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When are Foreign Volunteers Useful? Israel's Transnational Soldiers in the War of 1948 Re-examined



Nir Arielli

Abstract

The literature on foreign, or “transnational,” war volunteering has focused overwhelmingly on the motivations and experiences of the volunteers. This approach has largely overlooked other aspects of the phenomenon such as the military and political use that host states can derive from foreign fighters. This article focuses on the enlistment of international volunteers by the Israeli armed forces in the war of 1948–49. Drawing on a combination of archival material, interviews with veterans, and secondary literature, the article assesses the relative importance of “Machal” (Israel’s overseas volunteers) by comparing the role played by these foreigners with that of transnational volunteers who fought in other twentieth-century conflicts.

The literature on foreign, or “transnational,” war volunteering has focused overwhelmingly on the motivations and experiences of the volunteers. While the interest in soldiers who choose “to go to war on their own initiative without the aid and comfort of their patrimony” is understandable,¹ there is much more that can be learned from the phenomenon. One of the largely unexplored issues in this context is how and when were foreign volunteers useful, militarily and politically,

1. Michael W. Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1994), 139.

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to their hosts? To tackle this question, this article focuses on the enlistment of international volunteers by the Israeli armed forces in the war of 1948–49.

These foreigners came from several countries with the largest contingents arriving from Britain, South Africa, France, the United States, Canada, and Latin America. Upon enlisting, these volunteers were normally promised a number of incentives, one of them being that the cost of the journey back to their home country would be covered at the end of their service.² There is some debate regarding the exact number of volunteers. The first time the Israeli Ministry of Defense attempted to conduct a head count of overseas volunteers was in June 1949, after the war had ended and many of the foreigners had already left the country. The ministry estimated the overall number of volunteers at 2,405.³ In the 1980s historian David Bercuson argued that more than 5,000 foreigners fought for the Israelis while the volunteers' veterans association puts the figure at 4,400 individuals from fifty-six countries.⁴ The discrepancy in figures is partially the result of different definitions of who constituted a foreign volunteer, and who could be classed as a new immigrant. There has also been some debate regarding the inclusion of foreigners whose involvement began before the outbreak of war and who did not engage in fighting against Arab forces.⁵ The first armed foreign volunteers were used as part of the Zionist attempt to break through the British naval blockade of Palestine in 1945–48. A few foreigners had enlisted in the Haganah, the precursor of the Israeli military, during the first phase of the war between 29 November 1947 and 15 May 1948, when the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine) fought against the Palestinian Arabs. The vast majority, however, arrived after the Israeli declaration of independence in May 1948. Once the State of Israel was established, the General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) created the Machal department (*mitnadvey chutz laaretz*, "overseas volunteers"). While the department's role was strictly administrative—to take charge of the volunteers' welfare—its name came to encompass the volunteers as a whole, many of them still referring to themselves as *machalniks* more than sixty years later.

Predictably, the literature on Machal has been trapped in the conflicting narratives on the Arab-Israeli conflict. The majority of these texts are memoirs that were written by veteran volunteers, as well as official and semi-official histories

2. "Conditions of service" [no date], file 323, 7335/1949, Israel Defense Forces Archives, Tel Hashomer [hereafter: IDFA].

3. Mordecai Nisyahu, "Machal in the War of Independence" [no date], pp. 4–6, file 108, 1046/1970, IDFA.

4. Compare: David Bercuson, *The Secret Army* (Toronto: Letser & Orpen Dennys, 1983), xiii; and Maurice Ostroff, "The 1948 War of Independence in a Nutshell," World Machal website, accessible on: http://www.machal.org.il/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=120&Itemid=154&lang=he [last accessed on 29 December 2012].

5. For more on the evolving definitions of Israel's foreign volunteers, see: Yaacov Markovitzky, *Machal: Overseas Volunteers in Israel's War of Independence* (Tel Aviv: World Machal, 2003), 7–8.

that approach the topic from a rather patriotic or pro-Israeli point of view.⁶ The works of David Bercuson, Murray Greenfield, and Joseph Hochstein for instance, sought to highlight the contribution of the “forgotten heroes” whose deeds have been “lost in the historical shuffle.”⁷ In sharp contrast, Dan Freeman-Maloy, writing in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, has accused Israel's foreign volunteers of partaking in the expulsion, massacre, and rape of the Palestinian population, though the evidence he produces to support this claim is conjectural.⁸

This article seeks to assess the relative importance of Machal by comparing the role played by these foreigners with that of transnational volunteers who fought in other twentieth-century conflicts. While the mobilizing ideologies in the conflicts that are discussed in the following pages varied drastically, there is much to learn from the similarities and differences in the structural elements of the respective recruitment processes. Furthermore, if different empires can be compared to one another, and different revolutions can be assessed together despite diverging historical circumstances, surely the same applies to transnational war volunteers. Ultimately, the historical significance of a phenomenon is best understood within a comparative context.

I

As a point of departure, the level of involvement and commitment of a host state in the recruitment process needs to be ascertained. In the case of Machal, the recruitment of experienced servicemen from abroad began as a state-sponsored project, albeit by a state-to-be. David Ben Gurion, Chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency, played a pivotal role in initiating this process. He began examining the possibility of purchasing surplus military aircraft and other war matériel in North America in July 1945. In December 1946 he officially assumed the defense portfolio which later evolved into the role of Defense Minister. By the autumn of 1947, Ben Gurion had reached the resolution that the armed Jewish militias in Palestine must be transformed into a modern military force based on a Western (mainly British and American) model. He wanted professional and technical know-how to supplement the *Yishuv's* military capabilities. Hence, from October 1947 onwards, he instructed Haganah representatives in Western countries to approach World War II veteran pilots, air force mechanics, sailors,

6. For memoirs written by veteran volunteers see, for example: Ben Dunkelman, *Dual Allegiance: An Autobiography* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976); Gordon Levett, *Flying under Two Flags* (London: Frank Cass, 1994); David Teperson, *Eyes of the Beholder* (Kfar Shmaryahu: Machal Museum, 2008) [in Hebrew]. For official and semi-official histories see: Henry Katzew, *South Africa's 800: The Story of South African Volunteers in Israel's War of Birth* (Ra'anana: Telfed, 2003); Markovitzky, *Machal: Overseas Volunteers in Israel's War of Independence*; Avi Cohen, ed., *The History of the Air Force in the War of Independence*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2004) [in Hebrew].

7. Bercuson, *The Secret Army*, 233; Murray S. Greenfield and Joseph M. Hochstein, *The Jews' Secret Fleet* (Jerusalem & New York: Gefen, 1987), xvii.

