

## National Liberation Narratives

Gerald Cromer

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### Article abstract

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## **National Liberation Narratives**

by  
*Gerald Cromer*

### **Abstract**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

A number of scholars have pointed out the shortcomings of political causalism<sup>1</sup> or reductionism<sup>2</sup> in the study of national liberation movements. They argue that concentrating on the political dimension of the struggle for independence diverts attention from the extent to which the justifications for the resort to violence are grounded in the mainstream national discourse and the master narratives of the society in question. The cultural specificity of each liberation movement makes it impossible to generalize about the content of this kind of rhetoric. However, a review of the studies that have been carried out on the Irish Republican Army (IRA),<sup>3</sup> the Armenian Secret Liberation Army (ASALA),<sup>4</sup> and the three movements that fought against the British mandate in Palestine,<sup>5</sup> indi-

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**Gerald Cromer** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Criminology at Bar-Ilan University.

cates a striking resemblance in the form it takes. For the purposes of analysis, these similarities are best considered under two broad headings — the construction of history and the appropriation of religion.

Drawing attention to the profound impact that witnessing violence has on those who decide to take up arms against the British presence in Northern Ireland, Aretxaga argued that it has “the force of self-evidence, the power of knowledge that cannot be contested and needs no elaboration.”<sup>6</sup> However, as James Scott has pointed out, experience does not exist outside the flow of discourse.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, personal experiences of violence are invariably “embedded in the discursive flow of collective memory that emerged as a frame of interpretation.”<sup>8</sup>

The rhetoric of national liberation movements is therefore replete with references to the past.<sup>9</sup> The analogies invariably take the form of narratives about oppression and victimization and, when relevant, the resistance they engendered. Telling these stories is not designed to simply transmit knowledge about the nation’s past. Rather, history is “condensed in key events that have become part of the cultural consciousness of people,” and “understood in existential terms — as a predicament that gives meaning to peoples’ lives legitimizing their politics and charging their actions with emotional power.”<sup>10</sup>

The resort to history is meant to reactualize the past by engendering new feats of heroism. National liberation movements hail past acts of bravery in order to encourage similar actions in the present. Their collective memory therefore consists of a series of projective narratives that are descriptive and prescriptive at one and the same time.

They not only tell a story of the past but also map out future actions that can imbue the time of individual lives with collective values . . . dictate biographies and autobiographies to come . . . tell individuals how they would ideally have to live and die in order to contribute properly to their collectivity and its future.<sup>11</sup>

These projective narratives of the ideal life and death are backed up by regulative biographies<sup>12</sup> of those who personified them. The life histories of freedom fighters who fell in the struggle for independence are constructed in such a way that they can be portrayed as examples of the national ideal. Those who resort to violence are depicted not as outcasts from society but as paradigmatic of its deepest values. They are to be praised rather than punished for their actions.

This particular reading of history and life histories is, of course, very different from earlier ones, especially that of the religious authorities. Their preoccupation with divine intervention is replaced by an emphasis on human action, or what Hilda Schatzberger has aptly referred to as the motif of an active deed.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, however, nationalist propaganda is replete with symbols made effective by centuries of ecclesiastic rhetoric. Because of the centrality of reli-

gion in the national consciousness, the leaders of liberation movements often couch their criticism in sacred terms. They use the language of the faith to attack some of its most basic tenets.

As a result of this propensity to appropriate religious texts and rituals, traditional models are rarely discarded; rather, they are transformed and infused with new meanings.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the three movements that fought against the British mandate in Palestine reinterpreted the most sacred prayers and precepts of Judaism in their attempt to undermine the traditional understanding of them.<sup>15</sup> Rereading the commandments and rewriting the liturgy in this way enabled them to attack the religious worldview and benefit from its sacred aura at one and the same time.

A similar process has occurred in the ASALA and IRA. In each of these cases, however, the figure of the martyr was the major instrument and site of the cultural struggle for legitimacy. Although the concepts of sacrifice and martyrdom are as central to the rhetoric of national liberation as they are to church sermons and other forms of religious discourse, the message conveyed is exactly the opposite. Writing about the ASALA, Kachig Tololyan drew attention to the way in which the movement portrayed its members as “living and dying in the central martyrological tradition of the culture, while remaining resolutely secular, disdaining the promise and reward of any paradise.”<sup>16</sup> Malachi O’Doherty made a similar point with regard to the IRA, emphasizing both the similarity and the difference between the two protagonists.

Republicanism and Catholicism are both about the reward for sacrifice. The true Catholic and the true republican give up their ordinary lives to heroic self-sacrifice for the attainment of a promised land. For the Catholic the promise is of an eternity of bliss, for the republican the promised land is the republic, a new Ireland which is imagined to be the restoration of a pure and ancient Ireland, uncontaminated by British influence.<sup>17</sup>

This brief review of previous studies of the rhetoric of national liberation movements seems to confirm Begona Aretxaga’s more general observation that “it is not in conscious ideology, as customarily defined, but in a dialectics of images and story-like creations that people delineate their world, including their politics.”<sup>18</sup> This is not to imply, however, that the movement’s discourse does not have a certain internal coherence. In fact, exactly the opposite is the case. The construction of history and appropriation of religion are part of an intricate network of nested narratives<sup>19</sup> that national liberation fighters recount and dialogic narration<sup>20</sup> that they engage in to justify their resort to violence.

