Today we’re looking at the calamity of the *Altalena*, the ill-fated Edzel ship that tried to bring desperately needed refugee fighters, arms, and ammunition to the soldiers of Israelin June 1948, just weeks after the declaration of statehood and the ensuing invasion by five Arab armies.

Edzel leaders bought a mothballed American ship, named it *Altalena*(using Vladimir Jabotinsky’s pen-name), and recruited a 25-year-old Navy veteran from Chicago, who had commanded a similar ship in the Pacific, to be its captain.

His ship sailed on June 11 from Port-du-Bouc with 940 passengers, including 120 young women.  For the *Altalena’*s mission to succeed, its planners would have to secure the cooperation of France, to evade the British navy (which had already diverted the *Exodus 1947* and *Ben Hecht*ships from their course), and to coordinate the plan with the Provisional Government of David Ben-Gurion.

On May 26, that government had established the Israel Defense Forces as the army of the State of Israel and prohibited the “continued existence of any other armed force” (such as Palmach to its left and Irgun and Lehi to its right).

Ostensibly, Begin accepted this decision: “Within the boundaries of the Hebrew independent state there is no need for a Hebrew underground. In the State of Israel, we shall be soldiers and builders. We shall respect its Government, for it is our Government.” But… there was a hitch. Jerusalem was outside the boundaries of the new state.

The cooperation of the French was indeed secured: they armed and supported Irgun’s project because it was likely to hasten British departure from Palestine.

Begin, alarmed by a BBC broadcast announcing both an agreed UN ceasefire and news of the Irgun ship headed to Palestine, decided to abort the mission. But faulty radio communication kept his message from reaching the Altalena.  The ship continued en route to Israel with all possible speed.

Begin stated, “that the government should decide and tell us whether the Altalenashould proceed and arrive in Israel, or whether we should send it back.”

Deputy Defense Minister Yisrael Galili told Begin that, “we agree to the arrival of the vessel.  As quickly as possible…” and designated Kfar Vitkin, near Netanya, as the place to land. On June 16, Ben-Gurion mentioned the Altalenain his diary: “Tomorrow or the next day their ship is due to arrive. …They should not be turned back.”

The Irgun units were to be equipped to fight anywhere beyond Israeli rule, i.e., Jerusalem. The sticking point was the distribution of the ship’s weapons and munitions; Galili insisted that all be turned over, unconditionally, to the IDF.

This was more than a technical matter; it brought to the fore Ben-Gurion’s determination that there be a single government and military under his exclusive command. “There are not going to be two armies. And Mr. Begin will not do whatever he feels like. We must decide whether to hand over power to Begin or tell him to cease his separatist activities. If he does not give in, we shall open fire.”

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In this contest of wills, Ben-Gurion felt he had to make the state’s survival his overriding consideration.

Ben-Gurion believed that Begin was challenging his authority, endangering the new state; possibly planning  “a *putsch*.”  Giving the *Altalena* ten minutes to accede to his demands for surrender, he said: “Accept orders and carry them out, or [we] shoot…The time for agreements has  passed…and force must be applied without hesitation.”

Not all Ben-Gurion’s soldiers were in agreement: the air force, for example, refused his order to take off and bomb the ship.

Ben-Gurion insisted that destruction of the *Altalena* was the only way to prevent civil war.

In his view, Begin had reneged on his agreement to turn over military supplies by insisting on the right to unload the ship and distribute its weapons to their own units. No sovereign government, he argued, could accept such conditions.

Timeline