

A New Look at Truman and “Exodus 1947”

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In 2003, a desk diary of Harry Truman’s for the year 1947 was found at the Truman Library, in Independence, Missouri. It had been sent to him as a present in late 1946 by Matthew G. Ely, president of the Real Estate Board of New York, Inc. A slip of paper inside the diary, with the heading “President’s Study,” indicates that Truman used it in his study at the oval office in the White House.

The diary, in Truman’s own handwriting, contains one single entry on Palestine, dated July 21—almost two months to the day before the opening of the UN General Assembly at Lake Success, New York, that was destined to decide at the end of November to partition Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. In this entry, the president of the United States gave vent to his spleen in an antisemitic diatribe against the Jewish people. The cause of his anger was a ten-minute telephone call he had received from Henry Morgenthau, President Roosevelt’s secretary of the treasury, concerning a “Jewish ship in Palistine” [sic].

But first, a brief review of the events of the few days prior to that.

There can be no doubt that the ship in question was none other than the *Exodus 1947*. The ship, carrying some 4,500 Jewish Holocaust survivors from Europe, all would-be “illegal” immigrants into Palestine, had been shadowed by four ships of the British Navy all the way from Port de Bouc, France, its point of departure. Just after 03:00 on the morning of July 18, when the *Exodus* was still some thirty miles outside of Palestine’s territorial waters, British Navy marines boarded the ship. A violent, vicious struggle ensued, relayed live to the world by Hagana radio transmitters. At around 05:00, Ike Aranne, the ship’s American-born captain, surrendered to the British in order to secure medical aid for the great number of Jewish wounded—three Jews dead or dying, twenty-eight in need of hospitalization and some two hundred in need of first aid. The *Exodus* was towed by the British Navy into Haifa harbor at 16:00 on the same day.¹

Early that same morning, following the ship's surrender, Moshe Shertok, the political secretary of the Jewish Agency, wired Judge Emil Sandstrom, the chairman of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), then pursuing its investigations in Palestine, inviting him to bring the committee to Haifa to witness what he anticipated would be the violent, forcible transfer of the *Exodus* passengers to the three British ships that would carry them back to Europe. Sandstrom, together with the Yugoslav member of the committee, Valado Simic, were duly taken to Haifa by Aubrey (Abba) Eban, where they spent an hour witnessing the forcible transfer of the Jews. A large number of the world's media were on hand to record the emotion-laden event.²

The three British ships carrying their complement of Jewish refugees set sail for Europe the next day, July 19. Quite evidently, the Zionist leaders, planning to take advantage of the universal public sympathy garnered until then, mobilized Henry Morgenthau to speak with Truman, in the hope that the latter would press the British to relax or abandon their deportation policy. The diary entry was written in the heat of the moment, directly after the phone call, while the three British ships were on the high seas:

6:00 P.M. Monday July 21, 1947

Had ten minutes conversation with Henry Morgenthau about Jewish ship in Palistine [sic]. Told him I would talk to Gen[eral] Marshall about it.

He'd no business, whatever to call me. **The Jews have no sense of proportion nor do they have any judgment on world affairs.**

Henry brought a thousand Jews to New York on a supposedly temporary basis and they stayed. When the country went backward and Republican in the election of 1946, this incident loomed large on the D[isplaced] P[ersons] program.

The Jews, I find are very, very selfish. They care not how many Estonians, Latvians, Finns, Poles, Yugoslavs or Greeks get murdered or mistreated as DPs as long as the Jews get special treatment. **Yet when they have power, physical, financial or political neither Hitler nor Stalin has anything on them for cruelty or mistreatment to the underdog.** Put an underdog on top and it makes no difference whether his name is Russian, Jewish, Negro, Management, Labor, Mormon, Baptist he goes haywire. I've found very, very few who remember their past condition when prosperity comes.³ (author's emphases)

We do not have any record of the contents of the ten-minute telephone conversation itself. However, if by some twist of fate, Truman had not seen the media reports of the searing events that had been played out in Haifa harbor just three days before, Morgenthau would surely have enlightened him. We may assume that Morgenthau, and the Zionists, would have been surprised, to say the very least, at Truman's reaction.