8. Dan Freeman-Maloy, “Mahal and the Dispossession of the Palestinians,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 2 (2011): 43–61, especially 53.

and commanders with operational experience with the view of inviting them to join the armed forces of the Jews in Palestine.⁹ In internal correspondence these recruits were referred to as “experts” or “specialists.”¹⁰

When the recruitment process is examined, it becomes apparent that the initial thrust came from the Jewish leadership in Palestine. As early as January 1946, Zionist emissaries such as Ze’ev (Danny) Schind and Akiva Skidell recruited American and Canadian sailors to take part in *Aliyah Bet*—the shipping of “illegal” Jewish immigrants from Europe to Palestine, in violation of the British naval blockade. Approximately 240 men enlisted for this project.¹¹ After the United Nations voted to partition Palestine in late November 1947, Moshe Shertok, who would soon become Israel’s first Foreign Minister, approached General John H. Hilldring, Assistant Secretary of State (under George Marshall), and asked for help in obtaining two or three military advisers for the Jewish state-to-be.¹² Haganah representative Shlomo Shamir also sent out discreet feelers among high-ranking officers and technical experts in the United States. Shamir was soon put in touch with U.S. Army Colonel David “Mickey” Marcus who promised he would try to find retired generals for the task. When he found that none of those he approached would agree to go without assurance from American authorities that their army status and citizenship would not be jeopardized, he offered his own services. “I may not be the best man for the job,” he told Shamir, “but I’m the only one willing to go.”¹³ Arriving in Palestine in January 1948, his initial task was to advise the Zionist leadership on military command, control, and training. Soon he was appointed commander of the Jerusalem front and given the rank of *Aluf* (the contemporary equivalent would be a Major General). Tragically for everyone involved, Marcus was killed following a friendly fire incident in June 1948. Buried with full military honors at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, his time in Israeli service was later portrayed in the film *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966), starring Kirk Douglas.

The international Zionist recruitment effort took place against the backdrop of a large-scale fund raising campaign that was conducted among several Jewish communities. The recruiters of military personnel relied on and expanded upon pre-existing networks for the secret procurement of weapons as well as on the help of

9. David Ben Gurion, *The Restored State of Israel* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1969), 66–69 [in Hebrew]; Cohen, *The History of the Air Force*, 48–49; Ricky-Dale Calhoun, “Arming David: The Haganah’s Illegal Arms Procurement Network in the United States, 1945–49,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 36 (2007): 24–25.

10. See, for instance: “Machal Specialists—Conditions of Service” [no date], file 4, 901/1971; and “Correspondence regarding experts from abroad working for the navy” [1949], file no. 143, 1000827/1958, IDFA.

11. Greenfield and Hochstein, *The Jews’ Secret Fleet*, 36–39; Aviva Halamish, “American volunteers in illegal immigration to Palestine, 1946–1948,” *Jewish History* 9 (1995): 91–106; Markovitzky, *Machal*, 10–14.

12. Bercuson, *The Secret Army*, 52.

13. Zipporah Porath, *Col. David (Mickey) Marcus: A Soldier for All Humanity* (New York: American Jewish Historical Society, 2010), 5.

numerous local Zionist organizations which operated in the United States, Canada, South Africa, and other countries. Major Wellesley Aron, for example, who had served in the British Army during the Second World War, was sent to the U.S. by the Jewish Agency after the war and was later put in charge of the New York office of Land and Labor, ostensibly a Jewish youth group but, in actual fact, an organization which recruited combat veterans for service in Palestine.¹⁴ For the air force there was a separate recruitment effort. Al Schwimmer, an American flight engineer who worked for TWA, was authorized by Haganah representatives Yehuda Arazi and Teddy Kollek to procure surplus aircraft, pilots, and technicians, and he was given substantial sums of money to do so. After starting on his own, Schwimmer eventually worked in collaboration with Heyman Shamir, who had been put in charge of acquisitions and training for the fledgling Jewish air force in Palestine.¹⁵ A similar recruiting effort took place in Britain and other Western countries, though on a much smaller scale.¹⁶ In countries where pre-existing legislation restricted citizens from enlisting for foreign military service, the recruiters had to conduct their work in secret to elude the authorities. This was the case in Britain, with its Foreign Enlistment Act, and in the United States, where both the Neutrality Act and Nationality Act¹⁷ could be brought to bear on the volunteers.

The service of foreigners was intended to be voluntary and was often underpinned by feelings of solidarity, as the vast majority of the recruits—well over 95 percent—were Jewish. However, when the need arose, Ben Gurion was willing to pay to get the personnel he believed the future Jewish state required. During the recruitment of airmen in North America, Heyman Shamir soon realized that Palestine-level salaries were insufficient and, taking into consideration the realities of the local market, began to offer monthly payments of \$400–\$500. Salaries of experienced combat veterans could be as high as \$600 per month.¹⁸ This raises the question of whether or not the overseas volunteers who fought for Israel in 1948 could be categorized as mercenaries. According to a UN convention that was drafted in the 1980s and went into force in 2001, a mercenary is a person “motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a party to the conflict, material

14. Bercuson, *The Secret Army*, 55; Calhoun, “Arming David,” 26.

15. Yossi Melman, “Captain America,” *Haaretz*, 25 August 2008, accessible on: <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1351663> [last accessed on 25 December 2012]; Doron Rosen, *In Quest of the American Treasure: The Israeli Underground (the Haganah) Activity in the U.S. in 1945–49* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Defense, 2008), 204–11 [in Hebrew].

16. See, for instance: Testimony by Rafi Thon, file 196.5, Haganah Archives, Tel Aviv [hereafter: HA].

17. “Sec. 401. A person who is a national of the United States, whether by birth or naturalization, shall lose his nationality by: [...] (c) Entering, or serving in, the armed forces of a foreign state unless expressly authorized by the laws of the United States...” The Nationality Act, 76th Congress, 3rd session, ch. 876, 14 October 1940.

18. Lon Nordeen, *Fighters Over Israel* (London: Guild Publishing, 1991), 14; Melman, “Captain America”; Rosen, *In Quest*, 208.

compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar rank and functions in the armed forces of that party.”¹⁹ If this definition is to be adopted for the case at hand, even though it did not exist at the time, then the majority of the Machal volunteers would fall outside its parameters. Indeed, as noted above, these foreigners were overwhelmingly of Jewish descent and their declared aim in coming to Israel was the desire to help fortify and defend the nascent Jewish state. The salaries they received were equal to those given to local soldiers, though volunteers from certain countries were entitled to additional “pocket money” from funds raised by their communities abroad.²⁰ On the other hand, there were some pilots who went to Israel primarily because they were bored with post-World War II life and wanted to see some action. Those among them who received substantially higher salaries than the locals could, in contemporary terms, be characterized as mercenaries.²¹

Once they were recruited, the volunteers had to be transported to the war zone. The global effort of bringing them to Israel, and indeed much of the success of the international Zionist recruitment and arms purchase network, depended on French acquiescence. As Meir Zamir has recently shown, following World War II, France sought to regain its pre-war position as a Great Power. French military and intelligence circles believed that an Arab victory in Palestine would enhance the prestige of the Arab League and further jeopardize France’s position in North Africa. In contrast, a Jewish victory would divert the attention of Arab public opinion from North Africa to Palestine. This idea appealed to the French. Furthermore, there was broad public support in France for the Zionists, partially as a result of the Holocaust and partially as a means for the French to get back at the British for their role in humiliating them by driving France out of the Levant. France’s approach in aiding the Zionists manifested itself in clandestine collaboration between the French army and the secret services of the Haganah, which included the exchange of intelligence. In addition, the French authorities turned a blind eye to the purchase and transit of arms across French territory and through French ports.²² Hence, the fairly free passage of international volunteers from France to Israel was made possible.