The article that follows provides a detailed analysis and preliminary model of these “story-like creations.” It is based on a case study of the Fighters for the Freedom of Israel, one of the three movements that took up arms against the British mandate in Palestine. Before presenting the narratives, however, it is necessary to provide a short description of the ideology, actions, and propaganda

efforts of the Fighters for the Freedom of Israel. A brief introduction of this nature is an essential prerequisite for understanding everything that follows.<sup>21</sup>

## FIGHTERS FOR THE FREEDOM OF ISRAEL

With the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 the leaders of the *Yishuv* (the pre-state Jewish settlement in Palestine) faced a serious dilemma. The British government, which earlier in the year had issued a White Paper that placed rigid restrictions on Jewish immigration, land purchase, and settlement, was now in the forefront of the struggle against Nazi Germany. The official policy of the Jewish Agency as formulated by David Ben-Gurion was “to fight Hitler as if there was no White Paper and to fight the White Paper as if there was no war,”<sup>22</sup> but in practice the leaders of the *Yishuv* only adhered to the first part of this declaration. They supported the war effort against Germany and the other Axis powers, and called a halt to the struggle against the mandatory authorities.

Within a short time, however, this conciliatory stance toward the British led to a rift within the *Irgun Tzva Leumi* (National Military Organization) that was associated with the right-wing Revisionist movement. Avraham Stern, the party’s emissary to the Jewish community in Poland, insisted that the armed struggle against the mandatory authorities continue unabated and he therefore formed a rival group, the National Military Organization in the Land of Israel. After fierce competition over conscripts and arms supplies, Stern found himself at the head of a tiny, poorly equipped band of fighters who were determined to form the vanguard of the struggle against the British mandate in Palestine.

Drawing attention to the traditional British policy of divide and rule, Stern, who by then had taken the name Yair after the leader of the Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire in 72 AD, argued that Whitehall, and not the local Arab leaders, constituted the major obstacle to the establishment of a Jewish state. There was, he insisted, an irreconcilable conflict of interests between the British Empire and those of the *Yishuv*. There was no possibility, therefore, of any form of cooperation or even compromise between the two sides. The *Yishuv* had to continue the armed struggle until the British relinquished the League of Nations mandate and left the Promised Land to its rightful owners.

Yair and his followers not only adopted a more militant stance toward the mandatory authorities, they also cited different reasons for taking up arms against them. From the very beginning they insisted that the problem was not that British rule was bad, but that it was foreign. Consequently, the fight was not against any particular edict of mandate but its very existence.

This stance reflected Yair’s view regarding the *raison d’être* of Zionism. Referring to the “natural striving of every nation to a free homeland,” he took exception to the rationale offered by other groups within the Zionist movement and insisted that the aim was not to find a solution to the problem of the Jewish

people but to the problem of its motherland. Yair and his followers were therefore unwilling to accept any form of partition or even to settle for the whole of mandatory Palestine. The boundaries of the Jewish state were to be in accordance with the divine promise to Abraham — all the way from the river of Egypt to the great river, Euphrates.

Setting out to achieve these ends, the National Military Organization in Israel first carried out a number of bank robberies so that it could finance its operations against British installations and personnel. These attacks led to constant harassment by the mandatory authorities and the eventual imprisonment and/or killing of most members of the fledgling movement. Yair and his followers were also ostracized by the *Yishuv* because of their insistence on continuing the struggle against the British, and the fact that two of their operations led to the inadvertent killing of Jews. With the murder of Yair by CID officers in February 1942, the organization ceased to function.

Seven months later, a number of fighters escaped from the British detention camp, Mizra, and began to rebuild the movement. Renamed *Lohamei Herut Israel/Lehi* (Fighters for the Freedom of Israel), it was now run by a triumvirate who followed in Yair's footsteps with regard to both the ends of the group and the means used to achieve them. However, they were not placed beyond the pale in the same way; times were changing.

The receding threat and eventual demise of Nazi Germany gave the leaders of the *Yishuv* more room for manoeuvre. The growing awareness of Britain's responsibility for the death of thousands of Jews as a result of its restrictive immigration policy and disillusionment with the policies of the new post-war Labor administration prompted a revival of the armed struggle against the British government. *Lehi* began to cooperate with *Irgun Tzva Leumi* in July 1945, and four months later they formed the Hebrew Resistance Movement with the mainstream *Haganah*. Although *Lehi* remained by far the smallest of the three groups, it had a radicalizing effect on its larger and more moderate counterparts. They too went onto the attack against the British mandate in Palestine.

These forms of cooperation were fraught with tension and short-lived. The more extreme cases of individual terror, such as the assassination of Lord Moyne, the British resident minister in the Middle East, in 1944, were vehemently condemned by the leaders of the *Yishuv*. Even in these instances, though, the response to *Lehi's* actions were by no means unequivocal. In fact, the defiant court appearances of the two assassins and other members of the movement engendered a certain amount of respect for their total commitment to the cause.

Sometimes together, sometimes separately, and sometimes even at loggerheads with each other, the three movements continued the struggle until the British government relinquished its mandate over Palestine. Two weeks after the establishment of the state of Israel, *Lehi* joined the Israeli Defense Forces as a separate unit. A small group continued to operate in Jerusalem but it was forced

to disband after some of its members assassinated the United Nations mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte. With that operation, *Lehi* exploits and the movement as a whole came to an end.

In order to show that their actions were rooted in “deep ideological concepts and cold political logic,” *Lehi*’s “language of firearms” went hand-in-hand with “a verbal attack.” The different kinds of written material and the two weekly clandestine radio broadcasts were conceived of as both propaganda (e.g. “an answer to the waverers”) and auto-propaganda (e.g. “a conceptual basis for armed actions and the instincts and feelings that precipitate them”). The campaign as a whole was meant to encourage a gradual increase in commitment to the movement’s cause. The aim was “to inculcate the idea of a war of liberation amongst the masses by transforming their unconscious support into conscious awareness, and turning this awareness into a commitment to action.”

With the exception of a number of pamphlets on internal matters, such as methods for ensuring secrecy and educational curricula, *Lehi* publications were not designed with a specific audience in mind. They were almost all directed at the *Yishuv* in general, and even those that were earmarked for a particular sector, such as “the rank and file” or “skeptics,” were in no way distinctive. For the purposes of this study, therefore, *Lehi* writings can be treated as a single unit of analysis. There is no need to differentiate between one source and another.

