This is my post on the third chapter of Benny Morris’s book “1948 A History of the First Arab-Israeli War”. I hope to cover each of the other chapters in turn.

This chapter deals with the first part of the civil war or inter-ethnic war which occurred after the UN vote for partition of Israel/Palestine. The 1948 war had two parts, a war between the Yishuv (Jewish community in Palestine) and the Palestinians, which here is called the civil war, which runs from November 30th 1947 to May 14th 1948, and a conventional war between the Yishuv/the newly created state of Israel and the armies from Arab countries from May 15th 1948 to 1949 (fighting more or less ended in January of that year but the war officially ended in July 1949).

The civil war can be further divided into two parts: the first part which is dealt with in this chapter runs from the November 30th 1947 until the end of March 1948. According to Morris it is the Arabs who are on the offensive, carrying out guerrilla attacks and terrorist attacks, which are responded to in kind by the Haganah the Jewish militia which later becomes the IDF/the Israeli army and the two paramilitary/terrorist organizations the IZL and the LHI.

Picture of a hotel in Jerusalem that was bombed by the Palestinians, leveling 4 buildings and killing 58, mostly civilians (Morris qualifies it as the worst attack of the war):

During the civil war British troops are still there but they are in the process of leaving Palestine, they try not to interfere in the fighting while making an effort to maintain law and order where possible.

It is important to note that while the Palestinian population is 1.2 or 1.3 million, and the Yishuv population only 630,000, the Yishuv had a disproportionate number of army-age males as the Zionist leadership had made sure to ship in as many young fit males as possible during the 30s and 40s.

Also the Jewish community was better organized, better trained, better armed and had a real army in the Haganah. The Palestinians had no army of their own, and fought as separate bands or gangs with little central coordination or control. Also the Yishuv was very homogeneous close to 90 percent Ashkenazi and 90 percent secular, while Palestinian Arab society was divided on any number of lines: religious, town/country, etc.

In the aftermath of the holocaust there was much popular US support for Zionism. And Golda Myerson (Meir) managed to raise 50 million dollars in a US fundraising tour in January-March 1948, another 50 million in another tour in May-June. Morris writes that this was used to buy arms from Czechoslovakia and that these arms shipments proved decisive in the battles from April to October 1948.

On the other hand the Arab countries were not as well organized nor as generous, and the Palestinians received a fraction of this foreign aid.
The Yishuv had also set up a clandestine arms industry, which produced guns, bullets, mortars and grenades, all of it hidden from the British.

Also the Yishuv was much more united and had stronger nationalist feelings. While the Palestinian villagers, had ties to family, village and region, rather than to an abstract nation.

Morris describes the various attacks that occurred, most of them in the area destined to form the Jewish state. There were terrorist attacks and attacks on Jewish settlements, which were not very successful because of the Jewish defenses. On the other hand attacks on Jewish convoys of goods were much more successful. It seems from most of the accounts Morris gives that much more Arabs than Jews died in most of the attacks. Of note, is that territory did not change hands, as it would during the later phases of the war.

In any case the fear of defeat as well as the collapse of the Palestinian economy caused many Palestinians to flee their homes. Many of the elite left the country, but most people went to their villages of origin. In all 75,000 to 100,000 Palestinians left their homes in this first part of the civil war. The Palestinian leadership tried to stop this flight, especially for young fighting age males, though sometimes they did encourage the evacuation of women and children.

By the end of this first period there were about 1,000 dead in the Yishuv. Morris does not give a number of Palestinian dead, but it must be higher as at each attack there were more Palestinians killed, though they may have mainly been militants. On the other hand the IZL and LHI paramilitary/terrorist organizations carried out terror attacks during this period. The Haganah did too, but mainly as retaliation.

The next chapter will cover the second stage of the civil war, where the Yishuv takes the initiative, with major battles and the conquest of territory (mainly by the Jews).

This is my post on the second chapter of Benny Morris’s book “1948 A History of the First Arab-Israeli War”. I hope to cover each of the other chapters in turn.

This chapter deals with the handing over of the Israel/Palestine issue to the UN, the UN special committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) which came up with the plan, the vote on the resolution in the UN general assembly and the reaction of the Arab states.

In February 1947 the British who could no longer afford and were no longer interested in maintaining their mandate in Palestine handed the issue over to the UN.

The UN gave the issue to a specially formed committee UNSCOP composed of representatives from Holland, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Canada, Australia, India, Iran, Peru, Guatemala and Uruguay. So no Arab, Zionist or Great Power members.