19. “International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries,” resolution 44/34, 4 December 1989, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, accessible on <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/mercenaries.htm> [last accessed on 25 December 2012].

20. For more on equal pay, see: Levett, *Flying under Two Flags*, 148. On *machalniks’* additional monthly allowance, see, for instance: J. Voet, Secretary of the Zionist organization in Holland, to Ministry of Defense, 25 March 1949, J24/132, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem [hereafter CZA].

21. For more on boredom, see: Nordeen, *Fighters Over Israel*, 14. For a brief discussion of mercenary aspects in the recruitment, see: Freeman-Maloy, “Mahal and the Dispossession,” 47.

22. Meir Zamir, “Bid’ for *Altalena*: France’s covert action in the 1948 war in Palestine,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 46 (2010): 17–58. See also: Amitzur Ilan, *The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Arms Race* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 186.

In Paris, the activities of the Zionist recruitment network were conducted much more openly than in the United States or Britain. This benefitted not only the large contingent of more than 500 French and Francophone volunteers but also those of other nationalities. When the British pilot Gordon Levett arrived in Paris he found the area around the offices on the Avenue de la Grande Armée, where British volunteers were generally sent, to be swarming with would-be volunteers from several countries.²³ Those arriving were temporarily housed in cheap hotels. Much like those who had joined the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War a decade earlier, the Machal volunteers were transported from Paris to southern France in small groups, once a sufficiently large contingent had gathered. Northwest of Marseilles was the large former military camp of Grand Arenas that was taken over by the Zionist organization *HaHalutz* and turned into a transit camp for Jews waiting to immigrate to Palestine. It offered a perfect cover for the volunteers and, in fact, some of them were soon incorporated in the camp's administration.²⁴ After an initial screening, recruits were sent for training at a small country manor in Trets and in the surrounding hills. This training included grenade throwing, pistol and rifle shooting, and some rudimentary Hebrew lessons, as well as a short course in the history of the Zionist movement.²⁵ The fact that the Zionists were allowed to use Grand Arenas is in itself proof of the favorable disposition of the French authorities towards the Zionist movement. Further evidence is provided by Avi Grant, a former British volunteer, who recalls that when local gendarmes came to "inspect" the training camp at Trets they were received with wine, American cigarettes, and a friendly chat. As they were about to leave, the Haganah's man in charge gave each of the gendarmes an envelope with money, "and that was the search!"²⁶ After staying in France for periods that varied between a number of days and several weeks, the volunteers were sent by ship to Israel, the vast majority arriving after the establishment of the state.²⁷

The efficiency of the Zionists' organization, however, should not be overstated. From New York Teddy Kollek, a chief recruiter and the future Mayor of Jerusalem, complained that "every time we receive conflicting instructions. First there was an order to stop recruiting altogether. A few days later an order was received to recruit 200 men." Rafi Thon, the Haganah's commander in Britain, lamented the fact that would-be recruits were given unrealistic promises

23. Levett, *Flying under Two Flags*, 128.

24. Interviews with Avi Grant, 21 December 2010, and Eleanor Lieber, 27 December 2010.

25. Bercuson, *The Secret Army*, 78; Judah Ben David, *Sword in Foreign Lands: The Haganah in Europe, 1945–1948* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1978), 247 [in Hebrew].

26. Interview with Avi Grant, 21 December 2010.

27. Some of the recruits from North America were flown to Prague or Rome to assist with the training of pilots or the smuggling of aircraft and weapons, and thus did not pass through France. Volunteers from Finland also reached Israel via Czechoslovakia. Rosen, *In Quest*, 210; Hannu Reime, "Un-Finnish business," *Haaretz*, 8 October 2010, accessible on: <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/magazine/un-finnish-business-1.317886> [last accessed on 27 July 2013].

which could not be held.²⁸ It was only in 1949, after most recruits had already been enlisted for some time, that a definition of who ought to be considered part of Machal was agreed and a uniform declaration, which all new volunteers were obliged to sign, was drafted.²⁹

There were problems not only with initial enlistment but also with the transportation to Israel. For instance, some of the volunteers from Britain were told by their recruiters to purchase military uniforms, boots, and rucksacks at army surplus stores before leaving so that they would arrive equipped. However, the presence of such items in their baggage meant that they were easy targets for border authorities on the lookout for young men on their way to fight in the Middle East. This made the journey of would-be volunteers to France more complicated.³⁰ Furthermore, according to several accounts, conditions at the transit camp near Marseilles were dreadful. At least nine British volunteers were so distressed by the conditions they encountered that they escaped from Grand Arenas and tried to make their way back to the U.K. This proved both harmful to the Zionist effort and difficult for the volunteers themselves. As many of the volunteers handed over their passports upon arrival in the camp, they needed to seek assistance from the British Consul in Marseilles to facilitate their return.³¹ Back in Britain, they were questioned by the security services about the recruitment process, their trip to France, and the training they had received. Stanley Jackson, for instance, told Special Branch in London: "I have had the adventure knocked out of me by the terrible camp in Marseilles. I would like to go to Palestine to join the Jewish forces there but I could not stand waiting at that camp."³² In addition to the difficulties in France, many veterans recalled the boat journey to Israel as being particularly traumatic.

The point worth emphasizing for our purpose is the extent of Israel's involvement in the recruitment and transportation of foreign fighters. Vast amounts of money were spent on bringing the volunteers to France and other locations in Europe, maintaining them during their stay there, transferring them to Israel, and funding the return trip at the end of their service. For some of the airmen, the Israelis also covered the costs of life insurance. Because of the clandestine and disorganized nature of the recruitment process, it is extremely difficult to estimate the total cost of Machal-related activity between 1947 and 1949. The fragmentary evidence only gives a rough idea of the price tag involved.

28. Nisyahu, "Machal in the War of Independence," p. 8, IDFA.

29. "Committee on Machal," 1949, file 323, 7335/1949, IDFA.

30. Interviews with Zeev Feliswasser, 20 December 2010, and Menachem Silberstein, 5 January 2011.

31. The volunteers that were interviewed for this study do not know to this day why their passports were taken away from them. According to Bercuson, the volunteers were provided with false identity papers, usually in the name of Jews who had been murdered in Nazi death camps, in order to bring them in under the British quota system. Bercuson, *The Secret Army*, 78. However, passports were still taken away from volunteers after British rule in Palestine had ended.

32. Statement of witness, 3 June 1948, HO 45/25587, The National Archives, London (hereafter: TNA).

For instance, in 1949, the representatives of the Israeli Ministry of Defense in the United States spent \$125,000 on recruiting and transporting flight instructors for the air force's flight school. A further \$30,000 were spent on covering the legal costs of thirteen airmen who were arrested while trying to smuggle three bomber aircraft to Palestine, in breach of the arms embargo imposed by the U.S. government.³³ These examples help to illustrate that the enlistment of foreigners for military service in Israel was a host-state-led project.