This record of Truman's private, innermost thoughts should prompt a fundamental revision of the conventional wisdom on his support for the Zionist cause, and the reaction of the enlightened West to the Holocaust. Zionist historiography might need to reconsider the effectiveness of Ben-Gurion's policy of using the survivors' plight as a political instrument in the struggle for a Jewish state.⁴ Such a revision would also impinge on another commonly held view—that the UN Partition Resolution of November 29, 1947 owed much to the world's conscience over the Jewish people's fate during World War II, and the failure of the West to mount any military effort to save Jews.

But, as noted, Truman's desk diary for 1947 was not discovered until 2003. In the immediate aftermath of the episode, the *Exodus 1947* was transformed into a defining moment in the Zionist struggle for a Jewish state, both in popular and in Zionist historiography and mythology. The heroic determination of the 4,500 Jewish "illegal" immigrants not to disembark voluntarily on any shore but that of Palestine, their deportation by force from Palestine to Port de Bouc in France, the refusal of all but a handful to disembark voluntarily on French soil and their eventual, forced disembarkation in Hamburg, Germany, where they were sent back to DP camps on German soil in September 1947—all contained the stuff of high tragedy.

Public mythology preceded historical scholarship. The epic saga was immortalized first by Leon Uris, more than a decade before the official government archives were opened to scholars. In 1958, Uris published his book, *Exodus*, which quickly became the biggest bestseller in the United States since *Gone with the Wind*. *Exodus* was translated into no less than a dozen languages. Uris sold the film rights in advance and in 1960, his book was transferred to the big screen, in a hit feature film starring Paul Newman.

The *Exodus* epic became a part of Zionist mythology—a symbol of the determination of the Jewish survivors, rising from the ashes of the Holocaust, to attain statehood, in a struggle that was crowned by the declaration of Israel's independence in May 1948. The infant state was immediately forced to defend its sovereignty against the invasion of five Arab States.

In Israel, a fierce competition ensued between the various camps on the political Left, each trying to appropriate for itself the glory of the *Exodus*. Official and semi-official histories used the episode as proof that they deserved the credit for having booted the British out of Palestine.⁵ The “official” history of the *Yishuv*’s struggle for statehood, *Sefer Toldot Habagana*, published in 1972, before British documents from 1947 were declassified, was quite categorical about the wider political effect of the *Exodus* episode—it had, its authors claimed, aroused public opinion the world over against the cruelty of the British government, and had convinced world opinion that there was an absolute necessity to open the gates of at least part of Palestine to the hundreds of thousands of Jews stranded in Europe.⁶

Historians have since concluded that the *Exodus* affair did not, in fact, influence the British decision to leave Palestine, nor did it find any concrete expression in UNSCOP’s final report.⁷ But one account, which made full use of the British documents, concluded that Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin maneuvered himself into the role of “inhuman monster,” and that “far from making an example of the *Exodus* and rallying the world against the organizers of illegal immigration, Bevin succeeded only in shocking the world community into deeper sympathy for the Zionist enterprise.”⁸

The *Exodus* affair did, indeed, ignite the world’s imagination, and caused ephemeral dismay. As such, public opinion had some, albeit unquantifiable, influence on the leaders of Western democracies. However, those leaders’ own private views, as Truman’s diary entry shows, were somewhat more prosaic.

But in the battle for public opinion, as well as in the evolution of British decision making, a further, no less weighty, factor requires consideration. The sympathy generated by the struggle of the Jewish survivors to gain entry into Palestine was, in fact, offset repeatedly by cruel, at times barbarous, acts by the Jewish terrorist dissidents in Palestine. Such was the case with the *Exodus*.

On July 30, just one day after the three transports carrying the refugees docked at Port de Bouc, their port of embarkation, and just as the second phase in the refugees’ odyssey was about to unfold, members of the I.Z.L (Irgun Zeva’i Le’umi) terrorist group hanged two British sergeants that they had kidnapped and were holding hostage, in retaliation for the British hanging of three of their own members. The sergeants’ bodies were taken to a nearby wood and strung up between two trees, under which a booby trap mine was placed.

When their bodies were discovered, the army captain who tried to take them down detonated the mine, blowing the corpses to pieces, and injuring himself.⁹

The British never hanged another Jew in Palestine. But the I.Z.L's act offset any residual public sympathy from the *Exodus* affair and must have surely dissuaded Truman from any inclination he might have had to intervene with the British on the refugees' behalf. On the contrary, the hanging of the two sergeants may well have confirmed for him the sentiments he had revealed in his private diary just nine days previously. Indeed, *The Times*, in one of the mildest reactions of the British press, wrote of the I.Z.L's actions that "the bestialities of the Nazis could go no further."¹⁰

* * *

Notwithstanding all of the above, anyone at all familiar with Truman's posthumously published private letters—those to Bess, his sweetheart and later wife, and those that he wrote in the heat of the moment, which his secretary had the good sense not to mail¹¹—will not be surprised by the July 1947 diary entry.

