

David Cesarani, *Major Farran's Hat; Murder, Scandal and Britain's War Against Jewish Terrorism, 1945-1948* (London: Heineman, 2009), ISBN 9780434018444.

This work is a timely and much needed analysis of Britain's counter insurgency operations in the Palestine Mandate, which focuses on a particular episode in its history to illustrate the failure of British policy and methods in dealing with 'terrorism'. As one of Britain's leading academics on Anglo-Jewry, David Cesarani has in recent years widened his scope to examine associated or related areas, including biographies of Arthur Koestler (1998), Adolf Eichmann (2004) and perspectives on the liberation of Belsen (2006).

In *Major Farran's Hat*, he has produced an extremely well-researched account of the murder and subsequent cover-up by the British authorities, of Jewish teenager Alexander Rubowitz in May 1947. The hat, to which this rather Agatha Christie-sounding title refers, was one found at the scene of the crime in a Jerusalem suburb, belonging to the perpetrator, Major Roy Farran. Cesarani uses the example of the Rubowitz murder, and what might be called the 'extra-judicial' activities of a group of former special operations soldiers, to highlight why Britain failed to crush the Jewish insurgency after World War Two. Over five chapters, the author explores the reasons why Britain lost control of Palestine, the failings of the security forces and the wider consequences of those events both in Britain and in later 'dirty wars' such as in Malaya and Kenya. The overall impression painted by Cesarani is a failure of understanding on many different levels of how to defeat terrorism which, as a strategy for the security forces and a policy for the government, is as pertinent today as it was in the 1940s.

Cesarani begins his account by setting out the context for the arrest, interrogation and murder of Rubowitz, who was an activist in the 'Fighters for the Freedom of Israel' (LEHI) – otherwise known as the Stern Gang. During the Arab Revolt of the 1930s and World War Two, moderate Zionist groups had cooperated with the British, either to suppress hostile Muslim groups, or to support the British war effort against Nazism. The latter included providing information on fellow Jewish, but extremist, Irgun and Stern Gang groups. The author records how this changed after the end of the war, when there was increasing pressure on the British to implement the 1917 Balfour Declaration and, as a Mandate, fulfil Zionist aims for a Jewish 'homeland', particularly in the light of the Shoah or Holocaust. Cesarani exposes differences of opinion between various sections of the

British Government, such as the Colonial Office, the military establishment, the Palestine Police and the newly appointed Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Montgomery, about how to handle this increasingly hostile situation.

Britain's most famous World War Two commander, Montgomery, who had little faith in either the local police or General Sir Alan Cunningham, the High Commissioner, decided on an aggressive campaign, led by specially recruited squads of former commandos, who had a free hand as to how they operated. Believing in using the same tactics as their extremist enemies, Cesarani shows that the British units made up from some of the most highly decorated soldier heroes of World War Two, who acted outside of the law and Human Rights conventions, were both jury and executioner. This in turn escalated the violence as moderate Jews refused to supply intelligence to the British and led to a broadly anti-British coalition. A recurring point made in the book is that soldiers do not make good policemen. The fact that whilst they were very successful in the various activities of the S.A.S. in France or Greece for instance, operating behind enemy lines with a supportive local population, the situation was completely different in Palestine and therefore they were doomed to fail from the start.

Using many sources from different Whitehall departments (particularly those recently declassified by the Security Services), personal papers, and a wealth of Israeli archival material, Cesarani's account of the eventual trial and its 'irregularities' – including interference of evidence – produces a tale more akin to that of a thriller novel than an academic discourse. However, this does not undermine its credibility; the book exposes the embarrassing scandal of British rule, the inadequacies of the justice system, and the unsuitability of maverick soldiers, such as Farran, to special operations work.

Of particular interest are those files relating to MI5, MI6, Special Branch and CID activities in Britain as they attempted to thwart the Irgun and Stern Gang's efforts to export a wave of terror, involving bombings and assassinations (Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, being one important target). Cesarani shows that elements within Anglo-Jewry were sympathetic to the aims and methods employed by Jewish extremists, which ultimately brings to mind the problems of allegiance for a minority religious/ethnic group within a host country. Parallels with Britain's Muslim population come to mind, with British troops fighting and dying in Iraq and Afghanistan, much the same as they had been doing in Palestine between

1945 and 1948. However, the idea of split loyalties or the position of religion versus nationality is not explored by Cesarani in his conclusion.

A further criticism of an otherwise well-researched, absorbing and well-written book, is the importance Cesarani attributes to the murder of Rubowitz, and the subsequent sham trial and cover-up, to the British withdrawal from Palestine. While it was important, it was one of a sequence of blows delivered to the British, which also included the bombings of the Rome Embassy and King David Hotel, the lynching of British soldiers, hostility from the world's media (especially when Jewish refugees were refused entry into Palestine), and an unsympathetic U.S. Government and United Nations commission. In conclusion, Cesarani's book should be seen by the reader as a first step in the understanding of a complex situation, before moving onto such texts as Nicholas Bethell's *The Palestine Triangle* (1979), Tom Segev's *One Palestine, Complete* (1993), and Benny Morris's *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (2009).

Nick Burkitt,  
University of Exeter