If we cast a comparative glance at other instances where transnational volunteers fought for foreign countries or political entities, the Israeli case appears fairly unusual. For instance, the initiative to recruit foreigners and create an international force that would help defend the Spanish Republic in 1936 did not come from the government in Madrid. Leftist volunteers from abroad started offering their services to Republican forces shortly after the outbreak of war. Then, in autumn 1936, the Communist International or Comintern in Moscow began to recruit volunteers internationally and, following negotiations with the Spanish government, established the International Brigades along with their headquarters and training camp at Albacete.³⁴ In 1991, when foreign volunteers first started arriving in Zagreb to join Croatian units fighting against the Serbs, the Croatian authorities were caught unprepared and did not know exactly what to do with them.³⁵ According to Thomas Hegghammer, in the conflicts where Muslim foreign fighters have inserted themselves from the 1980s onwards, "recruitment was initiated and handled by other foreigners, not locals." The Palestinian-born cleric, Abdallah Azzam, who oversaw the recruitment of thousands of international volunteers for the Afghan guerilla struggle against the Soviet Union, is a case in point.³⁶ Host-state-led recruitment of foreigners is not without precedent—the *Waffen SS* actively recruited volunteers who were not German citizens during World War II—but such cases remain rare.

33. Rosen, *In Quest*, 329. For the expenses entailed in maintaining the American volunteers who served on Aliyah Bet ships in 1946–1948, see: Halamish, "American volunteers," 100. For some of the costs related to the demobilization of the volunteers at the end of the war, see files KH4/11650, S41/436 and J24/132, CZA. For difficulties in ascertaining exactly how much money was spent on the acquisition of war matériel abroad, an activity closely related to the recruitment of foreign volunteers, see: Yitzhak Greenberg, "Financing the War of Independence," *Zionism* 13 (1988): 10 [in Hebrew].

34. Rémi Skoutelsky, "L'engagement des volontaires français en Espagne républicaine," *Le Mouvement Social* 181 (1997): 8; Nir Arielli, "Getting there: Enlistment Considerations and the Recruitment Networks of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War," in *Transnational Soldiers: Foreign Military Enlistment in the Modern Era*, ed. Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave, 2012), 224.

35. Nir Arielli, "In Search of Meaning: Foreign Volunteers in the Croatian Armed Forces," *Contemporary European History* 21 (2012): 7.

36. Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," *International Security* 35 (2010): 65.

II

The Israeli effort to recruit World War II combat veterans had unexpected consequences, in that it inspired an unanticipated wave of volunteerism. Several hundred men and women, mainly Jews but also a number of non-Jews, offered their services without being approached by Zionist emissaries. In December 1947 Benjamin Dunkelman and Lionel Druker, two Canadian Jews, came up with the initiative to recruit a Canadian unit and raise money for its equipment during a conversation at a Zionist Organization of Canada meeting in Ottawa. According to Druker, before arriving in New York, “we had no direct contact with the Jewish Agency.”³⁷ In July 1948, Ben Gurion noted in his diary that 3,000 South African Jews had offered their services but most of them could not be brought to Israel because of financial constraints.³⁸ Another striking example of this wave of spontaneous voluntarism was to be found in the U.K. In his memoirs from the period, Ben-Gurion estimated that some 500 volunteers had come from the U.K., even though “no real recruitment was carried out” there. More recent estimates have given figures well above 600.³⁹

The volunteers came from a broad range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Their reasons for joining the Jewish cause in Palestine were manifold, much as in other situations in which volunteers have enlisted for military service abroad.⁴⁰ Judging by the interviews with and memoirs published by veterans from the U.K., it seems that their motivations could be broadly divided into two categories: sentiments of Jewish solidarity being the first, and more personal reasons which were not entirely related to the conflict in Palestine making up the second. Examples of the former are plentiful. Eleanor Lieber was a long-standing member of Zionist youth organizations and wanted to immigrate to Palestine. Before joining the struggle in Israel, Vidal Sassoon, the future hairdressing tycoon, was a member of 43 Group, an organization which was composed mainly of Jewish ex-servicemen intent on combating antisemitism.⁴¹ Dov Sugerman, even though

37. Ayala Dan's interview with Lionel Druker, 16 May 1967, 80/34/93, HA.

38. Ben-Gurion, *The Restored State of Israel*, 204.

39. *Ibid.*, 286, 253; Benny Morris, 1948: *A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2010), 104 [in Hebrew]; “List of volunteers from the United Kingdom” [no date], IDF folder 10, UK & Australia, Mahal Archive, Kfar Shmaryahu; Natan Adrian, “Anglo-Jewry and the state of Israel: defining the relationship, 1948–1956,” *Israel Studies* 10 (2005): 127. It should be noted that many of the volunteers who came from Britain were not British citizens. Some were residents, who had arrived before or after World War II, while others travelled to the U.K. from Africa and Asia in order to enlist.

40. See, for comparison: Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows*, 42; Nir Arielli, “Induced to volunteer? The predicament of Jewish communists in Palestine and the Spanish Civil War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 46 (2011): 854–70.

41. Interview with Eleanor Lieber, 27 December 2010; Chrissy Iley, “Vidal Sassoon interview,” *Telegraph*, 16 May 2011, <http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/news-features/TMG8480525/Vidal-Sassoon-interview.html> [last accessed on 27 March 2013]. For more on 43 Group, see: sub-file 865040/236: “Recruits for Jewish Army in Palestine” [1948], HO 45/25587, TNA.

he had “hardly any Jewish background,” became motivated after hearing pro-Zionist speeches in London’s Hyde Park. He explained to his wife that, if he could fight for England during World War II, he could fight for “our country” as well.⁴² Bernard Rose, a Cardiff-born Jew, was outraged by the way Britain had dealt with the refugees on board the ship *Exodus*.⁴³ The danger that the Jews in Palestine faced, especially in light of the recent memories of the Holocaust, inspired a large reservoir of supporters, predominantly among Diaspora communities, where a “1948 moment” was evident, but sometimes even further afield. Gordon Levett, one of the few non-Jewish volunteers to come from Britain, was moved by “the horror of the gas chambers” of World War II. He was also angered by the Labour government’s anti-Zionist policy: “To this day I wonder what Attlee and Bevin and their Cabinet colleagues would have said when the last Israeli Jew and Jewess had drowned off Tel Aviv.”⁴⁴

However, for some, a belief in Zionism was mixed with or overshadowed by other, more personal motivations. Anita Koifman, who had worked for Zionist organizations in London, pointed out that volunteering “could have filled a void that we had after the [Second World] War.”⁴⁵ Lily Myerson, the wife of Dov Sugeran, went to Israel primarily in order to join him and her brother.⁴⁶ Kurt Stern, who was born in Czechoslovakia and reached Britain as part of the Kindertransport, lost most of his family in the Holocaust and decided to go to Israel to join the few family members that remained. “I didn’t come for Zionism, I came for family,” he recalled sixty-two years later.⁴⁷ Avi Grant had lost his family during the Blitz, and thus felt not only that he had very little to keep him in England, but that he would have no one to worry about him when he was gone:

I thought that because I had no parents, because I had nobody to mourn for me ... whoever went out there at that time, went out there prepared to die; there was no choice. This was the accepted thing; if you volunteered to go out to Israel, you were prepared to die because that’s how it would be.⁴⁸

The pure adventure of potentially taking part in such an exciting and historic event certainly had its attractions as well. Sol Jacobs recalled: “when I decided that I was going to volunteer, I didn’t dwell on it at all...” His only dilemma was whether to take up a job in Florida or go to Israel and “have something to tell my grandchildren.”⁴⁹ Bernard Rose vividly remembers how, on his first night in Israel, another British

42. Interview with Lily Myerson (wife), 23 December 2010.

43. Interview with Bernard Rose, 11 January 2011.

44. Levett, *Flying under Two Flags*, 124–25. For the importance of the Holocaust for American volunteers who joined Aliyah Bet in the years 1946–48, see: Halamish, “American Volunteers,” 93.