The members of the committee visited Palestine for five weeks that summer. The Palestinian leadership boycotted UNSCOP (though the committee met with some Palestinians privately), and the committee members generally got a favorable view of the Zionist settlers as opposed to the Palestinians, especially the poor peasants.

Also the chair of UNSCOP came to believe that if there was a partition and it led to war, the Yishuv (Jewish community in Palestine) would win the war against the Arabs and gain control of most of Palestine.

They witnessed the Exodus affair, where the British turned away a ship of 4,500 Jewish immigrants, who were sent to France in three separate ships. France refused to unload the ships by force against the wishes of the migrants. The British then took them to Germany and put them in camps. Sending the Jewish
holocaust survivors back to Germany of all places, made the British look particularly bad.

Two UNSCOP members witnessed the transfer of the migrants to the three ships in Haifa and had a chance to talk to them and this has a profound effect on them.

The UNSCOP members then went to Europe and voted 6 to 4 in favor of visiting the Holocaust survivors in displaced persons camps. All of the survivors they met wanted to immigrate to Palestine.

They then came up with their proposal. Two suggestions were made, one the majority view supported to states one Jewish the other Arab joined in an economic union, with Jerusalem and Bethlehem being part of neither state but under international trusteeship. This was from the representatives of Sweden, Holland, Canada, Uruguay, Guatemala, Peru and Czechoslovakia.

The minority plan supported a single democratic state with an Arab minority and with Jewish immigration limited to maintain an Arab majority. This was from the representatives of Yugoslavia, Iran and and India.

The following map shows the partition plan as finally voted on in the general assembly. The green map shows the borders as originally given by the majority proposal (slightly different, giving the Jewish state 62% rather than 55%).

The Zionists didn’t want to give citizenship to the Arabs that would be left in the Jewish state (the Arabs were to be more than 40% of the population), because then they could not expel them, but merely jail them, and it would be according to Ben-Gurion better to expel than to jail.

This was presented in September 1947. The British considered the majority proposal as grossly unfair to the Arabs, and were surprised that there were no angry demonstrations in the Arab world. But they committed to leave and let the Arabs and the Jews sort it out. They didn’t want it to be their responsibility.

There was lobbying to gain votes in the general assembly. A two-thirds majority was needed for the plan to be accepted. There was lobbying of the UN delegations and of their countries at home. The Americans refused to pressure other countries until November 25th, a few days before the vote, when Truman basically decided to support the Zionists diplomatically.

The final vote was on 29 November 1947. The final count was 33 yes, 13 no and 10 abstentions. And so the resolution passed with the required two-third majority.

Resolution 181 called for partition into two states one Jewish the other Arab. The Jewish state on 55% of the land, the Arab state on 42% of the land, and the rest being international Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

Both sides thought that war would ensue. The Arab states got together and decided on war, but couldn’t come up with any real plans. They ended up agreeing not to invade until after the British withdrew because they didn’t want to fight the British. They also didn’t like the Husseini the Palestinian leader, and didn’t really want a Palestinian state to be established under his rule. In any case they couldn’t back down because they were unpopular and undemocratic regimes that didn’t want to go against the wishes of the people in their respective countries who felt strongly about the matter.

There was rioting and violence against Jews and against British/Western targets in the Arab world following the general assembly vote and the passing of the resolution.
In December 1947 the British decided to pull out, while not helping to implement the partition plan which they considered to be unjust.

And this leads to the first stage of the civil war between the Zionists and the Palestinians which is described in the next chapter.

This is my post on the first chapter of Benny Morris’s book “1948 A History of the First Arab-Israeli War”. I hope to cover each of the other chapters in turn.

This chapter briefly deals with the background from 1881, just before the first Zionist immigrants arrived, until early 1947, before the UN got involved in coming up with a plan/solution.

This is pretty much a summary of the chapter. For future chapters/posts I do not intend on following the text in such detail. But since this chapter covers such a large period it would have been difficult to just focus on one or two important points.

“In 1881, Palestine had about 450,000 Arabs — about 90 percent Muslim, the rest Christian — and 25,000 Jews. Most of the Jews, almost all of whom were ultra-Orthodox, non-nationalist, and poor, lived in Jerusalem, the country’s main town (population thirty thousand).”

Important to note that Palestine here refers to a region, not a separate province, let alone an independent political entity.

Also of note Palestine was at the time part of the Ottoman empire. That is until the end of World War I, when the Ottoman empire falls apart, and the British take over Palestine.

The first wave of Zionist immigrants, the first Aliya, brought about 30,000 Jewish settlers between 1882 and 1903. Morris says that their goal was to build Jewish settlements and towns that would eventually result in a Jewish majority and the establishment of a Jewish state in all of Palestine. Though they generally kept this objective to themselves.

