A member of the black and tans in a studio portrait. *Source: author's collection*.

The Image of "Black and Tans" in late Mandate Palestine

Richard Cahill

The "Black and Tans" were an auxiliary force that the British had hobbled together after World War I, in order to squelch the Irish Rebellion of 1919-1920. They became infamous for their use of excessive force, brash tactics (including torture) and communal punishment. In a recent article, I examined how over 650 former "Black and Tans" were signed on to serve in Palestine in the early 1920s. Based on research in the records of the British National Archive as well as newspapers and other sources from the 1920s and 1930s, I traced the activities and several personalities of the former "Black and Tans" who served together from 1922 to 1926 as the British Palestine Gendarmerie, and then as individual members of the Palestine Police. Many rose to the highest rank and some were at the center of controversies. In that same article,

I analyzed public discourse, including the media, concerning these former "Black and Tans." The astonishing finding was that up through the late 1930s, public discourse in the U.S. and Britain did not bat an eye at the conduct of these infamous men.

This article takes a somewhat wider scope. It moves beyond the actual former members of the "Black and Tans" in Palestine and explores the rhetorical power of the image of "Black and Tans" in the struggle for Palestine. The focus here is to trace and understand how the label "Black and Tans" went from being a mere description of a certain group of auxiliary police to describing an image or representation of a mode of behavior that was given negative attributes. Naturally, the image of "Black and Tans" in public discourse was shaped by events of the Irish Rebellion where the "Black and Tans" developed a reputation for brutality. Due to media coverage of this brutality, public opinion in the United States became more sympathetic to the plight of poor Irish, seen as suffering at the hands of the British Colonials and their brutal "Black and Tans." Irish-Americans were especially sympathetic to the Irish nationalist movement and became increasingly critical of Britain. Arguably for the first time in U.S. history, Irish-Americans became a force in U.S. government, influencing Congress to put political pressure on Britain to withdraw from Ireland. In the end, the British could not hold the rebellion, and in 1922 the Irish Free State (today's Republic) was established. Four things are noteworthy in this thumbnail sketch of the narrative behind this image: (1) the Irish were the "local," the "native," the "colonized," and the "oppressed"; (2) the British and their "Black and Tans" were the "outsiders," the "imperials," the "colonizers," and the "oppressors"; (3) American public opinion mattered; and (4) Irish-Americans played a role.

This article is divided into two parts. The first part attempts to understand the first use in British official correspondence from Palestine of the term "Black and Tan" as a descriptive label with negative connotations. This occurrence appears during the Arab Revolt (1936-1939). The second part of this article describes how the image of the "Black and Tans" was employed in public discourse in Britain and the United States concerning the situation in Palestine, in particular toward the end of the Mandate period. As we shall see, certain parallels were drawn in public discourse to the "Black and Tans" of the Irish Rebellion and the British in Palestine, in an attempt to pressure Britain to withdraw its control of Palestine. Finally, some tentative conclusions and curiosities will be suggested. Research presented here should shed light on colonial/ anti-colonial political discourse of the period and be of significance for those studying trans-imperial cultural history.

"Black and Tan tendencies" in the Arab Revolt

"… I have been much concerned lately by occasional emergence of black-and-tan tendencies." These words come from a secret telegram from the High Commissioner for Palestine to the British Secretary of State in London on 5 September 1938. Why was the High Commissioner for Palestine concerned about "black-and-tan

tendencies?" And what did he mean by this? Was his attention focused on excessive force and brutality used by former "Black and Tans," some of whom were still among the ranks of the Palestine Police? Or was his concern with the portrayal of "black-and-tan tendencies" on the part of the media and public discourse?