45. Interview with Anita Koifman and Sol Jacobs, 22 December 2010.

46. Interview with Lily Myerson, 23 December 2010.

47. Interview with Kurt Stern, 23 December 2010.

48. Interview with Avi Grant, 21 December 2010.

49. Interview with Anita Koifman and Sol Jacobs, 22 December 2010.

volunteer shouted in his ear: “This is history, mate!”⁵⁰ For the courageous and adventurous, volunteering for the Zionist movement offered a great escape.

The military roles that some of the British volunteers carried out during the war of 1948 were not exactly what Ben Gurion originally anticipated. Lily Myerson worked as a secretary, initially in the army and later in the air force (eventually, women constituted approximately 10 percent of Machal). Avi Grant worked as an electrical engineer, mapping the electricity infrastructure of bases vacated by the British military. Gavriel Goldshmidt was a care worker in a hospital, assisting in the rehabilitation of soldiers who had been badly injured. In addition to combat veterans, the IDF ended up recruiting foreign volunteers with no military experience at all. Moshe Feingold, for instance, was not yet eighteen when he enlisted.⁵¹

While the specific roles described above were not originally anticipated when recruitment abroad began, the arrival of these Diaspora Jews in Israel during the war, and in some cases their decision to remain and settle in the country, fitted in well with the aspirations of Zionist leaders. The pre-war Jewish population of Palestine was approximately 630,000; a minority compared to the Arab population which was about double that size. The leaders of the *Yishuv* and, subsequently, of the State of Israel strove to bring as many Jews as possible to the country to offset this ratio. Moreover, Ben Gurion saw Israel as a melting pot of Jews from all over the world and, in his eyes, Machal played a small part in achieving this goal. In *Behilachem Yisrael* (As Israel Fought), a collection of wartime essays and speeches that was published in the early 1950s, Ben Gurion celebrated the contribution of “volunteering youths” from the Diaspora to the nascent Israeli air force: “a wonderful *kibbutz galuyot* [gathering of the exiles], merging Jewish bravery and fraternity, which will set an example for Jewish youths wherever they are...” He went on to hope—the text was written in late October 1948—that this spirit would live on after victory was attained.⁵²

However, the realities of the absorption of the Machal volunteers did not necessarily live up to the Zionist ideal. Indeed, a survey conducted by the IDF’s psychological research unit among 387 Machal men and women in March 1949 found that 55 percent of the foreign volunteers had formed a negative opinion of Israeli society.⁵³ Tellingly, at the end of the war only about 40 percent of all the foreigners who had served in the IDF intended to settle in Israel while the majority chose to leave. In June 1949 a Machal official complained that “the boys are going home not because they don’t want to stay on but because they are not

50. Interview with Bernard Rose, 11 January 2011.

51. Interviews with Lily Myerson, 23 December 2010; Avi Grant, 21 December 2010; Gavriel Goldshmidt, 3 January 2011; Moshe Feingold, 20 December 2010. For the breakdown of volunteers according to gender, see: Nisyahu, “Machal in the War of Independence,” p. 30, IDFA.

52. David Ben Gurion, *Behilachem Yisrael* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1975), 287–88 [in Hebrew].

53. Nisyahu, “Machal in the War of Independence,” pp. 29–31, IDFA.

able to obtain the necessary assistance which a new arrival requires in order to get him set up in the country on even the most modest scale.⁵⁴ G. Daniel Cohen has recently argued that the Machal volunteers represented a flexible approach to Zionism. While Ben Gurion promoted a melting pot ethos, the volunteers' Zionism was of a more "sentimental" nature, and their willingness to be mobilized was temporary and ad hoc.⁵⁵ Alas, this is a topic that warrants a separate study. For the purpose of this article it is important to ascertain to what extent these transnational soldiers—both those that were invited and those who enlisted of their own initiative—contributed to the Israeli war effort.

III

A comparison to other cases of transnational mobilization will help to assess the relative importance of the *Machal* volunteers. It can be argued that host states, or host entities, can potentially derive three types of benefits from enlisting foreign fighters: some kind of propaganda value; a solution to manpower shortages; and some form of qualitative edge over the enemy.

The propagandistic value of foreign volunteers to a country's cause could be internal—helping to boost morale at home—or external, by providing international exposure and perhaps even a semblance of international legitimacy to the cause they are fighting for. In the second half of the 1930s, the International Brigades certainly helped the Republican government receive favorable coverage in Left-leaning newspapers outside Spain. The presence of well-known figures among the volunteers, such as the French novelist André Malraux, and the partisan reports about the Brigades written by Ernest Hemingway and others went some way towards keeping international attention focused on the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, Valentine Cunningham has argued that, although some Western authors supported Franco:

merely making catalogues of the names of the writers and artists who did something for the Republican side does bear out one of the major distinctive claims of that side, that the forces of the legally elected Spanish government were struggling not just in the name of freedom and democracy against the forces of repression and Fascism, but were fighting for the survival of art and culture in free societies.⁵⁶

The volunteers who joined the Croatian armed forces during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, though less is known about them in general, boosted local morale despite their small numbers. As Professor Ozren Žunec, who during the war served in the Zagreb Defense Command, has pointed out:

54. "The absorption of Machal in Israel," 12 April 1949, file 240, 580/1956, IDFA; Lee Harris to J. Voet, 27 June 1949, J24/132, CZA.

55. Daniel Cohen, "Les volontaires anglo-américains dans l'armée israélienne," conference: *Se battre à l'étranger pour des idées*, École Normale Supérieure, Paris, 12–14 April 2012.

56. Valentine Cunningham, "Introduction," in *Spanish Front: Writers on the Civil War*, ed. V. Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), xxii.