Most of the settlers from the first and second Aliya (1904 to 1914), settled in the lowlands of Palestine, less crowded areas largely owned by effendis, wealthy urban landowners (the peasants of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) and most of the Galilee owned their lands and were generally unwilling to sell). The Zionists succeeded in winning the demographic contest in the lowlands and this was to be the territorial base of their future state.

Around this time (the end of the 19th century) Theodor Herzl considered to be the father of modern political Zionism, writes about a Jewish State as being the solution to European anti-Semitism. He starts organizing and working toward this, but doesn’t get far by the time he passes away in 1904, though eventually the movement he helps create bears fruit.

Morris writes that nationalism was a foreign concept to most Palestinians, who were impoverished and illiterate. The elite, the ayan, were somewhat influenced by European ideas and they appealed from 1891 on to Istanbul to stop Jewish immigration. However the Ottomans never really stopped Jewish immigration, land purchases, etc.
By 1914 there were four dozen Jewish settlements including Tel Aviv and the first kibbutz Degania both founded in 1909, and 60,000 to 85,000 Jews about 2/3 of them Zionists.

There was not much conflict between Jews and Arabs at first until about 1909 it was mostly regular crime and disagreements between neighbors about land use, etc. In 1909-1914 there was more violence and of a more nationalist form. Though the outbreak of World War I temporarily halted the violence.

The Ottoman army made two offensives against British-ruled Egypt from Palestine in 1915 and 1916. In 1917 the British conquered the southern half of the country. In 1918 they conquered the rest and pushed onto Syria forcing a Turkish surrendered and the end of the Ottoman Empire. The British gave up most of the land back to various Arab rulers except for Palestine, which they either wanted to keep or give to the Jews.

The Balfour declaration of 2 November 1917, by the British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour, declared in a single sentence that: “His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish People and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country”

The Jews who had lobbied for it, saw this as a huge breakthrough. The Arabs took this as a betrayal and a step backwards.

The British and the French carved up the Arab parts of the Ottoman empire between themselves. France got Lebanon and Syria, the British got Palestine and Iraq with indirect control over Egypt and Jordan.

On April 4th 1920 there was the first pogrom-like Arab rioting against Jews in Jerusalem. Six Jews died, many were injured and a handful were raped. This resulted in the formation of the Haganah (essentially a Jewish militia, which would eventually become the Israeli army).

There was more violence in 1921, 1929, and 1936-1939. Morris believes this was driven by a 1. growing national consciousness due to an increase in literacy and increased prosperity, 2. religious sources as well, but mainly 3. fear and antagonism toward the Zionist enterprise.

But Palestinian Arab society was fragmented. Divisions between Muslims and Christians, between the sedentary population and the nomadic Bedouins and between townspeople and villagers. Finally loyalties were to the family, clan and village, not to a nation.

The elites were divided by clan, the most powerful clan were the Husseinis, the opposition were the Nashashibis. The main conflict was a struggle for power, more than anything else.

There was an Arab Revolt during 1936-1939. Caused by fears of Zionist immigration, settlement, Judaisation of the country and fears of eventual displacement, but driven mainly by the large influx of immigrants due to the rise of anti-Semitism in Central and Eastern Europe. Between 1931 and 1939, the Jewish population went from 175,000 to 460,000.

Both the Jewish and Arab communities increased in size and power during this period. Though Morris says that the Jews fared better, because they “received enormous contributions and investments from Western
Jewry and large British government loans” and the Arabs received “little foreign investment or loans”.

**Jewish population:**
1881: 25,000  
1918: 60,000-85,000  
1948: 630,000

**Arab population:**
1881: 450,000  
1918: 650,000  
1948: 1,300,000

**Net domestic product Arabs:**
1922: 6,600,000 pounds sterling (539,000 manufacturing)  
1947: 32,300,000 pounds (6,700,000 manufacturing)

**Net domestic product Jews (Yishuv):**
1922: 1,700,000 (491,000 manufacturing)  
1947: 38,500,000 (31,000,000 manufacturing)

The Jews had managed to create internal, democratic governing institutions which in 1947-1948 converted into the agencies of the new State of Israel. They had an effective taxation system. They founded a university, etc.

As a result of the revolt the British sent a committee headed by Lord Peel to examine the situation in Palestine, and it issued a long report. There was a partition plan that would give 20% of the land to the Jews, 70% to the Arabs and 10% would be kept by the British (Jerusalem and Bethlehem and a path from there to the sea at Jaffa). The plan also required removing 300,000 Arabs from the Jewish state.