Fortunately, almost all the material published by the movement has been collected into two volumes under the title *Fighters for the Freedom of Israel: Collected Works*.<sup>23</sup> They constitute the subject matter of this study. As naturally occurring rather than provoked material,<sup>24</sup> these writings provide a non-distorted view of *Lehi*’s credo. Written in situ, they afford what is undoubtedly the most authentic picture of the movement.

## NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Richard Leeman and others have emphasized the fact that terrorist rhetoric “constructs a bipolar world which clearly divides between good and evil.”<sup>25</sup> In doing so, however, they have overlooked another essential feature of this kind of discourse. Terrorists not only relate to the nature of the conflict, they also foretell its outcome. In predicting their inevitable victory<sup>26</sup> — the victory of the forces of light over the forces of darkness — terrorist rhetoric assumes the structure of a narrative which, as Alasdir MacIntyre defines it, is “an evaluative framework in which good and bad character help to produce happy or unfortunate outcomes.”<sup>27</sup>

The different elements of the story are, of course, intertwined. For the purposes of analysis, however, they are best considered under three separate headings: casting, altercasting,<sup>28</sup> and forecasting.<sup>29</sup> They refer to the portrayal of the movement, the depiction of its enemies, and the result of the conflict between them respectively.

*Lehi* leaders often related to their resort to violence as a strategy of last resort. They contended that since all other means had failed to achieve independence there was no option but to conduct “a war of victims and blood.” This pragmatic argument, however, was invariably accompanied by a moral one. *Lehi* writings were replete with justifications for both the movement’s violation of the laws of the mandate and its failure to comply with the official policy of the *Yishuv*.

According to *Lehi* leaders, the British laws regarding Palestine were unjust and immoral, and therefore illegitimate. Consequently, members of the movement who were brought to trial did not deny their actions or offer excuses for committing them. Without exception, they insisted on being recognized as a belligerent party and being tried as prisoners of war, or totally rejected the right of the British to sit in judgment.

This rejection of the British laws as ephemeral went hand-in-hand with an appeal to “the sphere of eternal ideas such as freedom, liberty, and equality.” Thus, *Lehi* members swore allegiance to “the law of the movement of Hebrew freedom fighters and adhered to the supreme command, the command of life for our people.” Its authority, they argued, derived from the natural law concerning “the right of each nation to freedom in its homeland, and to fight against the oppressor and the exploiter.”<sup>30</sup>

*Lehi* propaganda portrayed both the leaders and rank-and-file members of the movement as positive deviants<sup>31</sup> who surpassed the conventional expectations regarding the extent to which people should devote their lives to “the life of the nation.” Having “left the fold in order to be stricter rather than more lenient with themselves, they can fearlessly face the trial of the people” and await the verdict of history with equanimity.<sup>32</sup> Notwithstanding this claim, however, *Lehi* rhetoric, in common with that of other terrorist groups, was characterized by an ongoing tension between elitism and populism.<sup>33</sup> Despite their belief in the need to assume the role of the vanguard, the leaders of the movement were highly sensitive to the fact that they enjoyed the backing of a very small minority of the *Yishuv*. Time and again, therefore, they attributed the lack of support to peoples’ “lack of courage to say openly what is hidden in their hearts” and insisted that they gave expression to “the unconscious desire of the entire nation.”<sup>34</sup>

This positive casting of *Lehi* was backed up by a negative altercasting of the movement’s opponents, and particularly of the British who were regarded as the number one enemy. Both the movement’s written material and radio broadcasts included a wide variety of provocation stories about the mandatory authority’s involvement in incitement, robbery, and a host of other crimes.<sup>35</sup> In particular, they recounted how the British killed women and children, unarmed persons, and combatants who had already surrendered.

But the “accusation of the accusers” was by no means limited to these and other violent actions against the *Yishuv*. *Lehi* leaders emphasized that they were



fighting against the very existence of a foreign ruler: “not against a bad commissioner but against the commission, not against the implementation of the mandate but against the fact that it was not given to the Jewish people.”<sup>36</sup> It was the mere presence of the British in the Promised Land rather than the way they behaved there that constituted the core of the problem. That is what made the mandatory authorities an “a priori enemy” and, in turn, a justifiable target of the Freedom Fighters of Israel.

*Lehi* propaganda explained why particular individuals, such as Lord Moyne and the High Commissioner, Sir Harold MacMichael, were singled out for assassination. However, the slide from the macro-target to micro ones was not limited to those at the top of the power pyramid.<sup>37</sup> Nobody could excuse himself on the grounds that he was obeying orders, because it is always possible to refuse to carry them out or to return to England. Each person’s willingness to stay and enforce British policy was therefore regarded as clear proof of his “wicked intentions.” All army and police personnel were either “direct or indirect murderers” and, therefore, each and every one of them “deserved death.”<sup>38</sup>

Movement leaders were fearful that their followers may humanize the local representatives of the British government. Thus, an article in the paper *Hechazit Hanoar* (The Youth Front) warned them not to be distracted by any positive feelings toward the potential targets of their actions.

Sometimes the victim, the target of the bullet appears, and he is flesh and blood, like you and me. A son, a husband, a father. Is it not the destruction of life, love and hope? . . . It is the enemy! He is guilty of the murder of hundreds of thousands. Because of him, mothers became bereaved of their offspring, children became orphans, and entire families were destroyed. He is the devil at the gate of the homeland. He is a murderer . . . Death to the enemy — freedom to the homeland.<sup>39</sup>

Throughout the struggle against the British government and its local representatives, *Lehi* propaganda drew attention to local and global developments that were thought to have confirmed the movement’s reading of the situation and strengthened the belief that it would, in the end, be triumphant. But these forecasts of ultimate victory were not based only on an analysis of unfolding events; they also derived from an understanding of “the logic of the process.” *Lehi* was fighting for the most basic right and most pressing need — national independence. The British, in contrast, were just trying “to cling on to another chunk of land in the empire.” Fired by greed alone, they did not have the will or dedication of freedom fighters. Their attempt to hold on to the reins of power was therefore doomed to failure from the outset.

