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MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.

Series II: Harold P. Manson File (Zionism Files), 1940-1949, undated.

Sub-series A: Main Manson File, 1940-1949.

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Jewish Army in Palestine proposal, 1939-1943.

C O P Y

"A"

29th August 1939

The Right Hon. Neville Chamberlain, P.C.
10 Downing Street, S.W.1
London

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

In this hour of supreme crisis, the consciousness that the Jews have a contribution to make to the defense of sacred values impels me to write this letter. I wish to confirm, in the most explicit manner, the declarations which I and my colleagues have made during the last months, and especially in the last week: that the Jews "stand by Great Britain and will fight on the side of the democracies. "

Our urgent desire is to give effect to these declarations. We wish to do so in a way entirely consonant with the general scheme of British action, and therefore would place ourselves, in matters big and small, under the co-ordinating direction of His Majesty's Government. The Jewish Agency is ready to enter into immediate arrangements for utilizing Jewish manpower, technical ability, resources, etc.

The Jewish Agency has recently had differences in the political field with the Mandatory Power. We would like these differences to give way before the greater and more pressing necessities of the time.

We ask you to accept this declaration in the spirit in which it is made.

I am, dear Prime Minister,

Yours sincerely,

Ch. Weizmann.

Copied
3/15/44
BI

C O P Y

77 Great Russel Street

1st December 1939

General Sir Edmind Ironside, G.C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O.
Chief of the Imperial General Staff
War Office
Whitehall, S.W.1

Dear General Ironside,

I revert once more to the subject of our intended offer of a Jewish Division to be recruited in Palestine and elsewhere for service with the British forces in the present war wherever required. I accept what I believe to be your point of view, viz; that the moment has not yet come for giving publicity to this proposal. But I wish to put it on record, and if it is possible at this stage, should be glad to have it accepted in principle.

No one can tell as yet how soon, or how late, the time may come when His Majesty's Government will call upon us to make good our offer. But when that happens, speed may well be of the essence of the matter. We assume that the higher commanding positions in the Jewish Division will be occupied by British Officers, preferably from among those who are in sympathy with the idea of a Jewish military unit. As to the junior officers, we should naturally like them to include a strong contingent of Palestinian Jews, as the existence of such cadres would greatly facilitate and hasten the recruitment and training of the rank and file when the time comes.

Would it therefore be possible to arrange for bringing to England a number of picked young Palestinians to go through an Officers' Training Course? In suggesting this I am not contemplating any publicity being given to these preparatory steps, nor that His Majesty's Government should be supposed to be committing themselves to any specific future action.

Yours very sincerely,

(Signed) Ch. Weizmann

3/15/44

C O P Y

"C"

WAR OFFICE
WHITEHALL
LONDON S. W. 1

PERSONAL AND
CONFIDENTIAL

December 4, 1939

Dear Dr. Weizmann,

Many thanks for your letter to General Ironside.

I showed it to him today and he agrees in principle with the raising of a division as you suggest. There are other implications which will have to be taken into consideration.

Meanwhile he has sent your letter to the A.G. to go into the question of raising the division.

I hope that something may come of your offer, but at this stage it is desirable to keep the matter confidential.

I will let you know what decision is reached as soon as I hear it.

Yours sincerely,

R. MACLEOD
Colonel G.S.,
Military Assistant to Chief
of the Imperial General Staff

MN
3-15-44

C O P Y

"D"

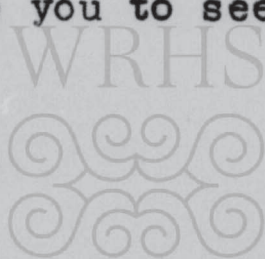
Sept. 3, 1940
THE JEWISH AGENCY FOR PALESTINE
77 GREAT RUSSELL STREET
LONDON W. C. 1

Lieutenant-General Sir John G. Dill, K.C.B.
War Office
Whitehall, S.W.1

Dear General Dill,

I have just seen the Prime Minister. I submitted to him the enclosed proposals, with which he expressed his full agreement. I asked whether I might go to see you in order to discuss the details and implementing of these proposals, and he gave me permission to do so.

I should therefore be grateful to you for letting me know when it would be convenient to you to see me.



Yours very sincerely,

Signed ... Ch. Weizmann

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- I. Recruitment of greatest possible number of Jews in Palestine for fighting services, to be formed into Jewish Battalions or larger formations.
 - II. The Colonial Office insists on an approximate parity in the number of Jews and of Arabs recruited for specific Jewish and Arab units in Palestine. As Jewish recruitment in Palestine is certain to yield much larger numbers than Arab, the excess of Jews to be sent for training to Egypt or anywhere else in the Middle East.
 - III. Officers Cadres, sufficient for a Jewish Division in the first instance, to be picked immediately from Jews from Palestine and trained in Egypt.

