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It is an incident rarely recalled today. Yet if you know where to look on a wall in West Jerusalem, you will find an account which still seeks to shift blame from those who carried it out: terrorists then, heroes later: heroes who had fought valiantly to establish a state. As anyone who has covered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict knows, history dominates contemporary politics in a way it no longer does in western Europe. Any British correspondent setting out to work in Gaza or on the West Bank might well find themselves asked to explain, or apologize for, the Balfour Declaration – so they had better know at least a little of what it was.

Their counterparts based in Jerusalem on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1946 certainly would have done. They were reporting from the Holy Land's holiest city in the last years of the British Mandate for Palestine. The League of Nations had looked to the British Empire to govern this contested corner of what had been the Ottoman Empire. The task was not only thankless, but ill defined, and, in its later stages, extremely dangerous. At lunchtime on that hot summer day, bombs went off in the basement of the King David Hotel, Headquarters of the British military and administrative authorities in Palestine. A whole corner of the hotel was immediately destroyed; dozens of dead buried in the ruins. Newsreel footage from the time – and now held in the Imperial War Museum archive – shows British servicemen searching the rubble in the aftermath of the attack. 'Words cannot express the stark tragedy of this ghastly incident,' says the voiceover.

Because the King David was the seat of power, it was also a magnet for journalists. Barbara Board, of the *Daily Mirror*, was just coming into the hotel to check the wires. 'I owe my life, and the fact that I am able to write this story of the bloodiest terrorist outrage, to the cool courage of a British military policeman,' she wrote in a piece which ran the next day. 'As the thunderous boom roared out and the five-storey building collapsed like a pack of cards,' she went on, 'one military policeman on guard at the entrance threw me onto the ground and shielded me with his body.' Clare Hollingworth, the veteran foreign correspondent who is still alive at the age of 104, was in a car along the road – although, as she was staying in the hotel at the time, she could well have been inside it. Her anger did not diminish with the years. She wrote in a later memoir of Menachem Begin – the future Israeli Prime Minister, who was one of those behind the attack – 'When Begin rose to power in the late 1970s I often found myself in his presence. But I never greeted him. I would not shake a hand with so much blood on it.' The *Daily Express*'s Peter Duffield, working on a feature 'Date Line King David' even permitted himself a journalistic joke – in questionable taste. 'A lot of the hotel I was writing about is not standing now – but maybe the feature will stand up.'

More than 90 people were killed. The bombers were members of the armed group Irgun Zvai Leumi. The Irgun had launched a campaign of violence to drive the British from Palestine, and pave the way for Jewish Statehood. Those who carried out the attack had done so disguised as Arab milkmen. The milk churns they brought were filled with explosives. The underground corridor along which they brought their deadly delivery is still there. If you visit today, as I did a couple of years ago while researching the history of the Jerusalem press corps, you will pass kitchens where the staff wear the stainless chef's whites you would expect in an expensive hotel. What a contrast with the dressed-down bombers, their hearts beating nervously even as their eyes struggled to adjust from the blinding midday light outside to the subterranean dimness. That they carried out the attack is not a matter of dispute; whether they gave sufficient warning remains so today, seven decades later. A plaque on the wall which marks the hotel's territory from the

pavement claims that, 'Warning phone calls has (sic) been made.' Still, it goes on, 'the hotel was not evacuated...and to the Irgun's regret 92 persons were killed.' Were she still alive, Barbara Board would have none of this. Part of her story for the next day's *Mirror* is based on an interview with one of the hotel switchboard operators. Of the suggestion that adequate warning was given, Board writes, 'This is a gross untruth. The telephone operator at the hotel had only four minutes' warning.' In the original, this appears in bold.

Still shaken from their close encounters with death, the British press corps of the time cannot get enough of the story. Challenged to respond to this 'bloodiest terrorist outrage', the mandatory authorities launch, 'The biggest military operation in the history of Britain's 23-year-old Palestine Mandate,' in the words of the *Daily Mail's* O'Dowd Gallagher. Board preferred the phrase, 'the world's greatest manhunt'. As any major military power stunned by a spectacular and deadly breach of its security would, the Mandate authorities go after the bombers. As has so often been the case in more recent conflicts, the insurgents seek to hide by disappearing back into the civilian population. The number of troops deployed is astonishing to anyone used to the diminished ranks of today's British Army: 13000 personnel are sent to Tel Aviv to seek out the bombers. The methods they use make slightly uncomfortable reading today – not least for the imagery it recalls from wartime Europe, a fresh memory to reporters then – but nowhere do correspondents pause to consider this. Dragging civilians in their thousands from their beds, the army holds them in pens in the streets until they can be questioned, 'The search began at dawn, when hundreds of Jewish men in pyjamas, and women and girls in nightdresses, were brought into the streets and lined up in barbed-wire cages for questioning,' wrote Board in the *Mirror* on July 31<sup>st</sup>, the week after the bombing. Nowhere does it seem to occur to her or her fellow reporters that some of these people – given the year – might have already been penned up behind barbed wire, and then in death camp uniforms that, to the modern eye, look like pyjamas.