According to this view, the ratio of forces was deceiving. Time and again, *Lehi* leaders insisted that, despite the fact that they, the few, were confronting the many, the movement’s spiritual strength gave it “an extra weapon that cannot be

measured in material terms.” This gave *Lehi* a distinct advantage over the physically superior empire. Thus, just six months after *Lehi* took up arms against the British, the paper *Bamahteret* (In the Underground) boldly declared, “We believe because we are right and not because we have a chance to succeed. We will succeed because we believe.” For the members of the movement, ‘the end was clear from the very beginning.’<sup>40</sup>

### **NESTED NARRATIVES: HISTORY AND METAHISTORY**

*Lehi*, in common with other national liberation movements, portrayed the ongoing struggle for independence as “a mirror of the past.” The story of the ongoing struggle with the British described in the previous section was therefore nested in a series of historical and metahistorical narratives. They too took the form of a morality play between the forces of good and evil in which the former always emerges victorious.

*Lehi* propaganda was replete with references to events of the past. It compared each and every protagonist to figures from bygone days. Heroes and villains alike were portrayed as being essentially similar to, or even as better or worse, than those that preceded them. Thus, the British were likened to all the arch-enemies of the Jewish people from Pharaoh to the tyrants of modern times. Frequent reference was made, for instance, to the Greeks and Romans who destroyed the First and Second Temples respectively. Significantly, however, they were most often compared to Amalek, the apogee of evil in the Jewish tradition and the only nation that the Jews were commanded to completely obliterate. In this particular case, allusions were often made to the biblical text in order to draw attention to the alleged similarities between the two enemies. The British, like Amalek in its time, “attack the stragglers and block the road leading to the Hebrew kingdom in Zion.”<sup>41</sup>

*Lehi* propaganda also included comparisons between the British mandate and Nazi Germany. The latter was not regarded as an ahistorical phenomenon or even as *sui generis*. Hitler was essentially the same as other enemies of the Jewish people: “the Hitlers of yesterday, the Hitlers of today, and the Hitlers of tomorrow.” In fact, some, including the British, were considered to be even worse than the Nazis. Not only did they fail to prevent German atrocities and commit many of their own, they also occupied the Hebrew homeland. And that, according to *Lehi*, is the most hideous crime of all, “the absolute evil that everything else stems from.”

*Lehi* leaders recalled the same historical events to attack their opponents within the *Yishuv*. They likened them to the Hellenists at the time of the destruction of the First Temple and the *Judenrat* in the lands occupied by Nazi Germany. Once again, the comparisons were often of an invidious nature. The contemporary situation was thought to be even worse than it had been in the past. Thus, *Lehi* recalled the presence of the “mixed multitude” who joined the slaves that

were delivered from Egypt and bemoaned the fact that they were currently to be found at the center rather than on the fringe of the nation. "Alas for the nation in which the mixed multitude is at the helm."

The resort to Jewish history extended, of course, to *Lehi* itself. The writings included myriad references to those who had fought for national liberation from biblical times until the period of the *Yishuv*. *Lehi* fighters portrayed themselves and were portrayed by others as the latest link in "the chain of heroes of the Jewish people, a people that had fought for its freedom with more force, more strength, more sacrifice and more determination than any other nation in the world."<sup>42</sup> The Maccabees, though, were considered to be the role model *par excellence*. *Lehi* publications were at pains to point out the implications of the Hasmonean victory of "the few over the many." Despite their small numbers, it was argued, the members of *Lehi* must perform "a Maccabean act" and conduct "a war of national liberation, a war against Hellenists and traitors, a war of terror, and a war on the battlefield, against the alien ruler in the land."<sup>43</sup>

*Lehi* propaganda tended to emphasize the determination rather than the successes of Jewish fighters throughout the ages. The fact that they fought, not that they won, was regarded as the crucial factor. However, this dichotomy is somewhat misleading because, according to *Lehi*, all those who engage in the struggle for Jewish independence are victorious in the end. Even if they lose a battle, they transmit the love of freedom to their contemporaries and to future generations. The struggle therefore continues unabated and will eventually be crowned with success. Victory is assured.

The Jewish liberation struggle, like that of other nations, is in certain ways unique. Each one depends on "the people, geography, and historical circumstances" concerned. Nevertheless, *Lehi* writings included many references to the situation elsewhere in order "to substantiate and emphasize the essence of all struggles for national independence."

Many of the examples drew attention to the longstanding evils of British imperialism. They had, of course, assumed different guises at different times, but the basic aim was always the same — the perpetuation of oppression. "Missionaries with the cross, merchants with gold, and soldiers with arms" were all enlisted to further the political and economic interests of the British Empire around the world. By recounting the stories of nations that had freed themselves from British tyranny and those still in the process of doing so, *Lehi* reiterated the lesson learnt from Jewish history. Only armed resistance would lead to the expulsion of the foreign ruler and the establishment of an independent Jewish state in the Promised Land.

*Lehi* propaganda portrayed British imperialism as more despotic than any other kind of foreign rule and even as "the most perfect regime of oppression ever." Nevertheless, frequent reference was made to the fate of other colonial powers. Thus, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires were

often cited as proof of the fact that the mightiest rulers could be brought down by determined action on the part of subjugated nations. Leaders of the *Yishuv* should therefore follow the example of foreign heroes as well as those of the Jewish people. Garibaldi, de Gaulle, and others were also appropriate models for the struggle against the British presence in Palestine.