I felt somehow that foreign volunteers were a symbol that the world has not totally forgotten what was happening in Croatia. In autumn of 1991 Croatia felt alone and abandoned by the international community, and foreigners in HV [Croatian army] were a sign, however small, that there are some people in the world who care.⁵⁷

Compared to these examples, the Machal volunteers' external propaganda value was limited. During most of the war, the presence of foreigners in the IDF was not broadly advertized in the press, at least not by Israeli officials, because many of the volunteers were in breach of the law in their home states. As noted above, the British Foreign Enlistment Act and the American Neutrality Act prevented citizens from these countries from engaging in military service abroad. As many of the volunteers intended to return to their country of origin after completing their service, the Israeli press remained fairly silent about *Machal* during the first ten months of the war. The London-based *Jewish Chronicle* similarly adopted a cautious approach and did not discuss the departure of British Jews to fight for Israel. It did, however, report the launch of a "South African League for Hagana," which sought to "enroll all volunteers who would be prepared to leave for Palestine after May 15 [1948]."⁵⁸ Ben Gurion loosened the reins a little towards the end of the war and mentioned the contribution of foreigners to the war effort in a couple of speeches in October 1948.⁵⁹ At this stage, the press still tried to camouflage Machal. For instance, when the Israeli Air Force celebrated its first anniversary on 26 October 1948, the English-language pro-Zionist daily *Palestine Post* and other local newspapers mentioned the contribution to the cause of pilots who had flown in the British, American, South African, and Canadian air forces during World War II. But the fact that these were foreign volunteers, rather than newly arrived immigrants or Israelis who had served abroad, was purposely not mentioned.⁶⁰ Internationally, the first public acknowledgment regarding the presence of foreigners in the IDF came on 9 December 1948, at a luncheon of the Anglo-American Press Association in Paris, attended by Israel's Foreign Minister, Moshe Shertok. Shertok asked that most of his talk be kept off the record, but was willing to state that "foreigners made up less than 10 per cent" of the Israeli armed forces. He added that there were "Jewish and non-Jewish volunteers from many countries, including Britain and the Dominions," while stressing that none came from the USSR. Shertok concluded by saying: "People had gone to fight in Spain; why should they not come to Israel?"⁶¹

57. Arielli, "In search of meaning," 10.

58. "Soldiers for Hagana," *Jewish Chronicle*, 9 April 1948, 10. In South Africa the recruitment of volunteers benefitted from the pro-Zionist attitude of the government of Prime Minister Jan Christiaan Smuts and could thus be carried out openly.

59. "Ben Gurion: Israel arose by 'the strength that is within,'" *Palestine Post*, 3 October 1948, 4; Ben Gurion, *Behilachem Yisrael*, 287–88.

60. M. W. Jacobs, "It's Israel Air Force's Day," *Palestine Post*, 26 October 1948, 4.

61. "Less than 10% of Israel's army are foreigners," *Palestine Post*, 9 December 1948, 1; "Amended UK resolution," *Jewish Chronicle*, 10 December 1948, 20.

As the fighting ended in early 1949, the Jewish press both in Israel and abroad began to discuss the role of foreign volunteers in the war more openly, and started to make use of the term *Machal*, which had not been mentioned thus far.⁶² Overall, though the *machalniks* were not kept secret, the Israeli leadership preferred caution over the benefits of external propaganda.

Evidence regarding *Machal's* contribution to local morale is mixed, depending to a great extent on the settings of a multitude of encounters and interactions. A number of veterans recalled being greeted with admiration.⁶³ However, some of the IDF's internal correspondence also reveals tensions between locals and foreigners as a result of incompatible expectations, conflicting perceptions of how best to organize and train the Israeli military, and even competition over command posts in the air force and navy.⁶⁴ A mixed picture also emerged from the first meeting of the "Old *Machalniks*" veterans' association in London in December 1949. "Because of our English background, they didn't exactly welcome us with open arms," one veteran told the *Jewish Chronicle*, adding that "we were a bit awkward too."⁶⁵ Further proof that propaganda was not the crux of *Machal's* contribution is the fact that, save for a few exceptions, the volunteers did not figure prominently in postwar historiography or in Israeli collective memory. As alluded to earlier, in the 1980s Bercuson pointed out that "the roles played by foreign volunteers in the fighting and by many Jews outside Palestine in providing much-needed military supplies—has been all but ignored, even in Israel." A monument in Israel, commemorating the names of the 119 foreigners who had died during the war, was only erected in 1993.⁶⁶

Did Israel's foreign fighters help to solve a manpower crisis, as other transnational soldiers have done in previous conflicts? At the beginning of World War II, when the *Waffen SS* recruited volunteers from beyond Germany's prewar borders, only "*Volksdeutsche*" and individuals who supposedly hailed from similarly "pure" races were admitted. However, as the war became protracted and as ranks needed filling, the recruitment of "non-Germanic" volunteers began in the Baltic States, Bosnia, and Ukraine. Eventually, in March 1944, Hitler gave an order authorizing SS chief Heinrich Himmler to liberate any POW who volunteered for armed service in the *Waffen-SS*.⁶⁷ Similarly, during the Winter War between

62. See, for instance: "Anglo-Jews fought in Israel," *Jewish Chronicle*, 29 January 1949, 6; "British Jews in Israeli forces," *Jewish Chronicle*, 18 February 1949, 15; "The American citizenship of volunteers in the Israeli army will not be denied," *Hazofe*, 25 March 1949.

63. Interview with Faye Surovich, 21 December 2010.

64. Nisyahu, "Machal in the War of Independence," p. 34, IDFA. For evidence of dissatisfaction among Aliyah Bet officials with their pre-1948 American volunteers, see Halamish, "American volunteers," 94, 98–101.

65. "Old *Machalniks*' forgather," *Jewish Chronicle*, 16 December 1949, 9.

66. Bercuson, *The Secret Army*, xiii; Markovitzky, *Machal*, 40–41.

67. Jean-Luc Leleu, "From the Nazi Party's Shock Troop to the 'European' Mass Army: The *Waffen-SS* Volunteers," in *War Volunteering in Modern Times: From the French Revolution to the Second World War*, ed. Christine G. Krüger and Sonja Levsen (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave, 2011), 234.

Finland and the USSR, Finnish embassies were initially very selective about the type and number of foreign volunteers they accepted. However, when the situation at the front became grave in early 1940, Helsinki changed its directives, broadening the criteria for potential volunteers, and emphasizing only that they ought to be willing to serve in the infantry.⁶⁸ Foreign fighters could also be used to solve manpower shortages at specific junctures in a conflict. In early November 1936, when Nationalist forces advanced on Madrid and the Republican government of Largo Caballero left the city, the International Brigades played a key role in defending the Spanish capital and warding off the attack.⁶⁹

It would be difficult to argue that *Machal* had served a similar purpose. Contrary to the myth of the small but highly motivated Israeli David, who had confronted the large but ineffective Arab Goliath, a notion that gained currency in Israel in postwar decades but has since been debunked by several historians, the IDF did not suffer from personnel shortages. Conscription among Israeli Jews was introduced on 21 May 1948 and, by the end of that year, the IDF had recruited 108,261 men and women.⁷⁰ It should therefore come as no surprise that, when the nineteen-year-old Zeev Feliswasser offered to enlist in London, he was told abruptly: “Look, we don’t need cannon-fodder, we have enough cannon-fodder.”⁷¹ Foreigners who did make a substantial numerical contribution to the IDF, and who did solve manpower shortages in certain instances, were the Gachal recruits. Gachal (an acronym of the Hebrew words *Giyus Chutz La’aretz*—Overseas Recruitment) was drawn up from would-be immigrants who resided in Displaced Persons camps in Europe and British detention camps in Cyprus. According to Hannah Yablonka’s calculation, some 22,300 Eastern European Holocaust survivors joined the IDF through Gachal. These recruits were treated with far less consideration than the Western *machalniks*.⁷² Indeed, while the latter could, in some cases, have some influence on which unit they would be assigned to and benefitted from a number of material privileges, Gachal recruits, it has often been argued, were sent to the frontline without adequate training.⁷³

If the Machal volunteers did not serve a propaganda purpose or solve a manpower crisis, perhaps they provided the IDF with some sort of qualitative advantage over the enemy; a contribution in expertise rather than in numbers?