But with all its problems the Peel recommendations basically set up the idea of the two-state settlement. The Zionists accepted the partition plan (though the right-wing revisionist Zionists rejected it) and the Palestinians rejected it.

As a response to the Peel proposals the Arab rebellion started up again in September 1937. The violence was worse during this second period. The Irgun Zvai Leumi (IZL, National Military Organization), carried out retaliatory terrorist attacks against Arab towns, and the Haganah carried out selected reprisals. The British also cracked down and arrested or got rid of the rebels.

Though the rebellion failed militarily it kind of succeeded in changing British policy. The British wanted to assure quiet in the Middle East during the war and so issued a new white paper limiting Jewish immigration and land purchase.

The Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) protested against the white paper, and the IZL carried out some attacks against British targets.

But between 3,000 and 6,000 Palestinian political and military activists were killed and thousands more were driven into exile or jailed. They were much weakened by this fighting against the British, and this did much damage to their war effort in 1947-1948.

The conflict between the Arabs, the Yishuv and the British was put on hold during World War II. The Jews
supported the British, and many volunteered to serve in the British army. The Palestinians like most of the Arab world supported the Axis against the British (though five or six thousand Arabs joined the Allied armed forces, vs more than twenty-six thousand Jews).

After the war the weakening of British and French power resulted in the liberation of many regions from imperial rule, and the emergence of new countries. Lebanon, Syria and Jordan became independent, and Egypt and Iraq had looser imperial control.

On the one hand the Holocaust destroyed “Zionism’s main potential pool of manpower”, but on the other hand it created sympathy within the international community for the Jews and for their quest to create a national home for themselves. Just as World War I resulted in the Balfour declaration, World War II resulted in the UN partition plan of 29 November 1947, which would lead to the creation of the State of Israel.

In January 1942 Chaim Weizmann in an article in Foreign Affairs, demanded a Jewish state in all of Palestine. And in May at a Zionist conference, the demand for a Jewish state in the Land of Israel was adopted as an official policy.

Morris writes that in the US the Jews decisively won the battle for public opinion, “due to the impact of the Holocaust and effective Zionist propaganda”. The American Jewish community of five million was energized and united by the Holocaust, they were well organized and wealthy and were traditionally big donors to political campaigns.

Towards the end of the war and after the war the Zionist efforts were focused on allowing the survivors of the concentration camps in Europe to immigrate to Palestine. The British were still blocking it.

The LHI (Lohamei Herut Yisrael) or Freedom Fighters of Israel a small group also called the “Stern Gang” (after the name of its leader), sought to fight the British. It attempted to establish an “alliance” with Nazi Germany against the British, but failed to do so. It then carried out a campaign against the British rulers, but didn’t manage to do much, due to its small size, Haganah and IZL tip-offs, and British suppression.

In 1944 the IZL under the command of Menachem Begin resumed their armed struggle against the British. They believed that the main battle was not against the Arabs but against the British. They carried out attacks against the British. The mainstream Zionists condemned this, and there was an open-season called the “Saison” against the IZL from November 1944 to March 1945.

But after the war and with continued British opposition to letting the Displaced Persons (DPs) immigrate to Palestine, the Haganah joined them from November 1945. The three groups Haganah, IZL and LHI made a formal agreement known as the Hebrew Rebellion Movement. Two significant attacks were the blowing up railway tracks at 153 points around Palestine on November 1st and the simultaneous destruction of eleven bridges connecting Palestine to Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt on 17 June 1946.

At the same time the Haganah resumed its illegal immigration campaign. which managed to get 70,700 immigrants into Palestine between August 1945 and May 1948. (they had previously tried to get immigrants in, at the start of the war, but were blocked by the British, and by 1941 the Germans blocked all the boats from their side)

The Americans wanted 100,000 DPs to be allowed to immigrate immediately but the British opposed this. There was an Anglo-American Committee to examine the situation of the DPs. Their recommendation was
to allow the 100,000 DPs as quickly as conditions would permit. But it rejected partition and suggested that the British Mandate should continue under UN trusteeship. Later Palestine should be independent either under a single state or a binational state.

The Zionists accepted the immigration recommendation but rejected the rest. The Arabs rejected everything. They wanted independence not binationalism.

After the report Jewish attacks against the British resumed. The British cracked down on the Haganah, but it didn’t have much effect because the intelligence of the Haganah managed to get advanced warning. In response the IZL blew up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, which was the British military and administrative headquarters killing 91 people.

The British tried to come up with another solution/plan. The Jews demanded immediate Jewish statehood, the Arabs demanded “immediate Arab independence”. And things didn’t get anywhere. That was the situation at the beginning of 1947.

The British basically gave up and handed the problem over to the UN, which is the subject of the next chapter.