The fact that the stories were taken from “throughout the ages and from around the world” led to the conclusion that they were rooted in the very nature of the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. The “longstanding law of the conqueror” asserts that oppressors never give up control voluntarily. They do everything within their power to safeguard or, to be more precise, further their political and economic interests. Consequently, nations hoping to gain independence cannot rely on either the conscience or mercy of their oppressors. They have to fight for their rights because “a motherland is only extricated from the claws of the rapacious conqueror with blood, the blood of the enemy and the blood of those fighting for their national home.”<sup>44</sup>

The struggle for independence always assumes the same form. It is started by a small minority that arrives at a correct reading of the situation and draws the appropriate conclusions as to how to change it. Their initial resistance leads to further and even more cruel oppression. However, this is to no avail. In fact, the attempt to suppress the revolt both deepens and widens the resistance to oppression. Besides “fanning the flames of hatred, strengthening the will to wage war, and intensifying the aspirations for freedom” of those already involved in the struggle for independence, it also transforms them into “an exemplary model” for others. More and more of their compatriots accept the need to take up arms and actually do so. There are, of course, further losses and defeats, but the struggle for freedom continues to gain momentum and in accordance with “the iron law of liberation” is eventually crowned with success: “Any subjugated nation that is not contaminated by a spirit of degeneration and has a desire to live will fight for its freedom. Any nation that fights for its freedom will in the end be victorious.”<sup>45</sup>

This law is explained, in part at least, by the fact that national liberation movements do not need to achieve an outright military victory in order to gain independence. It is enough “to create a permanent state of war that demands constant preparedness of large forces and causes a continuing feeling of unrest.” This forces the oppressor to ask if “the gains are not outweighed by the losses” and, in turn, to decide that it is in his best interest to concede defeat and grant independence to the fledgling nation.

But even this kind of victory cannot be explained in terms of the physical power of the liberation movement; its “spiritual superiority” over the oppressor must also be taken into account. This advantage, *Lehi* leaders argued in the paper *Hama’as* (The Deed), derives from the rightness of the cause:

The oppressor has greater numbers and more physical power, but these are not the only factors that determine the outcome of a war. There is also the force of justice that guides the hand holding the weapon. The spiritual superiority that accompanies the physical force is the determining factor. It bestows courage on the freedom fighters, enabling them to advance and attack under lethal gunfire. The lack of spiritual strength and awareness of justice cause consternation and panic in the heart of the persecutors and reveal the full extent of their fear.<sup>46</sup>

Military strength is therefore deceptive. National liberation struggles indicate that “not everything that appears weak is in fact weak, and not everything that gives the impression of being strong is in fact strong.” Other factors, both material and spiritual, have to be included in the balance of forces. When they are taken into account, the final result is clear. In the end, right always overcomes might.

### **NESTED NARRATIVES: BIOGRAPHY**

Although *Lehi*'s projective narratives were replete with references to Jews throughout the ages who fought and died in the struggle for national independence, the movement took special pride in the feats of its own members. Regulative biographies of *Lehi* heroes hailed the physical bravery and spiritual courage of those who met their death in combat or on the scaffold. However, this was by no means the whole story. Portrayals of the fallen did not only relate to the period during which they fought in the underground. The biographies of Yair and those who followed in his footsteps included detailed descriptions of how they first internalized, then lived, and finally became part of the movement's projective narrative.

When recounting the life histories of individual members, *Lehi* propaganda often drew attention to attributes that were regarded, with the benefit of hindsight of course, as early signs of their suitability for and interest in the movement. Thus, the tendency of Eliahu Hakim, one of the assassins of Lord Moyne, to stand up for himself in children's games was cited as the first indication of his courage. His subsequent lack of success in school was attributed not to a lack of scholastic ability but to the distractions of “an agitated body and a heart that yearns for action.” Clearly, therefore, it was only a matter of time until Hakim went underground and took up arms against the British.<sup>47</sup>

*Lehi* heroes often drew attention to critical events in their lives that caused them to join the movement. For Elahu Hakim the sight of Arab rioters was “the first spark.” In the case of his co-assassin, Eliahu Beit-Zuri, watching the British police disperse a demonstration led to the realization that it was necessary “to use force and to attack those who are responsible for all our troubles.” Witnessing violence of one kind or another prompted the nascent heroes to take a deeper

look at things. Looking at their own personal experiences from an historical perspective they began to understand “the complete picture” and this, in turn, convinced them to go underground.<sup>48</sup>

The need to ensure complete secrecy prevented *Lehi* from describing the subsequent exploits of their members. Instead, they concentrated attention on how the fallen met their death at the hands of the British. The movement’s written material and radio broadcasts were full of accounts about the physical bravery of those killed and injured in the underground. Stories were told about how they fought against seemingly insurmountable odds to the bitter end. Frequent mention was also made of the *Lehi* members’ willingness to endanger themselves to save their colleagues and their refusal to reveal the secrets of the underground even when subjected to torture. Despite undergoing “superhuman pain,” all the fighters went to their death with “the purity of the silent.”

Those who fell at the hands of the British were portrayed not only as “noble men of action” but also as “spiritual heroes.” They were depicted as a combination of two seemingly antithetic components, such as book and sword, and dream and action. However, these attributes were always regarded as being complimentary rather than in conflict with each other. “The two elements, spirit and matter blend together into a mixture of supreme power. The mission gives direction to the weapons and the sword paves the way for the mission.”<sup>49</sup>

A profile of Yair published shortly after he was killed by the British hailed him as the supreme embodiment of all these positive attributes and concluded that he was “the acme of perfection.” Henceforth, Yair was referred to in superhuman terms, as “a figure from another world.”<sup>50</sup> In contrast, those who followed in his footsteps were invariably portrayed as being very ordinary. One of the fallen, for instance, was referred to as “a simple and innocent youngster without any pretensions whatsoever,” and *Lehi* members in general were depicted as being essentially similar to everybody else in the *Yishuv*. “They emerged from amongst you. They are your flesh and blood.” The message was clear: “If a typical youngster, an unknown soldier of the nation can die in this way, surely there are thousands and even tens of thousands who are prepared to risk their lives.”<sup>51</sup> Two kinds of heroes were therefore held up as a role model for the younger generation: the superhuman and the human, the perfect and those “striving for perfection.”