Truman was a product of the social and economic environment in which he grew to maturity—Independence, Missouri, at the heart of the rural, turn-of-the-century American Midwest. During his early years, Truman struggled to eke out a living as a farmer and, as was common custom in Missouri, he routinely spoke derogatively of "blacks [to whom he usually referred as 'niggers'], Jews and Orientals." Truman imbibed the prevailing xenophobic antipathy to foreign immigrants, fuelled by resentment at having to compete in the land market with non-native Americans, whom he referred to as—"bohunks" [a derogatory term for Eastern and South-Eastern Europeans] and "Rooshans" [Russians].¹²

In June 1911, in his marriage proposal to Bess, the twenty-seven-year-old Truman found it appropriate to treat his intended to his views on race:

Uncle Will says that the Lord made a white man from dust, a nigger from mud, then he threw up what was left and it came down a Chinaman. He does hate Chinese and Japs. So do I. It is race prejudice, I guess. But I am strongly of the opinion that negros [sic] ought to be in Africa, yellow men in Asia and white men in Europe and America.¹³

At the same time, Truman regarded himself as a deeply religious man. He admired the ancient Hebrews, the people of the Bible. But he preferred the New Testament to the Old, and looked on the Bible primarily as a moral code manual for everyday behavior.¹⁴ His religious inclinations apparently did not clash with his innate racist prejudices which, as the 1947 diary entry confirms, remained with him for most of his adult life.

In 1918, writing on the eve of his embarkation for the war in Europe, Truman described New York to Bess as a “kike town,”¹⁵ and to his first cousin, Mary Noland, he elaborated: “This town has 8,000,000 people, 7,500,000 of ‘em are of Israelitish extraction. (400,000 are wops and the rest are white people).”¹⁶

Truman’s friendship and business partnership with Eddie Jacobson during and after World War I have become the stuff of legend. But Jacobson himself would have been shocked to read some of Truman’s daily letters to his fiancée, which he, Jacobson, routinely took to the mailbox. In February 1918, Truman boasted to Bess about the success of his army canteen:

I go count nickels and dimes up to four hundred dollars a day more or less. I guess I should be very proud of my **Jewish ability**.¹⁷ (author’s emphasis)

Jacobson was astonished by Truman’s behavior at a private meeting at the White House some thirty years later, in March 1948. Jacobson had been mobilized by the Zionists to persuade Truman to relax his veto on Zionist visitors and to agree to receive Dr. Chaim Weizmann (one might well ask why Jacobson’s services were needed if Truman was so supportive). Jacobson later recalled that at the meeting itself, his close friend of over thirty years had come “as close to being an antisemite as a man could possibly be.”¹⁸

On May 14, 1948, the Truman administration recognized the State of Israel, just eleven minutes after Ben-Gurion had declared independence. Truman secured immediate entry into the pantheon of Zionist and Israeli heroes. How can we reconcile the apparent contradiction between Truman’s private sentiments—his racist bigotry—and his support for the Zionist cause, at this critical juncture?

To a considerable degree, the answer is domestic politics. Harry Truman—notwithstanding his personal prejudices and his bitter resentment of the machinations of the Zionist lobby—was persuaded (at times, “coerced” would be a more appropriate word) by his political advisers to bow to the electoral exigencies of the Jewish vote in key states, and to the need for the substantial donations of Jewish money, both to the Democratic party, and to his own presidential campaign.¹⁹

Clark Clifford was Truman’s closest political aide, and arguably the most influential adviser in the Truman White House. In September 1947, he wrote a seminal memo for Truman, replete with supporting statistics, detailing the influence of the Jewish vote in various states, especially New York. He pointed out that since

President Wilson's electoral victory in 1916, no candidate had ever secured the presidency without taking New York.²⁰

On May 12, 1948, a top-secret meeting took place at the White House, to decide if the administration should recognize the new State of Israel, which was to declare its independence two days later. The key protagonists at the meeting were Secretary of State George Marshall and Under-Secretary Robert Lovett, on the one hand—and Clark Clifford on the other. When Marshall entered the room, he glared at Clifford and asked Truman why he was present at all, protesting that “this was straight politics.” Truman responded coolly that Clifford was present because he, the president, had invited him.²¹

Lovett argued that there was no precedent for recognizing a state which did not yet have internationally recognized borders. He continued that, contrary to Clifford's political reasoning, American recognition would be highly detrimental to the prestige of the president and would be regarded as “a transparent attempt to win the Jewish vote.”

