war *did* go wrong? What if the people *did* panic? Ben-Gurion's supporters and critics alike could imagine only one leader who could hold the line or even turn the tide.

How did he become so indispensable? Biographers still struggle with the question. He was an indifferent orator who left no great speeches. He wasn't all that charismatic, and only seemed to be so after the 1948 victory.

But well before then, he'd demonstrated a gift for seeing the future clearly, where others saw only fog. Having anticipated war with the Arabs before anyone else, he had answers before anyone else. And this he knew: only if the "fragmented" Jews fought as one people would they win. For all their factional loyalties, they knew it, too, but needed someone to decide it for them. Ben-Gurion founded Israel by uniting it.