The Arab Revolt (1936-39) stretched the British control over Palestine to its limits. Violence erupted all around the country. The Arab Palestinian population was upset by the continuing immigration of Jews and with British rule. Reports of Arabs killing Jews and Jews killing Arabs abound. Sniping, ambushing cars and buses in desolate places, and assassinations became common. After the first wave of violence, the High Commissioner for Palestine, Arthur G. Wauchope, left the position and the Inspector General of the Palestine Police (Roy Spicer) was replaced. On 18th March 1937, His Majesty issued a new and more comprehensive Palestine Defence Order. It provided the High Commissioner with the legal power to do just about anything to ensure public safety and squelch the revolt. And by 1938, the cast of British players in Jerusalem had changed again. After an interim with Acting High Commissioner William D. Battershill, the new High Commissioner, Harold MacMichael, took office. In October of 1937, Alan Saunders became the new Inspector General of the Palestine Police. MacMichael, like other High Commissioners before him, begged London for more troops as soon as possible. By May of 1938 there was talk of the British sending Sir Charles Tegart, expert on police and terrorism, to Palestine and the construction of "Tegart's Wall" – a barbed wire barrier on the northern and eastern borders, the cost of which was estimated to be £90,000.

It is in this context – a wide-spread and violent revolt – that the High Commissioner expressed in September of 1938 to the Secretary of State in London his many concerns and observations. He worried about the publication of a recent Commission Report. If the Report suggested a partition of Palestine, this would only add fuel to the fire of the Arab revolt. He looked forward to the arrival of perhaps a whole division of the British Army to help bring things under control. He was also amiable to the idea of bringing the police and the military forces under one commander and eagerly awaited the arrival of Tegart.

In his correspondence with the Secretary of State in early September, the High Commissioner related that the General Officer Commanding or GOC (Robert Haining) and the Inspector General of the Police (Saunders) thought that the Palestine Police had "reached the limit of expansion and that no further large number of British police can be effectively introduced and absorbed." He then went on to think out the possibilities of these moves on paper: "They [Haining and Saunders] feel that any further large increase would have to take the form of an organized body, fully officered force, similar to a gendarmerie." At the end of his paragraph he adds the phrase mentioned above, "I have been much concerned lately by occasional emergence of black-and-tan tendencies." This reference may seem strange within the context of a rather violent stage of the revolt, with daily news of attacks and counter attacks. The High Commissioner's concern about "black-and-tan tendencies" seems inconsistent with the realities of the situation. What might have prompted such concern?

A search of the documents held in the British National Archive as well as the local and international English language press has not revealed anything related to the former members of the "Black and Tans" that might have triggered such a comment by the High Commissioner on 9th September 1938. Since he mentioned "black-and-tan tendencies" as though the words referred to a well-recognized argot, we may assume that he was speaking more generally about brutal tactics used by the British. One possible cause of his concern could stem from the Special Night Squads (SNS) of British intelligence officer, Captain Orde Wingate. Wingate was not a former "Black and Tan" but he was a militant Zionist with religious convictions and eccentric behavior. Wingate set up the SNS without permission and only gained approval after the fact. The SNS consisted of about 200 men (50 Brits and 150 Jews), divided into four platoons within the region of Galilee. Former members of these squads later testified, some nostalgically, to their involvement in carrying out "punishments" on villages suspected of collaborating with Arab rebels. Wingate carried out spontaneous "executions" in villages after holding his own mock trials. According to members of the SNS, Wingate occasionally forced Arab villagers to rub mud and oil on their faces, a humiliating affront to their sense of dignity. The SNS remained active for most of the revolt years despite allegations that these squads would go out on night operations intoxicated. Moshe Dayan, a member of the SNS, later recalled that they tortured one prisoner to death.

A few of Wingate's men were so dismayed by his behavior that they attempted to complain to the British authorities. One report concerning Wingate and the SNS' brutal tactics came to Jerusalem in early September, 1938. So perhaps it was the activities of the SNS, who also acted rather independently (as gendarmerie might do), that the High Commissioner was referring to when he expressed his "concern about black-and-tan tendencies." As I showed in a recent article, these tendencies (exhibited indeed by former members of the "Black and Tans") had been a part of the situation in Palestine in the 1920s and early 1930s. Until this point, however, these earlier incidents seem to have gone without notice or report in the collective British governmental correspondences about the violent situation and treatment of the citizenry by government sponsored police in Palestine. This therefore marks a turning point.

Former "Black and Tans" were deployed to Palestine as early as 1922 and by the late 1930s several high ranking police were from their ranks. Yet from 1922 to 1938 the label or image of "Black and Tans" was not invoked in internal British colonial correspondence. When, in 1938, the term "Black and Tans" crept into British governmental discourse, it did not seem to be in reference to former members of the "Black and Tans" but rather to Wingate and his SNS. By the 1940s the phrase gained use in political discourse, such as debates in the British Parliament. We now turn our attention to the story of how this phrase and its corresponding images seep into public discourse during the 1940s.

