

Major Farran's Hat: Murder, Scandal, and Britain's Secret War Against Jewish Terrorism, 1945-1948

Review Number: 856

Publish date: Sunday, 31 January, 2010

Author: David Cesarani

ISBN: 9780434018444

Date of Publication: 2009

Price: £20.00

Pages: 290pp.

Publisher: William Heinemann

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: James R. Vaughan

David Cesarani's stylish book unravels the often sordid details of what might at first seem a relatively minor incident in the decline and collapse of British rule in Palestine. It tells the story of abduction and murder of Alexander Rubowitz, a teenage activist affiliated to the extremist Zionist paramilitary organisation, *Lohamei HaHerut b'Yisrael* (better known in Britain as the 'Stern Gang'), and reveals how the British imperial establishment subsequently sought first to cover up the crime and subsequently to pervert the course of justice in order to protect the commander of the covert police 'hit squad' responsible for the murder. Skilfully combining a scholarly reading of the archival record with a story-teller's feel for drama and narrative development, Cesarani's account of the events surrounding Rubowitz's disappearance and his analysis of the implications of the case, cast fascinating light on the reasons for British failure in Palestine and draws interesting, if less developed conclusions in relation to the broader history of British counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations.

At the centre of the plot is Roy Farran, a Second World War hero and among the most highly decorated officers in the British Army. Farran, who later took to describing himself as 'a relic of Kiplingesque times' was undoubtedly a courageous soldier and a skilful exponent of irregular warfare. Cesarani provides a lengthy account of his wartime activities, testifying to a ruthlessness in battle, which Cesarani characterises as 'mercilessness towards his enemies' (p. 66). By way of evidence, Cesarani refers to a 'killing spree' (including the killing of prisoners) which Farran is alleged to have embarked on in Cyprus in 1941 (p. 8) and his unconventional exploits with the Special Air Service (SAS) in Italy, France and Greece. Farran's successes, which included an operation northern France in August 1944 in which his 60-strong SAS unit inflicted 500 German casualties, earned him a second bar for his Military Cross, the Distinguished Service Order, the French Croix de Guerre, and a reputation for recklessness that included the capacity for open disregard of orders. 'He was a buccaneer', concluded Major Victor Dover, the adjutant of the 1st Parachute Brigade responsible for a special forces training course that Farran undertook in 1943, 'and always gave me the impression that he was born three centuries too late' (p. 73).

The transition from war to peacetime was a difficult one for Farran. After a period of depression and boredom following VE Day, he rejoined his old regiment, the 3rd King's Own Hussars, and in October 1945 found himself in Palestine. There is persuasive evidence that Farran arrived in Palestine with no strong

feelings or prejudice in relation to Jewish or Zionist matters. However, as Cesarani notes, 'In the course of one blood-soaked year he was embittered by the nature of the war the [Jewish] underground waged on the British security forces' (p. 81). Frustrated by what he regarded as the ineffectual policy of the British Government and disgusted by the failure of the Yishuv to take a meaningful stand against the Irgun and Stern Gang, he left Palestine in August 1946. In March 1947, however, the War Office ordered him to return to Palestine and put his specialist knowledge of guerrilla warfare techniques at the disposal of the Palestine Police.

The creation of paramilitary 'gangs' or 'special squads' was the responsibility of Colonel Nicol Gray, inspector-general of the Palestine Police, and Lieutenant-General Bernard Fergusson, to whom Gray gave the task of recruiting the officers who would spearhead a British counter-terrorist offensive. Both men were experienced veterans of commando operations and advocates of the potential value of unconventional warfare techniques. Gray, a former Royal Marine Commando, whose exploits in France and Germany after D-Day had earned him war hero status, while Fergusson had served with Orde Wingate, the eccentric but influential pioneer of British counter-insurgency warfare both in Palestine in 1937 and with the 'Chindit' expeditions in Burma in 1943–4. The spiralling levels of terrorist violence in Palestine in 1946–7 convinced both men that the situation called for unconventional policing methods in order to return some semblance of security and stability to Palestine. Fergusson therefore created a number of new positions within the Palestine Police to be known as Deputy Superintendents of Police (Operations and Training). These DSPs were to be the leaders of the anti-terrorist special squads and were envisaged as being 'men trained in commando tactics, fieldcraft, ambushes, weapons use, unarmed combat'. For Cesarani, the conclusion is that the special squads were envisaged from the start as 'hit squads intended at best to snatch suspects or provoke gunfights.' (p.63)

Cesarani, however, does relatively little to explain why the decision to militarise the Palestine Police through the creation of the special squads was implemented so late in the day in relation to the deterioration of the security situation in Palestine. The violent extremists of the Stern Gang had been operating against British targets since 1940, while the Irgun had recommenced its anti-British campaign in 1944. Furthermore, it might be argued that by March 1947, there was growing recognition in political circles that the British position in Palestine was effectively untenable. The British Government ordered the evacuation of British women, children and male civilians in non-essential jobs from Palestine on 31 January 1947, well before the War Office despatched Farran to Palestine on an apparent mission to 'get tough' with the terrorists. Cesarani's interpretation is that the decks were being cleared in preparation for an all out struggle with the terrorist. Given that on 14 February 1947, Ernest Bevin announced that the British Government would be referring the Palestine question to the United Nations, however, it might be argued with at least equal plausibility, that the British were pursuing a policy of gradual political disengagement. Cesarani is interesting when he hints at a split between the politicians and the military on this issue, suggesting that Montgomery, Cunningham and Barker, sensing which way the political wind was blowing, were seeking a last chance to save the military's 'precious bases' in Palestine (p. 58). One suspects, however, that in characterising the creation of the 'special squads' as a 'troop surge', Cesarani is more interested in developing parallels with contemporary counter-insurgency operations in Iraq, than in unpicking the discrepancies between British military and political objectives in Palestine in 1947.