Both Yair and his followers, having lived and died in accordance with the movement’s projective narrative, became an integral part of it. Time and again, therefore, *Lehi* propaganda emphasized the fact that they had not died in vain. “The blood of earlier heroes flowed in their veins, and now their blood flows in ours.” Their death was made meaningful by the life that it gave to the cause.

The relationship between the fallen and those who followed in their footsteps was often portrayed as a reciprocal one. Those killed by the British provided a fresh set of role models for future generations. However, it was the

knowledge that their sacrifice would be emulated by others that enabled them to take up arms and risk being killed in the first place. Thus, when recruits swore allegiance to the movement they promised that if sentenced to death they would go to the gallows with “pride and peace of mind” in the belief that doing so “will educate thousands of other fighters who will continue to struggle and ensure the success of our mission.”<sup>52</sup>

In accordance with this oath, Eliahu Beit Zuri put on the red execution garb and declared that it was “the most beautiful suit that I have ever worn.” His fellow assassin, Elahu Hakim, even grinned on the way to the gallows. He was, he reportedly said to the hangman, “smiling to the generations to come.” In contrast, Winston Churchill, the British prime minister, “was enraged, angry and agitated.” According to a pamphlet that was published immediately after the hanging:

Despite temporary victories, the British Prime Minister felt that his cause is lost. Immunity is not forever and the evil power will be crushed. The two who were hanged felt, knew, and believed that the goal which they devoted their lives to would be achieved. Their land will be liberated and the Hebrew people will go from slavery to freedom.<sup>53</sup>

The scaffold was, therefore, an ideal stage for the morality play between *Lehi* and the British government. The forces of good and evil “stood barefaced, one against the other,” and their contrasting emotions reflected the final outcome of the confrontation between them.<sup>54</sup>

## DIALOGIC NARRATION

“Any given telling takes account of previous and anticipated tellings, and responds to alternative and challenging stories.”<sup>55</sup> As a result of this process of dialogic narration, *Lehi* leaders were engaged in an ongoing colloquy with the movement’s external and internal enemies. Their propaganda was in constant dialogue with the narratives of the British government, the official leadership of the *Yishuv*, and the sacred texts of orthodox Judaism. Although these dialogues were neither autarkic nor monolithic entities, considering them separately helps to delineate the particular form and content of each controversy and to understand the major thrust of each one.

*Lehi* countered the British narrative by claiming that its resort to terror was, in fact, reactive. The Fighters for the Freedom of Israel had not started the cycle of violence but simply responded to the actions of the mandatory authorities and their presence in the Promised Land. Consequently, the members of *Lehi*, together with the rest of the *Yishuv*, were the objects of violence and not its instigators. The British were the victimizers and the Jews, as usual, were the victims.

This guilt transfer<sup>56</sup> found linguistic expression in an ongoing war of

labels.<sup>57</sup> *Lehi* leaders tried to delegitimize the mandatory authorities in exactly the same way as they were deviantized by them. Thus, the British government and their representatives in Palestine were frequently referred to as criminals of one kind or another — murderers, robbers, and pirates — terrorists in references to terrorist laws and a terrorist government, and even as subhuman, through epithets such as wild pigs, barbarians, and Nazis. They, not *Lehi*, were “the scum of the earth.”

Time and again, *Lehi* propaganda drew attention to the fact that, although the leaders of Labor Zionism advocated taking concerted action against the British, they rarely did so. Their failure to practice what they preached was attributed to the selfishness, shortsightedness, or sheer wickedness of those at the helm of the *Yishuv*.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, both the leaders of *Lehi* and its rank and file members were depicted as being highly altruistic and blessed with foresight. They were the only people in the pre-state Jewish settlement in Palestine who both understood the situation and took the appropriate steps to change it.

This claim to uniqueness found linguistic expression in a wide variety of dichotomies between the leaders and members of *Lehi* and their Labor Zionist counterparts. One set of images was religious in nature: sacred versus profane, pure versus impure, and human versus immortal. Another focused on the dimension of time: past versus future, men of yesterday versus men of tomorrow, and blind versus prophetic. Clearly, however, the aim of all these images and, for that matter, all the others that were used, was the same. They were meant to emphasize the difference between those who adopted a conciliatory stance toward the British and those who fought steadfastly against them. The former told an unacted projective narrative,<sup>59</sup> the latter lived it to the full.

*Lehi* also portrayed the heroism of its members as being diametrically opposed to the passivity and martyrdom of their religious forbears. Time and again, religious Jews were lambasted for their belief in divine intervention and their reliance on the coming of the Messiah. Confident of his arrival and willing to wait until it happened, religious Jews did not feel the need to take the initiative in changing the course of Jewish history. Some even believed that it was forbidden to do so. *Lehi*, in contrast, believed in both the need and efficacy of human action in achieving national independence. After more than 2000 years of exile the Jewish people must transform itself from being the object of history to its subject. Although suffering may continue for a long time, it will be the active suffering of war rather than the passive suffering of persecution. It will, therefore, serve a purpose instead of being to no avail.

In common with other liberation movements, *Lehi* couched its attack on the prior religious narrative in sacred terms. The struggle for national independence was regarded as “the holiest idea” of the Jewish people. Adherence to the “commandments of the heroes of Israel throughout the generations” was, therefore, expected to be as strict as that of religious Jews to the divine laws. Alluding



to the *Shema*, a prayer that observant Jews recite three times a day and on their deathbed, those who had taken up arms against the British were called upon to carry out each mission “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.”<sup>60</sup> Freedom, like God, was holy; it also demanded unlimited love.

