

# **The Bombing of the British Embassy in Rome, 1946: A Bold Act of Political Violence**

On October 31, 1946, the British Embassy at Porta Pia in Rome was rocked by a devastating explosion, marking a significant escalation in the campaign of political violence waged by the Irgun Zvai Leumi, a Revisionist Zionist paramilitary group. This terrorist attack, the first of its kind by the Irgun against British personnel on European soil, underscored the group's determination to challenge British policies restricting Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine. The bombing injured two people, caused irreparable damage to the embassy's residential wing, and sent shockwaves through the international community, highlighting the global reach of the Palestinian Jewish struggle.

## **Background: The Irgun and the Struggle for Palestine**

The Irgun, led by Menachem Begin, was a militant organization committed to establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. Formed in the 1930s, it broke away from the more restrained Haganah, advocating for armed resistance against British rule. The British White Paper of 1939, which severely limited Jewish immigration to Palestine, was a flashpoint for the Irgun, especially as news of the Holocaust underscored the urgent need for a Jewish homeland. By 1944, under Begin's leadership, the Irgun resumed its campaign of violence, targeting British installations to force a policy change.

The British Embassy in Rome was singled out as a target because the Irgun believed it was a hub for "anti-Jewish intrigue," obstructing illegal Jewish immigration (Aliyah Bet) to Palestine. At the time, thousands of Jewish refugees, many Holocaust survivors, were housed in displaced persons camps across Europe, including in Italy, where the Irgun found fertile ground for recruitment.

## **The Attack: Planning and Execution**

The bombing was meticulously planned by Irgun operatives, who established a network in Italy with support from local antifascist resistance groups and members of the Betar youth movement, a Revisionist Zionist organization. In March 1946, Irgun members, including refugees like Dov Gurwitz and Tiburzio Deitel, set up a front office in Rome's Via Sicilia, near Allied intelligence offices, to coordinate operations. Two commando training schools were also established in Tricase and Ladispoli to prepare recruits for sabotage missions.

On the night of October 31, 1946, Irgun operatives split into two squads. One group painted a large swastika on the British Consulate's wall, a provocative act meant to equate British policies with Nazi oppression. The second squad placed two suitcases containing 40

kilograms of TNT, rigged with timers, on the steps of the embassy's front entrance on Via XX Settembre. A driver noticed the suspicious suitcases and entered the building to report them, but the explosives detonated before any action could be taken, causing significant destruction. The residential section of the embassy was wrecked beyond repair, though fortunately, only two people were injured. Ambassador Noel Charles, a key target, was on leave, sparing him from the attack.

## **Afterwards: Investigations and Arrests**

The attack was swiftly attributed to foreign militants from Mandatory Palestine. Under pressure from the British government, Italian police, Carabinieri, and Allied forces launched a crackdown, targeting Betar members and Jewish refugees suspected of Irgun ties. Three suspects were arrested shortly after the bombing, followed by two more on November 4. In December, a significant breakthrough came with the discovery of an Irgun sabotage school in Rome, where authorities seized pistols, ammunition, hand grenades, and training materials. Among those arrested were Dow Gurwitz, Tiburzio Deitel, Michael Braun, David Viten, and a key operative, Tavin.

One notable arrestee, Israel (Ze'ev) Epstein, a childhood friend of Menachem Begin, attempted to escape custody on December 27, 1946, but was shot during the attempt. The British requested that the suspects be extradited to prison camps in Eritrea, but not all were transferred. By December 1946, five of the eight arrested were released, with hopes expressed for the remaining prisoners' freedom, according to the American League for a Free Palestine.

The Italian authorities, initially bewildered, also explored alternative theories. Some Italian newspapers speculated about "Zionist terrorists," a claim vehemently denied by Dr. Umberto Nachon of the Jewish Agency in Italy, who argued that Jews had no motive for such an act and that the British had many global enemies. Archival records from 1948 later revealed suspicions of Italian Communist Party involvement, though no conclusive evidence supported this theory.

## **Impact and Legacy**

The bombing had far-reaching consequences. It confirmed fears, articulated by MI5's David Petrie in May 1946, of Jewish terrorism expanding beyond Palestine. The attack humiliated the British, prompting Italy to impose stricter immigration controls and a registry deadline for refugees by March 31, 1947. The Irgun's operations in Italy were disrupted, forcing them to relocate to other European capitals, where they continued attacks, such as the bombing of the Sacher Hotel in Vienna, a British military headquarters.

The bombing also strained Anglo-Italian relations and fueled antisemitic sentiment in the United Kingdom, as public opinion grappled with the audacity of the attack. Jewish Agency leaders condemned the bombing, distancing themselves from the Irgun's tactics, but the incident underscored the fractious nature of Jewish resistance movements. Italian historian Furio Biagini later argued that the Irgun's bold actions, alongside those of Lehi and

the Haganah, contributed to Britain's eventual withdrawal from Palestine in 1948, complementing diplomatic efforts by the Jewish Agency.

The physical scars of the attack lingered. The embassy building, purchased by the British in the 19th century, was so severely damaged that it was replaced by a new structure, designed by Sir Basil Spence and opened in 1971. The Italian government provided temporary accommodations for embassy staff at the former residence of Russian princess Zinaida Volkonskaya in San Giovanni, which Britain formally purchased in 1951.

## **Conclusion**

The 1946 bombing of the British Embassy in Rome was a pivotal moment in the Irgun's campaign against British colonial policies. It demonstrated the group's ability to project power beyond Palestine, exploiting the chaos of postwar Europe to advance its goals. While the attack achieved limited immediate success, it amplified the Zionist cause on the world stage, contributing to the pressures that led to the establishment of Israel in 1948. However, it also highlighted the moral and strategic complexities of political violence, leaving a legacy of controversy that continues to spark debate among historians and policymakers.