American and British use of the image of "Black and Tans" in Public Discourse

We have seen that former members of the "Black and Tans" did serve in Palestine, first as a unit of gendarmerie (1922-1926) and then as members of the British Section of the Palestine Police. Despite their negative reputation in the U.S. and Britain, newspaper coverage of Palestine for most of the Mandate period did not raise the specter of brutal "Black and Tans" of the Irish Rebellion. The two brief articles in the New York Times that bookend their service in the Palestine Gendarmerie merely mention that they were former "Black and Tans," without giving any evaluation of this fact. Even after the Wailing Wall incident of 1928 (precursor to the Wailing Wall riots of 1929), in which the British Police officers involved were indeed former "Black and Tans," Zionists accused them of brutality, but did not use the label (and its negative image) of "Black and Tans." In the New York Times, all of the nine articles that dealt with this incident mentioned that the police used excessive force and used "whips and clubs," or created a "desecration." One article even claimed that police "attacked Jews" at the Wall. The significance here is that the term "Black and Tans" was not used in these articles, even though, as I have shown elsewhere, those police who were directly involved were former members of the "Black and Tans."

The last mention of former members of the "Black and Tans" in Palestine in the press came during November of 1944, in what might be called a human interest story: a few of them took a lion from a Hungarian circus, followed by a "Mademoiselle Szedgkholzut" (a large woman in tights with two purple ostrich feathers in her hair) and a crowd of Arabs and Jews, back to their camp near Haifa. Thus, media coverage of former "Black and Tans" in Palestine seems to have been rather benign.

However the image of "Black and Tans" began to be employed as a powerful rhetorical tool in the media and public discourse in the U.S. and Britain from the early 1940s onwards. By this time, the image of the "Black and Tans" had made its way into popular culture. For instance, the Irish folksong, popular among Irish Americans, "Come Out Ye Black and Tans!" was written in 1931. The refrain goes:

Oh, come out you black and tans,
Come out and fight me like a man
Show your wife how you won medals down in Flanders
Tell them how the IRA made you run like hell away,
From the green and lovely lanes in Killeshandra.

Its verses poke fun at British colonial practices of the time:
Come tell us how you slew, Them ol' Arabs two by two,
Like the Zulus they had spears and bows and arrows,
How you bravely faced each one,
With your sixteen pounder gun,
And you frightened them damn natives to their marrow.

Note the reference to Arabs. As tensions between the Zionists, the Palestinian Arabs, and the British increased after the White Paper of 1939 (which limited Jewish immigration and which many Zionists viewed as a betrayal by British), the image of "Black and Tans" in public discourse was used with some frequency with regard to Palestine.

On 3rd July 1946, the National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers in London issued a resolution: "We express our particular abhorrence at the violent attacks in the worst Black and Tan tradition upon the great Jewish Labour Institutions and Agricultural Communal Settlements – the only real friends and allies of British Labour in the Middle East." This resolution was published in leading British newspapers. In addition to print media, the image of "Black and Tans" was also invoked the House of Commons.