The written propaganda and radio broadcasts were both replete with citations of those commandments that were thought to be an endorsement of the movement’s resort to violence. They included biblical precepts, such as an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and so on,<sup>61</sup> and later rabbinic injunctions, such as if anyone comes to kill you, kill him first.<sup>62</sup> The teachings of the prophets were also frequently invoked. Significantly, the references were all of a particularistic rather than universalistic nature. *Lehi* propagandists insisted that love of other nations is reserved for the messianic era. Until then, the Gentiles would be the object of divine revenge and “the Hebrew fighter entrusted with implementing the prophecy.”

*Lehi* also appropriated religious rituals in its attempt to invest the movement’s resort to violence with an aura of sanctity. They portrayed the traditional mourning customs, for instance, as an empty and meaningless ritual that desecrated rather than hallowed the memory of the fallen and, even more importantly, as a catharsis that precludes the possibility of transforming valor into deeds. Sorrow, *Lehi* leaders urged, must become “a source of rage and a goad to action.” Members of the movement had to “forge the weapons of war from the blood of the fallen and vent their anger in cruel and redemptive action.”<sup>63</sup>

*Lehi* adopted a similar stance toward the Jewish festivals. They were also portrayed as an impediment to action. Significantly, this tendency was particularly marked with regard to Passover and Hanukkah, the festivals that commemorate the liberation of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage and Greek dominion respectively. Thus, in contrast to the traditional notion that the lights of the menorah are holy and are meant to “publicize the miracle” of the rededication of the Temple, *Lehi* used them to encourage people to take up arms against the British and sanctify those who did so. An article in *Hechazit* (The Deed) declared:

We will burn our bodies. Let our bodies be transformed into wicks. Let our hatred become oil and let our faith be the flame . . . Let our bodies be turned into burning candles. Let our blood be the holy blood of Hanukkah. This blood and these candles are sacred and it is a religious obligation to use them.<sup>64</sup>

An announcement of the death of a *Lehi* fighter made a similar point. It concluded with the opening words of the Kaddish, the traditional prayer in memory of the dead. However, the emphasis was completely different. The fallen hero rather than the eternal God was being sanctified.

Arieh! Listen to the memorial prayer of your brothers and the oath of

allegiance to our cause. As long as we live, we will fight for the freedom of Jerusalem and pray, like you, for the peace of Israel: with a rifle and a mine. Blessed and praised be the memory of anonymous soldiers, the fighters for the Kingdom of Israel. Magnified and sanctified be his great name.<sup>65</sup>

The nature of the argument is clear. *Lehi's* aim of liberating the homeland was holy. So too, therefore, were all those who fought for it and any means by which they did so.<sup>66</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

*Lehi's* narratives and dialogues were, it seems, particularly elaborate because of the special nature of the interaction between Jewish history and Judaism on the one hand, and Jewish nationhood on the other.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, they provide an ideal starting point for the development of a model of this kind of discourse. It needs to relate to three aspects of the liberation narratives: their internal structure, the nature of the interaction between them, and the different ways in which they are in dialogue with rival stories.

Liberation movements portray their current struggle as a morality play between the forces of good and the forces of evil at the end of which they will emerge victorious. Time and again, they insist that, despite the seemingly insurmountable odds and the fact that the conflict may be a long and bloody one, the foreign ruler will eventually be driven out and independence gained. Contrary to conventional wisdom, right is might, and it will, therefore, ultimately prevail.

The propaganda of liberation movements is replete with parallels between their current struggle against the foreign ruler and earlier ones of their own nation, or other nations that had to fight for their independence. These stories of the present and past are, in turn, nested in metahistorical narratives about the longstanding suffering of the nation in question, or of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed nations in general. They are portrayed as instances of an underlying historical pattern or even an immutable law of nature.

The rhetoric of liberation movements also provides a classic example of the way in which life histories are embedded in the story of the group within which those concerned find their identity.<sup>68</sup> The regulative biographies of past and particularly contemporary heroes are constructed so as to show how they first learnt, then lived, and finally became an integral part of the movement's projective narrative. Those who fell in the struggle for independence are portrayed not as outcasts from society but as paradigmatic figures of its dearest values.

The three sets of nested narratives — the present within the past, the national within the universal, and the individual within the collective — tend to reinforce each other because they all make the same basic point. Every story insists that victory is assured. Clearly, however, the narratives are not only meant

to predict the future; they are also supposed to help shape it by galvanizing people into taking up arms against the enemy and ousting them from the motherland in order to achieve national independence.

All the liberation narratives are in constant dialogue with those of the occupying power, other nationalists, and the religious authorities (see Table 1). Each colloquy is characterized by a different dichotomy (content) and a particular kind of discourse (form).

While in total disagreement with these rival stories, the national liberation movement cannot be oblivious to them. The foreign, dominant, and prior narratives do not only have sufficient dialogic force to compel attention; to a large extent at least, they provide the inferential structure for the stories of the liberation movement. In the war of words, it is not the freedom fighters but their rivals that set the contours of the conflict.

**Table 1. Dialogic Narration**

Enemy	Narrative	Content	Form
Occupying power	Foreign	Victimizer/victim	Inversion
Other nationalists	Dominant	Altruist/egoist	Contrast
Religious authorities	Prior	Martyr/hero	Appropriation

**ENDNOTES**

1. Begona Aretxaga, "Striking With Hunger: Cultural Meanings of Political Violence in Northern Ireland," in Kay Warren ed., *The Violence Within: Cultural and Political Opposition in Divided Nations* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993), p. 223.
2. Khachig Tololyan, "Cultural Narrative and the Motivation of the Terrorist," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10, no. 4 (1987), pp. 217-33.
3. Begona Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Aretxaga, "Striking With Hunger"; Paul Arthur, "Reading Violence: Ireland," in David E. Apter ed., *The Legitimization of Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 243-91.
4. Khachig Tololyan, "Cultural Narrative"; Khachig Tololyan, "Martyrdom as Legitimacy: Terrorism, Religion and Symbolic Appropriation in the Armenian Diaspora," in Paul Wilkinson and Alasdair M. Stewart eds., *Contemporary Research on Terrorism*. (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987), pp. 89-103.
5. Hilda Schatzberger, *Resistance and Tradition in Mandatory Palestine* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1985), in Hebrew.
6. Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence*, p. 89.
7. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).
8. Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence*, p. 90.