But Clifford produced three winning arguments for recognition: Firstly, when the British left Palestine on May 14, they would leave behind a political and military vacuum in Palestine, which only the Jews could fill. Secondly, the United States should preempt the Soviet Union in recognizing the new state in order to avert the risk that Israel would align itself with the Communists. And, last but not least, Clifford insisted that in view of the negative reactions of Jewish voters to the administration's recent Trusteeship initiative (March 1948), an early recognition now might recoup for the president some much-needed Jewish support.²²

In sum, the motives behind the Truman administration's immediate recognition of Israel in May 1948 were more prosaic than sentimental, more pragmatic than religious: *realpolitik* and politics, not necessarily in that order.

Notes:

¹ Michael J. Cohen, *Palestine and the Great Powers, 1945–1948* (Princeton, 1982), p. 254.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 254–55, and Aviva Halamish, *Exodus: The Real Story* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1990), pp. 133–34.

³ <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/diary/page21.htm>. General George C. Marshall, the American chief of the joint staffs during World War II, was Truman's secretary of state.

⁴ Halamish, *op. cit.*, p. 244. Prof. Halamish asserts that Ben-Gurion did not mount *aliyah*

gimmel from November 1945 primarily in order to augment the *Yishuv* population but specifically as a political instrument in the struggle for a Jewish state. *Aliyah gimmel*, as distinct from *aliyah bet*, i.e., illegal immigration in defiance of British law, introduced a deliberate policy of resisting with force any British effort to take over the ships carrying the would-be immigrants.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 245–48.

⁶ Yehuda Slutsky (ed.), *Sefer Toldot Habagana*, Vol. 3, part 2 (Tel Aviv, 1972), p. 1165.

⁷ Halamish, op. cit., pp. 248–49.

⁸ Nicholas Bethell, *The Palestine Triangle: The Struggle for the Holy Land, 1955–1948* (New York, 1979), pp. 342–43.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 337–39, and op. cit. Cohen, pp. 243–44.

¹⁰ *The Times*, August 1, 1947.

¹¹ See: Robert H. Ferrell (ed.), *Dear Bess: The Letters from Harry to Bess Truman, 1910–1959* (New York, 1983) and Monte Poen (ed.), *Strictly Personal and Confidential* (Boston, 1982).

¹² Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (New York, 1974), p. 183.

¹³ Harry to Bess, June 22, 1911, in Ferrell op. cit., p. 39. That letter was also published in the *Kansas City Star*, April 10, 1983. The Trumans married after the war, once Truman was set up in business with Eddie Jacobson, in June 1918.

¹⁴ Miller, op. cit., p. 214.

¹⁵ Harry to Bess, February 23, 1918 in Ferrell op. cit., p. 246. “Kike,” derived from “Isaac,” is a derogatory term for Jews.

¹⁶ Truman to Mary Ethel Noland, March 26, 1918, in the Mary Ethel Noland Papers, Truman Library (HSTL). “Wop” is a derogatory term for someone of Italian descent.

¹⁷ Harry to Bess, February 3, 1918 in Ferrell op. cit., p. 242.

¹⁸ Jacobson to Josef Cohn, March 27, 1952, reprinted in *American Jewish Archives*, 20/1, April, 1968, pp. 4–15.

¹⁹ See Michael J. Cohen, *Truman and Israel* (Berkeley, 1990), especially pp. 4–5, 8–12, 14.

²⁰ Clifford memorandum of November 19, 1947, in Clifford papers, HSTL, cited in Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, p. 60.

²¹ On the secret meeting at the White House, on May 12, 1948, see: McClintock Memorandum, May 12, 1948, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, vol. v, 1948, (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1976), pp. 972–76; also Cohen, op. cit., pp. 212–15.

²² On the Trusteeship initiative of the previous March, see Cohen, op. cit., pp. 188–98.