The day after the Zionist underground group, the Irgun, bombed the British headquarters at the King David Hotel (22nd July 1946), killing many British civil servants, Prime Minister Clement Attlee addressed the House of Commons and responded to questions. MP James R. H. Hutchison suggested that Britain send ex-officers and other men with experience to put down terror organizations in Palestine. MP Harry Hynd requested the Prime Minster be careful "not to set up anything like the Black and Tans." A partial transcript of the session of the House of Commons was published in the Times of London. During the weeks that followed, the House of Commons continued to discuss the situation in Palestine and the Report of the Anglo-American Committee. During this prolonged discussion, MP Mr. Richard Crossman, as he was arguing for the British to discontinue their domination of Palestine, asked, "Why should the British people go as 'Black and Tans' to Palestine?" A few days later, as the discussion continued, member MP Mr. George Hall tried to defend the Palestine Police against another member's concern that it would be seen as "a 'Black and Tan' organization." Hall insisted that there was "no danger at all of this police force, which is made up mainly of British men, becoming anything like a 'Black and Tan' force." MP Mr. Hyacinth Morgan fired back, "The 'Black and Tans' were British too." In British public discourse we see the image of "Black and Tans" as the equivalent to "failed colonial brutality" with the colonized often left undefined.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, the image of the "Black and Tans" was also being put to use by Zionists who sought to influence public opinion and U.S. policy on Palestine. Newspapers, especially the New York Times, were a central venue for this effort. In the 1920s and 1930s, the vast majority of information that made it into U.S. newspaper articles came from pro-Zionist sources, namely the Jewish Telegraph Agency Service (that provided wires to most major U.S. papers), Zionist agencies in Palestine, or a reporter for the *New York Times* who was sympathetic to Zionism, Joseph Levy. For example, in the first six months of 1929, 93 percent of information about Palestine in the *New York Times* came from these sources. This continued in the 1940s, but after 1945 there was a sharp increase in public statements from Zionists to the press and most significantly, display ads advocating the Zionist cause. An example of a public statement came from former U.S. Undersecretary of

State, Mr. Summer Welles, who demanded in a statement to the Washington Post that the U.S. bring the issue of Palestine before the United Nations immediately, before Palestine turned into another "Black and Tan rebellion."

Other Zionist activists also picked up the phrase. On 4th July 1946, the Political Action Committee for Palestine, Inc., published a full-page advertisement in the New York Times urging members of Congress to vote down a loan from the U.S. to Great Britain. The ad, an open letter to House Majority Leader, John McCormack of Massachusetts, states that the "British Government struck with her characteristic brand of Britannic despotism, at the Jewish community of Palestine, and mercilessly subjected the Jews to barbaric treatment by far exceeding the 'Black and Tan' era of Ireland." It goes on to say, "At this writing the British are still looting the Jewish settlements, and increasing the toll of 6,000,000 Jewish causalities exacted upon Jewry during the past few years." The letter argued that unless this loan is voted down, the U.S. will become Nazism's "true heir." Here we see a return to the language of colonialism, with the Zionist lobby using the phrase "Black and Tans" to picture the Jews as the victims of this violent inheritance. They make a rhetorical link between the British (and their "Black and Tans") and the Holocaust, while publicly blackmailing the U.S. Congress to vote against a loan to the British or become labeled Nazis.

Moreover, in April of 1947, the New York Times covered a statement issued by the chairman of the American Zionist Emergency Council (AZEC), Dr. Abba Hillel Silver. The statement, claiming to speak for all Zionist organizations in the U.S., and was issued after an executive committee meeting of the AZEC. The statement "characterized the British program in Palestine as 'organized banditry' and likened Britain to a 'faithless guardian scheming to destroy his ward.'" In the statement, the British Foreign Secretary, Mr. Ernest Bevin, is charged, "with reviving the black and tan days of Ireland in the Holy Land."

All this begs the question: why was the powerful rhetorical image of the "Black and Tans" not made use of during the first 20 years of the Mandate Period, since it was precisely during these years that former "Black and Tans" were actually used by Britain to control Palestine? Especially during the Arab revolt (1936-1939), one might expect to find the image of "Black and Tans" employed in the media (as it had been during the Irish Rebellion), since the parallels seem so obvious. But it was not. While the Arabs were struggling for self-rule in these years, the media coverage from the USA and Britain did not draw upon this image. But by 1939, after the Arab Revolt had been put down, and after the population of Jews in Palestine had increased significantly (yet had still not reached a majority), and the British had issued the White Paper of 1939, the Zionist leadership began to look more and more to the USA (not Britain) as a source for international support.