9. Joanne Wright, *Terrorist Propaganda: The Red Army and the Provisional IRA, 1968-1986* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990), p. 21.
10. Aretxaga, "Striking With Hunger," p. 224.
11. Tololyan, "Cultural Narrative," p. 218.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
13. Schatzberger, *Resistance and Tradition*, p. 57.
14. Aretxaga, "Striking With Hunger," p. 240; Arthur, "Reading Violence," p. 272.
15. Schatzberger, *Resistance and Tradition*, pp. 37-46.
16. Tololyan, "Martyrdom as Legitimacy," p. 102.
17. Malachi O'Doherty, *The Trouble With Guns* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1998), p. 20.
18. Aretxaga, "Striking with Hunger," pp. 230-31.
19. Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary M. Gergen, "Narratives of the Self," in Theodore R. Sarbin and Karl E. Scheibe, eds., *Studies in Social Identity* (New York: Praeger, 1983), p. 263. See also David E. Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 14.
20. Edward M. Bruner and Phyllis Gorfain, "Dialogic Narration and the Paradoxes of Massada," in Edward M. Bruner, ed., *Text, Play and Story: The Construction and Reconstruction of Self and Society* (Washington, DC: American Ethnological Society, 1984), pp. 56-79.
21. For a more comprehensive and detailed analysis of the ideology and actions of the movement, see *The Stern Gang: Ideology, Politics and Terror, 1940-1949* (London: Frank Cass, 1995).
22. Shlomo Lev-Ami, *By Struggle and Revolt: Haganah, Irgun and Lehi* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1979), p. 22, in Hebrew.
23. Fighters for the Freedom of Israel, *Collected Works* (Tel Aviv: Yair Publications, 1982), in Hebrew.
24. This dichotomy is taken from George Steinmetz, "Reflections on the Role of Social Narratives in Working Class Formation: Narrative Theory in the Social Sciences," *Social Science History* 16, no. 4 (1992), p. 490.
25. Richard W. Leeman, *The Rhetoric of Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. (New York: Greenwood, 1991), p. 46.
26. Maurice Tugwell, "Terrorism and Propaganda: Problem and Response," *Conflict Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1986), p. 6.
27. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 456.
28. Eugene W. Weinstein and Paul Deutschberger, "Some Dimensions of Altercasting," *Sociometry* 26, no. 4 (1963), pp. 454-66.
29. After deciding to use the terms casting and forecasting I came across them in Janet Hart, "Cracking the Code: Narratives and Political Mobilization in the Greek Resistance," *Social Science History* 16, no. 4 (1992), p. 64.
30. Fighters for the Freedom of Israel, *Collected Works* 2, p. 90.
31. David L. Dodge, "The Over-Negativized Conceptualization of Deviance: A Programmatic Exploration," *Deviant Behavior* 6, no.1 (1985), p. 18.
32. Fighters for the Freedom of Israel, *Collected Works* 1, p. 582.
33. Leeman, *The Rhetoric of Terrorism*, pp. 60-62.
34. Fighters for the Freedom of Israel, *Collected Works* 1, p. 602.
35. Robert G. Picard, "How Violence is Justified: Sinn Fein's An Phoblacht," *Journal of Communication* 41, no. 4 (1991), pp. 94-96.

36. Fighters for the Freedom of Israel, *Collected Works* 1, p. 122.
37. Bowman H. Miller, "Terrorism and Language: A Text-Based Analysis of the German Case," *Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (1987), p. 400.
38. Fighters for the Freedom of Israel, *Collected Works* 2, p. 155.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 448.
40. *Ibid.*, 1, p. 68.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 412. Compare Deuteronomy 25, 17-19.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
43. *Ibid.*, 2, pp. 307-08.
44. *Ibid.*, 1, p. 523.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*, 2, pp. 45-46.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 445.
48. See in particular *ibid.*, 1, pp. 925-27.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 381.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 389.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
52. *Ibid.*, 2, frontispiece.
53. *Ibid.*, 1, p. 944.
54. *Lehi* also regarded the courts of law as an ideal site for "removing the mask of hypocrisy from the face of the foreign ruler" and providing "an example and model of the hidden spiritual strength of the Hebrew freedom fighter."
55. Bruner and Gorfain, *Dialogic Narration*, p. 60.
56. Maurice Tugwell, "Guilt Transfer," in David C. Rapoport and Yonah Alexander eds., *The Morality of Terrorism: Religious and Secular Justifications* (New York: Pergamon, 1982), pp. 275-89.
57. Bonnie Cordes, "When Terrorists Do the Talking: Reflections on Terrorist Literature," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10, no. 4 (1987), p. 150.
58. *Lehi* propaganda never attributed the inaction of the official leadership of the *Yishuv* to legitimate differences of opinion regarding the appropriate response to the mandatory authorities. In fact, they always enclosed the word ideological in inverted commas so as to emphasize that the real reasons lay elsewhere.
59. Tololyan, "Cultural Narrative," p. 226.
60. See Deuteronomy 6, 5.
61. Exodus 21, 23-25.
62. Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 74b.
63. Fighters for the Freedom of Israel, *Collected Works* 1, pp. 895-96.
64. *Ibid.*, pp. 841-42.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
66. This argument was sometimes turned on its head. Those who fought and died in the struggle for national liberation were thought to have sanctified the motherland with their blood.
67. Anthony Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 203-24.
68. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 21.