What is perhaps most striking about the coverage of the time is that there is no sense that such a large scale operation, using such an indiscriminate approach, might not work. The reporters, who have rushed to Tel Aviv from the ruins of the King David Hotel, do not pause to put the question. There are excited accounts of an 'arsenal' and 'Terrorist HQ' discovered in 'Tel Aviv's Great Synagogue'. Nowhere does one get the sense that the Mandate's days are in fact numbered, although the Irgun's ability to strike a blow such as the bombing at the King David must have made the elite in both Jerusalem and London wonder. Only the reports in the coming days of yet more refugee ships arriving off Haifa hint at the fact that Palestine is shortly to become ungovernable. The coverage of the 'manhunt' is imperialistic and patriotic to a fault. To read it today, with its descriptions of presumably terrified civilians dragged into the night time streets, is to be reminded of Anna Politkovskaya's, damning verdict in one of her despatches from Chechnya, 'The only thing the methods of this war accomplish is to recruit new terrorists and resistance fighters, and to rouse hatred, calling for bloody revenge.'

The armed groups who were the target of the raids on Tel Aviv got their revenge less than two years later when the state of Israel came into being. Clare Hollingworth, covering the last days of the British mandate, is furious with 'misrepresentations and distortions [which] are reaching astonishing heights' on the Jewish side of the conflict, while 'on the Arab side the Press indulges in childish boasting and highly-coloured accounts of Arab victories.' Spin, unsophisticated as it apparently is, has already become an important part of what will come to be the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict. Hollingworth's immediate concern was the relocation of Cable and Wireless office – and with it the link she used to file. 'An important British interest has been needlessly sacrificed,' she wrote in *The Observer* on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1948. Her next line seems astonishingly prescient. 'There is little doubt that the Jewish State will build itself up commercially at considerable speed and provide the United States with a firm foothold in the Middle East.' As that process unfolded, power in the region changed, as did journalism's relationship with it. Israel's greatest military test, and most stunning victory, came in the Six Day war of June 1967. It was a masterpiece of spin, too. Winston Churchill, the grandson and namesake of the wartime Prime Minister, was then correspondent for the *News of the World*. Churchill was among those deceived into believing that Israel did not plan to strike the first blow – a stratagem thought up by Moshe Dayan, Israel's Defence Minister. In the summer of 2014, I interviewed the veteran Israeli photographer, David Rubinger, about his memories of covering the conflict. 'Units were sent on leave on Friday, and Saturday,' he remembered, 'which was obviously a Dayan trick.'

British correspondents were no longer close to power. As is normal for any foreign press corps, they were kept at distance; invited to draw nearer when their presence might be useful. Churchill himself is taken to tour Israeli Army positions in the south of the country. 'The cool self-assurance of these men – factory workers, farmers, students, actors – I spoke to in their slit trenches impressed me deeply,' he wrote in his next article. The 'terrorists' of two decades earlier have already vanished into history: 'cool', self-assured, soldiers have taken their place.

Sophisticated spin, carefully controlled access to the army: Israeli media relations techniques as instantly recognizable to my generation of correspondents from the early 2000s as they no doubt are today. The way that journalists work has changed since then, as has the story. Diplomatic despair of finding a solution has led to editorial fatigue. Dwindling international coverage budgets are already stretched elsewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean: reporting on the refugee crisis; where possible, Syria. For all that, the bombing of the King David hotel still has useful lessons for journalists seven decades later. Even in an age of social media, eyewitness reporting still carries weight. The stories sent by Board, Hollingworth, Duffield and others are still fresh because of their immediacy, their closeness to danger, and death. Access is everything – but beware it drawing you so close that you are easily spun (one imagines Clare Hollingworth was a spin doctor's nightmare – little danger of that happening to her). Do not borrow the language of the powerful, however readily it is offered. Some of the 'terrorists' whom the Russian air force has been bombing in Syria have been so designated by Moscow only because they have taken up arms against President Assad; the 'terrorists' of the King David Hotel are rarely seen as such in Israel, yet the Israeli government readily uses the word to describe its Palestinian enemies.

Above all, seek out the details of history, like the plaque giving an account of the bombing of the King David Hotel, which continue to influence today's conflicts – and which are firmly embedded in the stories which the belligerents have weaponized as part of their arsenal. If we British chose not to think much today about the British Mandate for Palestine – many of us may only have the haziest idea of what it involved – the same is not true of the people who populate the land between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean. Any diplomat or correspondent heading that way needs to understand that.

*James Rodgers is the author of Headlines from the Holy Land: Reporting the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (2015), and a former BBC correspondent in Gaza. He teaches Journalism at City University London.*