It was about this time that David Ben-Gurion adopted a strategy to enlist popular American support for Zionism. He advocated a public awareness campaign and although earlier he had feared comparing the Zionist struggle to that of the Irish struggle for self-rule, he now endorsed it. Although he disagreed with the Revisionist Zionist movement in several respects, he now approved their efforts to wage a public

relations campaign in the U.S. that included a popular level (newspapers, Christian clergy, public gatherings, etc.) as well as direct advocacy with members of the U.S. Congress. In the 1940s, some Zionists in the U.S. carried out a highly organized and systematic public opinion and political-influence campaign. Peter H. Bergson (Hillel Kook), a Palestinian Jew, came to the U.S. in 1940 and led a relatively small group of Palestinian Jews and others in this effort. They monitored newspapers, issued press-releases, submitted letters to editors and corresponded broadly. One of their rival Zionist groups, the American Zionist Emergency Council (AZEC), employed Rueben Fink to write letters to each member of the U.S. Congress and personally met with many congressmen. By 1946, Fink could boast in the introduction to the massive book AZEC had commissioned him to write, that 86% of the U.S. Senate and 75% of the House of Representative were sympathetic to the cause of Zionism. The change in approach of the Zionist leadership away from Great Britain and toward American popular and political support made the use of the image of the "Black and Tans" a useful rhetorical tool.

Conclusion

In Part I, circumstantial evidence was marshaled to show that the High Commissioner's concerns "of black and tan tendencies" may have arisen from the actions of the Special Night Squads (SNS). Interestingly, although led by an eccentric Brit (Wingate), the SNS were mostly Jewish, were housed at Jewish settlements, and received some of their funding from the Jewish Agency.

In the first two decades of British Mandate Palestine, an analogy between the "Black and Tans" in Ireland and the situation in Palestine held the following two parallels: The Arab Palestinians, resisting the colonization of their land, were equated to the Irish; the "Black and Tans" in Palestine were equated to the colonial powers, the Zionists aided by the British. What makes the findings of Part II of this article curious is that suddenly the image of the "Black and Tans" was used in public political discourse in the U.K. and the U.S., but the parallels were changed. Suddenly it was the Jews of Palestine who are equated to the Irish; the "Black and Tans" in Palestine were as British as they were in Ireland. The Palestinian Arabs were entirely absent from the analogy. As early as 1936, American Zionist Jews had used the analogy of Ireland to communicate with their American audiences. The idea was simple: Jewish Americans should help to create a Jewish Free State in Palestine, the same way that Irish Americans had helped to create the Irish Free State. Since the Zionists portrayed their own endeavors in Palestine as colonial throughout the early Mandate period, it seems ironic that by the 1940s, American Zionists were portraying the Jews of Palestine as the colonized seeking to rid themselves of those "Black and Tan" British.

This research sheds light on three areas of significance. First, early in the Mandate period, American and British public discourse *was not* critical about former "Black and Tans" serving in Palestine. This loud silence is significant because it fits into the

paradoxical phenomenon that certain areas of the globe (namely central Europe) were seen as fit for the right of self-determination, while other areas (namely Asia and Africa) were seen as in need of civilization. President Woodrow Wilson (champion of the right of self-determination) was a man of his times, times when colonialism was not questioned by the West. The vast majority of people in Palestine at the time (namely the Arabs) were viewed by the West as unfit for self-determination and in need of altruistic colonialism.

Second, the High Commission for Palestine's concern about "black and tan tendencies" in 1937 is significant in that it refers to British and Zionist actions (namely, the SNS) and remains limited to internal British correspondence between Jerusalem and London. It does not enter into public discourse. In other words, even at the height of the violence during the Arab Revolt (when an analogy to the Irish Rebellion would seem most fitting), public discourse does not pick up the image of "Black and Tans." But then again, since the Zionists, to a large extent, controlled the media coming out of Palestine, it would have been to their disadvantage to invoke the image of "Black and Tans" at this stage, since the Arabs (not the Jews) would have been analogous to the Irish.

Third and finally, the ironic use of the image of "Black and Tans" by Zionist activists in the mid-1940s is significant. Although Zionists enjoyed strong control over newspaper reports on the situation in Palestine throughout the Mandate period, by the 1940s they began a more aggressive form of influence. Mainstream American Zionists and Revisionist Zionists operating in the U.S. began to employ the powerful image of "Black and Tans" in their rhetoric. Both groups began to purchase ads in the *New York Times* to engender U.S. support for the Zionist movement. By the time U.S. support for Zionism was most crucial, namely as Britain announced, in 1947, that it would turn over the issue of Palestine to the United Nations and give up its Mandate, the United States government and to a large degree, American public opinion had been significantly shaped by Zionists' efforts, including their employment of the image of the "Blank and Tans."

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