Lt. Gen. Sir John G. Dill

Sept. 3, 1940

IV. Jewish "Desert Unit"

- V. Jewish Military units to be formed in England from foreign Jews in England, and volunteers from other countries, for service in the Middle East or elsewhere.



Memorandum on Proposal for a Palestine Jewish Army

Duplicate

AHS File

Date? ('43?)

How used?

1. On the eve of the war Dr. Weizmann, President of the Jewish Agency for Palestine and of the World Zionist Organization, wrote to Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain that the Jews "stand by Great Britain and will fight on the side of the Democracies"; he offered to enter into immediate arrangements for utilizing Jewish manpower and resources for the war effort. (See letter attached - Appendix A).
2. A fortnight thereafter, the Jewish Agency for Palestine introduced a voluntary registration for national service of Palestinian Jewish men and women between the ages of 18 and 50. Out of a total Jewish population of approximately one-half million, over 136,000 Jews registered for service -- the majority of the men for combatant service. The Palestine Administration remained passive, however, nor was anything done in response to Dr. Weizmann's offer to Mr. Chamberlain.
3. On December 1, 1939, in connection with conversations which Dr. Weizmann had with General Ironside, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Dr. Weizmann made specific proposals for the raising of a Jewish division to be recruited in Palestine and elsewhere. (Appendix B).

In a reply dated December 4th, Colonel Macleod, military assistant to the C.I.G.S., stated (Appendix C) that General Ironside agreed in principle with the raising of a Jewish division as suggested by Dr. Weizmann. The proposal, however, was not proceeded with owing to the opposition on political grounds, of the Colonial Office.

4. With the entry of Italy into the war and the need for additional manpower in the Near East, the situation underwent a change. The Jewish community of Palestine provided the only available reservoir of loyal and technically adaptable manpower. At first a number of Jewish service units -- in particular, engineering, R.A.F., and transport units, were formed and participated under British command in the Middle East campaigns. Later infantry units were also recruited and by July, 1942, over 15,000 Palestine Jews were serving in Jewish units attached to various British regiments, while nearly 25,000 more were organized in different police and semi-military formations in Palestine.

5. The proposal for a specific Jewish military force in Place of the scattered and unrelated Jewish companies was again taken up in September, 1940, by Dr. Weizmann with Mr. Churchill, by then, Prime Minister. Mr. Churchill in fact approved and initialled a five-point memorandum on the subject submitted him by Dr. Weizmann (Appendix D), and later the British Cabinet approved a proposal for the formation of a Jewish Force for service wherever required. A general to command the Force was appointed and discussions proceeded between him and the Jewish Agency in regard to various matters of detail.

6. Other political factors again intervened, however, and in February, 1941, the newly appointed Colonial Secretary, Lord Moyne, informed the Jewish Agency that the raising of a Jewish contingent was to be postponed for six months. When the matter was reopened by the Agency in the middle of October, 1941, they were informed that the whole project

was dropped owing to lack of equipment.

Pressure in behalf of a Jewish Force continued, however, and in August, 1942, the Secretary of War announced what was in fact a compromise arrangement, namely, the formation of a Palestine regiment consisting of Jewish and Arab infantry battalions. It afterwards appeared, however, that these battalions were not to be combatant units but were to be retained for local defense only and to receive limited training accordingly. Despite the protests of the Jewish Agency, these limitations, for which the local Administration in Palestine is undoubtedly responsible, remain unaltered.

7. In general the attitude of the Administration has been far from helpful as far as the recruitment of Jews is concerned. Indeed at times the Palestine Administration seemed anxious to do everything possible to discourage such recruitment. Relations between the Jews and the military authorities have been on an entirely different plane and were in general marked by a sense of mutual cordiality and appreciation. The fighting qualities and honorable service of the Jewish units in the field have been frequently commended by the military leaders including among others, General (now Field Marshall) Wavell, General Ball, and Marshall D'Albiac.

8. In conclusion, it is to be reported that according to a recent statement of the British War Minister, Sir James Grigg, more than 40,000 Jews are now serving with British Armed Forces in the Middle East. This is equivalent on the basis of population to a volunteer army of nearly

nine million in the United States. The bulletin of the British Information Services, dated May 25, 1943, states:

"The Jews of Palestine are playing a fighting and invaluable part in the war. They are serving in armed military and police formations, the great proportion in special Jewish units. The contribution that they are making to the supply position through the remarkable achievements of Jewish industry and agriculture in Palestine is of a critical character to the Middle East Military Command".