68. T 6572/9, Finnish National Archives. I am grateful to Kristo Karvinen for this information.

69. Gustav Regler, *The Owl of Minerva*, trans. Norman Denny (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959), 283; R. Dan Richardson, “The Defense of Madrid: Mysterious Generals, Red Front Fighters, and the International Brigades,” *Military Affairs* 43 (1979): 178–85.

70. “Recruitment: organizational problems” [July 1949], file no. 570, 852/1951, IDFA.

71. Interview with Zeev Feliswasser, 20 December 2010.

72. Hannah Torok-Yablonka, “The recruitment of Holocaust survivors during the War of Independence,” *Journal of Israeli History* 13 (1992): 44.

73. For more on the controversy surrounding the level of training of Gachal soldiers who were sent into battle, see, for instance: Gershon Rivlin, “Not cannon fodder” [in Hebrew], 80/34/93, HA.

This has certainly been the position of Zionist leaders and historians alike. After the war Ben Gurion declared that:

In spite of the contribution made by Israeli boys, Israel would not have been able to build up an air force and operate it without the assistance extended by volunteers from abroad, who had acquired their experience in the service of the allied power [sic] during World War II.⁷⁴

Historian Markovitzky was even more generous in his appraisal:

Their expertise in a wide range of fighting skills, their familiarity with the military framework, and the combat experience of many were key factors which contributed significantly to making it possible for the IDF, in an emergency period, while fighting was still in progress, to establish a regular army, in a relatively short time, which went on to win the war.⁷⁵

A more rigid and less sympathetic assessment can be found in an internal study composed by Mordecai Nisyahu for the IDF's historical research branch in the early 1950s. When weighing up Machal's wartime role, Nisyahu concluded that:

There is some exaggeration towards both extremes concerning Machal's contribution in the War of Independence. As it turns out, Machal brought an overwhelming contribution to the War of Independence only in the air force—but in the air force the contribution was decisive. And in this area the [financial] expenditures were justified. Not so in other areas where many [volunteers] were brought without a [suitable] profession and without exceptional military experience.⁷⁶

The common denominator between the three assessments mentioned above is the technical expertise and operational experience that at least some of the volunteers were able to provide, particularly those who joined the air force. This qualitative contribution becomes more apparent when it is set against the capabilities of the military forces possessed by the Arab states. In May 1948, the Royal Egyptian Air Force was the strongest among all the combatant states. It had 40 Spitfire fighters, ten C-47 Dakota aircraft capable of carrying bombs and various other transport, trainer, and liaison aircraft. In terms of airpower the Jewish side was initially very weak. When the *Sherut Avir* (Air Service) of the Haganah was established in autumn 1947, it consisted of only 11 light aircraft in various stages of obsolescence. Egyptian air raids that followed the Israeli declaration of independence further crippled what was now the Israeli Air Force (IAF).⁷⁷ Planes suitable for modern warfare had to be smuggled into the country

74. Quoted in: Nordeen, *Fighters over Israel*, 25.

75. Markovitzky, *Machal*, 41. For a similar appraisal, see also Rosen, *In Quest*, 69–70.

76. Nisyahu, "Machal in the War of Independence," p. 32, IDFA.

77. Nordeen, *Fighters over Israel*, 6–16; Bercuson, *The Secret Army*, 24; Haim Barkai, "Ha-'alut ha-realit shel milhemet ha-'atsma'ut," in *Israel's War of Independence 1948–1949*, ed. Alon Kadish, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2004), 759–60 [in Hebrew].



Foreign and Israeli pilots in IAF Squadron 101 [Courtesy of World Machal]

to evade the weapons embargo imposed by the UN, and secret training courses for Israeli pilots were conducted in Czechoslovakia and Italy. The appearance of trained foreign pilots, who were put into action almost upon arrival, clearly made a difference. Markovitzky argues that about 70 percent of the personnel of the IAF were overseas volunteers and, according to Rosen, approximately 1,000 foreigners served in the organization throughout the war. They fulfilled various roles: some 100 airmen helped to bring aircraft and weapons that were purchased abroad into the country; 167 foreign volunteers worked as ground crews in Israel and in the flight school in Czechoslovakia; and more than 170 took part in bombing, reconnaissance, and other combat flights.⁷⁸ Foreigners commanded squadrons and air force bases and held various other key positions. Lily Myerson had no trouble serving as a secretary in the air force; “I was needed because most of the work was in English.”⁷⁹ By the end of the war the Israeli side enjoyed aerial superiority, carrying out bombing raids on Cairo, Amman, and Damascus. Volunteer pilots even shot down a number of British RAF aircraft that were based in Egypt. In Operation Yoav of October 1948 the Israeli air force carried out 240 sorties in contrast to the mere 30 to 50 carried out by the Egyptians.⁸⁰ Foreign volunteers

78. Markovitzky, *Machal*, 22; Rosen, *In Quest*, 211.

79. Interview with Lily Myerson, 23 December 2010.

80. Nordeen, *Fighters over Israel*, 22–24; Ben Gurion, *Behilachem Yisrael*, 287–88; Morris, *1948*, 232; Derek J. Penslar, *Jews and the Military* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 230. The air forces of the Arab states were partially grounded owing to a lack of spare parts.



The IAF's operations room [Courtesy of Anita Koifman]

also played an important role in establishing Israel's anti-aircraft defenses. Moshe Ettenberg (Eitan) from the U.S. founded the air force's first radar unit and commanded a group of 40 overseas volunteers. Female volunteers from Britain and South Africa trained new Israeli recruits to become radar operators. Anita Koifman, who helped to design the IAF's operations room using the model of the RAF's Fighter Command headquarters where she had served during World War II, taught plotting.⁸¹

In comparison to subsequent Arab-Israeli wars, the role of the IAF in 1948 was not as pivotal. Air power was supplementary to rather than a leading element in this conflict.⁸² Yet the IAF's foreign volunteers could still lay claim to having made a real difference for two main reasons. First of all the weapons and ammunition they flew into Israel were crucial to the fledgling state's war effort. Secondly, the institutional foundations they established helped to mold the organization and its *modus operandi*; an impact which lasted long after the war ended. This is a fairly exceptional contribution which becomes apparent when other instances of transnational volunteering are examined.

Foreign pilots have, of course, participated in other conflicts. The French writer André Malraux, though not an airman himself, helped to recruit approximately 40 French, Belgian, Czech, and other foreign pilots and technicians for the *Escuadrilla España* which fought for the Republican government during the Spanish Civil War.

