When the Second World War finally came to an end, the British found themselves confronted by a challenge from the Yishuv, the small Zionist settlement in Palestine. This challenge, tacitly supported by the United States, was to compromise the British Empire’s overall position in the Middle East and thereby begin the process of its dissolution in the region. This failure to overcome the Zionist challenge is one of the most humiliating episodes in immediate post-war British history. How was it that the Yishuv was able to inflict such a defeat on a British military establishment fresh from its victories over Germany and Japan?

Exercising the Mandate

At the time the challenge was mounted, the British considered Palestine to be a territory of vital strategic importance, providing a military base from which to dominate the rest of the Middle East. In this way oil supplies and oil profits could be secured and any threat from the Soviet Union could be countered. Such was the region’s importance that in the event of war with the Russians the British planned a hurried withdrawal from continental Europe but intended to defend the Middle East at all costs, according the area a priority second only to the defence of the British Isles themselves.¹ The incoming Labour government hoped to be able to control the region informally, by means of a series of unequal relationships with a network of Arab client states, but a large military presence was still regarded as essential. Only British troops could, in the last resort, it was thought, ensure that friendly governments remained in power and defend against external attack in the event of another world war. The Mandate over Palestine was seen as providing the British with a degree of freedom of action which they were in the process of
losing in Egypt and would not possess anywhere else in the region. There was certainly no expectation that the British position was soon to crumble.²

British policy was fatally compromised by the Zionist settlement in Palestine, a settlement that had initially been sponsored as a counter-weight to Arab nationalism. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 committed Britain to supporting the establishment of a European Jewish colony in a land overwhelmingly inhabited by Arabs. While the settlement initially stagnated, the numbers seeking entry rose dramatically with the rise of Nazism in Germany. Whereas in 1931 there were only 4075 Jewish immigrants, by 1935 the number had risen to 66,472. Denied entry to other European countries or to the United States, German and Central European Jews increasingly came to look to Palestine as a safe haven.³

Arab opposition to this colonisation of their homeland culminated in the great revolt of 1936–39, the first Intifada, which led to what was, in effect, the reconquest of the Mandate by British troops. The insurgency was only suppressed with great difficulty and considerable brutality, costing over 3000 lives. The British turned to the Zionist settlers for assistance in the campaign, recruiting some 19,000 Jewish police and encouraging the activities of the Special Night Squads, Jewish murder gangs, trained by a British officer with strong Zionist sympathies, Orde Wingate. The Arab revolt was defeated and the Palestinians left disarmed, disorganised and leaderless to confront a Yishuv that was to increase dramatically in strength and determination during the Second World War.⁴

At the time, however, while the Palestinian Arabs might well have been defeated militarily, the scale of their revolt, together with the hostility of the Arab states to the Zionist colony, won a significant political victory in the shape of the 1939 White Paper. With war imminent in Europe, the British felt the need to conciliate Arab opinion. The White Paper limited Jewish immigration, restricted Jewish settlement and promised independence to an Arab Palestine within ten years.⁵ This commitment was condemned at the time by British Zionist sympathisers, among them Winston Churchill, as a betrayal of the Balfour Declaration and was, of course, bitterly opposed by all elements of the Yishuv.

The Zionist movement was divided in its response to the White Paper, with the Jewish Agency and the rival Revisionist movement taking very different stands. The Jewish Agency functioned as the effective settler government in Palestine, had the allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the Jewish population and was determined to overturn the White Paper by diplomatic methods. The Agency was sympathetic to