Cesarani is more convincing in his analysis of the performance of the special squads as counter-terrorist gangs. While they may have been generally effective as operational snatch or hit squads, they were deeply flawed as policing or intelligence gathering units. Early operations conducted by Farran's squads appear to have been somewhat amateurish and were frequently conducted with a casual disregard for legal procedure. After a frustrating month of at best minor successes, came the event that forms the centrepiece of Cesarani's book. On 6 May 1947, 16-year-old Alexander Rubowitz was unfortunate enough to attract the attention of Farran's squad whilst putting up Stern Gang posters in West Jerusalem. The teenager was abducted, driven out of the city towards Jericho where, in a secluded olive grove, he was interrogated and beaten. According to Cesarani, the 'interview' was terminated when Farran picked up a rock and smashed it against Rubowitz's head, killing him. The squad returned to Jerusalem where, the next day, Farran confessed what he had done

to Bernard Fergusson. Rubowitz's body was never found.

The subsequent course of the scandal, as news of the case leaked into both the Palestine and the international press exposed the cynical reluctance of Fergusson and Gray to take action against Farran until it became obvious that the evidence entering the public domain was too serious to ignore. Eventually, when Arthur Giles, the Deputy Inspector of the Palestine Police (whose resentment of the military adventurers parachuted into his police force was barely disguised), reported the details of the case to Sir Henry Gurney, the chief secretary of the Palestine government. The storm was now poised to break as Gurney instructed Giles 'to proceed with the case as an ordinary criminal offence with the object of bringing Farran and any other accused to trial' (p. 101). The ensuing events, from Farran's flight into Syria, to his return and the dismissal of the murder charges against him by a court martial convened in Jerusalem in October 1947, are related deftly and dramatically by the author. For Cesarani, however, the political cynicism surrounding the affair pervaded the British colonial establishment to its highest levels. He purports to find Prime Minister Attlee's attitude to the case to be 'remarkable' in that Attlee appears to have been 'more preoccupied with news management' than with any particular concern 'about alleged illegal actions perpetrated by the British security forces in Palestine' (pp. 122–3).

Cesarani's account of the Farran case is valuable in that it reintroduces a surprisingly forgotten episode into the well-trodden narratives of terrorism and counter-terrorism in the final years of the British mandate. The historiography of the period is extensive (1), but whilst accounts of various Irgun and Stern Gang atrocities, the Exodus incident, even the Dov Gruner trial and execution are commonplace, the historian will seek in vain for a reference to the peculiar case of Roy Farran and the murder of Alexander Rubowitz.(2) The intelligent manner in which Cesarani unpicks the complexities, contradictions and hypocrisies of the Farran affair, and uses them to develop a broader criticism of British colonial policing in Palestine as the Mandate drew towards collapse and liquidation, constitutes a valuable and always interesting historiographical contribution. Cesarani also seeks to draw longer-term historical lessons in relation to the 'toxic legacy' of the special squads in relation to subsequent counter-insurgency operations spanning a period from the Malayan Emergency, through the Northern Ireland 'Troubles', to contemporary struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is no doubt an important argument to be developed on this theme, but Cesarani does not really give himself the space to make it in any great depth. Cesarani might conclude that:

At a time when counter-insurgency warfare is once again at the forefront of military operations by the British Army and NATO, it is perhaps an opportune moment to revisit the events that took place on a balmy evening in Jerusalem sixty years ago as a warning of everything that can go wrong when young warriors directed by desperate and unscrupulous politicians wage war on terror.

In light of the fact that this fascinating and important analogy is developed by way of reference to an existing counter-insurgency secondary literature in a rather brief 'Epilogue', this conclusion reads more like an invocation for further comparative research than any definitive statement on the matter.

The author did not wish to respond to this review.

Notes

1. See, for example, a selection of recent publications in the general field of the decline of British rule in Palestine: Norman Rose, *'A Senseless, Squalid War'.* *Voices from Palestine 1945–1948* (London, 2009); Geoffrey Lewis, *Balfour and Weizmann: the Zionist, the Zealot and the Emergence of Israel* (London, 2009); *Britain and the Middle East: From Great Power to Junior Partner*, ed. Zach Levey and Elie Podeh (Brighton, 2008); Michael Makovsky, *Churchill's Promised Land: Zionism and Statecraft* (New Haven, CT, 2007); Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews* (London, 2007); Jill Hamilton, *God, Guns and Israel. Britain, the First World War and the Jews in the Holy Land* (Sutton,

- 2004); John Keay, *Sowing the Wind: the Seeds of Conflict in the Middle East* (London, 2003); Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete. Jews and Arabs Under the British Mandate* (London, 2000); A.J. Sherman, *Mandate Days: British Lives in Palestine, 1918–1948* (London, 1997). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Aside from obvious examples such as Farran and Fergusson's own memoirs: Roy Farran, *Winged Dagger: Adventures on Special Service* (London, 1948); Bernard Fergusson, *The Trumpet in the Hall* (London, 1970), brief exceptions to this pattern can be found in Jon Kimche, *Seven Fallen Pillars: The Middle East 1945–1953* (London, 1953); David Charters, 'Special Operations in counter-insurgency: the Farran case, Palestine 1947' *Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies Journal*, 124, 2 (June 1979); J. Bowyer Bell, *Terror Out of Zion: The Fight for Israeli Independence* (New Brunswick, 1996); Philip Brutton, *A Captain's Mandate. Palestine 1946–1948* (London, 1996). [Back to \(2\)](#)

Other reviews:

guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/mar/07/major-farrans-hat-david-cesarani> [2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/856>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/4471>

[2] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/mar/07/major-farrans-hat-david-cesarani>