81. Markovitzky, *Machal*, 26–27; interview with Anita Koifman, 22 December 2010.

82. Penslar, *Jews and the Military*, 229–30.

Other international volunteers flew for the Republic as part of the *2ª Escuadrilla Lafayette*. Both squadrons saw action in late summer 1936, achieving limited success in confrontations with Nationalist forces, before receding in importance with the arrival of aircraft and pilots from the Soviet Union.⁸³ The latter were part of a government-sanctioned state effort, rather than transnational volunteers, and can therefore be excluded from our comparison. If we focus on the voluntary international support the Spanish Republic's air force received, then it becomes difficult to argue that Malraux and his men provided a qualitative edge that the enemy did not have. Few in number and flying Dewoitine and Potez aircraft that were inferior to the German- and Italian-made planes serving the Nationalist side, their chances in the long run were never high. Moreover, Malraux and his pilots have often been criticized, by contemporaries and historians, for being "mercenaries" and "adventurers" who extracted exorbitant amounts of money for very little action.⁸⁴ Furthermore, they did not help to create an air force where none existed or establish institutional foundations which lived on after the end of the conflict.

Machal volunteers also contributed, though to a lesser extent, to the navy and the army. In the navy, roughly 200 foreigners constituted less than 10 percent of the manpower. Most of the *machalniks* who joined did so in the later stages of the war. Nonetheless, volunteers from abroad held key command positions. One of them was Paul Shulman, a former U.S. Navy frigate commander, who became Commander-in-Chief of the infant Israeli navy in October 1948.⁸⁵ Foreign volunteers were scattered throughout the army. The largest cluster—approximately 300 men—was in Brigade 7. The commander of the Brigade, Benjamin Dunkelman, was formerly a Major in the Canadian army. As far as the professionalization of local Israeli forces is concerned, the foreigners in the army and navy did not play such a pivotal role as their counterparts in the air force. However, at various stages of the war, Ben Gurion met with and received advice from Dunkelman, David "Mickey" Marcus, and Paul Shulman, much as he did from South African Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Cecil Margo.⁸⁶

The most effective way to assess the relative importance of Machal is through a diachronic comparison with the transnational volunteers who fought against them, on the Arab side. Already before the invasion of May 1948, when the struggle was still primarily between Palestinian Arabs and Jews, approximately 6,000 to 8,000 Arab volunteers, mainly from Iraq, Syria, and Egypt fought

83. Rémi Skoutelsky, *Novedad en el frente: Las Brigadas Internacionales en la guerra civil* (Madrid: Historia, 2006), 45–48; Jesus Salas Larrazabal, *Air War over Spain* (London: Ian Allan, 1969), 64–66, 76–79.

84. Anthony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), 140; Michael Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave, 2004), 42; Raymond Carr, *The Spanish Tragedy* (London: Weidenfeld, 1993), 136.

85. Nisياهو, "Machal in the War of Independence," pp. 16–17, IDFA; Ilan, *The Origins*, 104.

86. Nisياهو, "Machal in the War of Independence," p. 18, IDFA; Ilan, *The Origins*, 104; Freeman-Maloy, "Mahal and the Dispossession," 50; Ben Gurion, *The Restored State of Israel*, 205, 256, 264–65, 286.

alongside the Palestinian Arabs in Fawzi al-Qawuqji's Arab Liberation Army or in units established by the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gaza region.⁸⁷ From March 1948 onwards, well over 1,000 Moroccans, Algerians, Tunisians, and Libyans tried to make their way to Egypt to take part in the war in Palestine. Those who volunteered at an early stage in Benghazi received some money from the local Palestine Defense Committee before being sent to a military depot in Egypt. One British observer remarked, rather unkindly, that these consisted of "the town's unemployed and unemployables."⁸⁸ The vast majority of North African volunteers, who arrived in eastern Libya in May, did not succeed in reaching the war zone. They became stranded once the Egyptian border was closed on 7 June to comply with the UN-brokered ceasefire, which banned the introduction of fighting personnel into the warring countries. Consequently, in late June and July, the British authorities in Libya sent the volunteers back to French North Africa at a considerable cost.⁸⁹

Another problem which plagued foreign volunteers on the Arab side was very poor logistics. The Arab Liberation Army (ALA), which was established by the Arab League in autumn 1947 and included some 4,000 men at its height, suffered from a poor training regime and discipline problems which were made worse by a shortage of food, medical supplies, and ammunition. Only half of the force eventually took part in the fighting, sustaining activity for only a few months and achieving very little, save for a number of successful attacks on Jewish convoys. Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood accused ALA soldiers of committing robbery and rape against the Arab population.⁹⁰

Hence, while both sides attempted to make use of international supporters to increase their fighting capabilities, volunteers from non-combatant states who joined the Arab side were mostly "regional foreign fighters," coming from countries bordering on the conflict zone.⁹¹ If they were able to take part in the fighting at all they were deployed mostly in infantry units. They did not contribute

87. Morris, *1948*, 103–4.

88. "Palestine Defence Committee," [no date], FO 371/69426A, TNA. When North African volunteers for the Arab cause in Palestine first began to appear in spring 1948, the British authorities in Libya turned a blind eye. They did not place any obstacles in the way of the volunteers but also refrained from offering them any assistance. In early June 1948 the Foreign Office pointed out that "we are running the risk of incurring serious international criticism in permitting these volunteers to leave Cyrenaica." On 15 June the War Office reported that the movement of volunteers between Tunisia and Egypt through Libya had been stopped.

89. WO to C-in-C MELF, 22 June 1948; C-in-C MELF to WO, 2 July 1948, FO 371/69426A, TNA.

90. Matthew Hughes, "Lebanon's armed forces and the Arab-Israel War, 1948–49," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 24 (2005): 33–36; Morris, *1948*, 109; Ilan Pappé, *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1948–51* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), 23–24; Ilan Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947–51* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1992), 83–84.

91. For a distinction between "regional" and "global" foreign volunteers, see: Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters," 59.

towards the professionalization of the Arab war effort in the same way that the Machal volunteers propped-up the Israeli Air Force. The *machalniks* were “global” foreign fighters, drawn largely from Diaspora communities in English-, French- and Spanish-speaking countries. Despite their heterogeneous makeup and the difficulties they encountered, the technical know-how and the combat experience of ex-World War II servicemen and women who joined the Jewish side were an important asset the adversary did not have. Moreover, the flow of volunteers for Israel was fairly continuous in contrast to the volunteers on the Arab side who petered-out after the initial wave of enthusiasm in spring 1948. Therefore, one way to describe the role of Machal in 1948 is by pointing out that their input was far more important than that of the transnational volunteers who fought on the Arab side. Although some of the volunteers from abroad had no military experience when they arrived in Israel, and even though the recruitment process was far from smooth, the *machalniks* as a group were certainly useful to their Israeli hosts.

Variants of Machal continued to enlist overseas volunteers for the IDF in the decades that followed the war of 1948, and the practice still exists today, though Israel’s armed forces have evolved significantly since they were established. The contemporary enlistment of foreigners no longer serves the qualitative and professionalizing purposes of the past but is, primarily, part of the Zionist effort to preserve contacts between Israel and Jewish communities abroad. Thus, the military benefit derived from present day foreign volunteers is far smaller than that of the generation of 1948.

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