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The ghost of the Altalena seventy-five years on

Ofira Gruweis Kovalsky

Multidisciplinary Department, Zefat Academic College, Zefat, Israel; Herzl Institute, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

ABSTRACT

The tragic Altalena incident of June 1948, where prime minister and minister of defence David Ben-Gurion ordered the newly-formed Israel Defence Forces (IDF) to sink a ship laden with arms for one of Israel's pre-state military underground groups, killing sixteen people and wounding many others, remains one of the most traumatic events in Israel's history. This article re-examines the conduct of the key personalities involved in the incident and their attitude towards it in subsequent years.

KEYWORDS Altalena; David Ben-Gurion; Menachem Begin; ETZEL; Hagana; Israel Galili; Israel; Hillel Kook; Amihai Paglin; Yaacov Meridor

Every so often, the ghost of the Altalena comes back to haunt Israel and inflame public passions. In June 1948, a few weeks after the establishment of the State of Israel and during the first truce in the War of Independence, a ship laden with arms and newcomers was sent from France by the ETZEL, one of Israel's pre-state military underground groups. The arrival of the vessel off the Israel coast sparked a violent response as prime minister and minister of defence David Ben-Gurion ordered the newly-founded Israel Defence Forces (IDF) to sink it. Sixteen ETZEL members and three IDF soldiers were killed in the clash that ensued and many others were wounded.

Apart from the basic facts – a ship packed with arms and newcomers was shelled by the IDF on the order of the provisional government of the month-old State of Israel and burst into flames – all other details have remained a bitter bone of contention to date, much of it politically motivated. Since 2011, there has been talk about recovering the sunken remains of the vessel in the hope of resolving the argument once and for all.¹

Academic literature on the incident has largely treated the sinking of the Altalena as a foundational event that prevented the transformation of the pre-state underground movements into armed political

CONTACT Ofira Gruweis Kovalsky  ofira.gr@zefat.ac.il; ofiragruweis1@gmail.com
 Multidisciplinary Department, Zefat Academic College, Jerusalem 11, Zefat, Israel

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militias in the nascent Jewish state, which consequently did not slide to internecine strife as happened in numerous new states in the post-WWII era. The Altalena sinking has thus been portrayed as reinforcing the stability of Israel's political system and safeguarding the fledgling Israeli democracy from extremists who defied the authority of the national leadership.² At the same time, other scholars have shown that ETZEL commander Menachem Begin had no plans for a coup d'état but rather sought to incorporate the organisation as a key player into Israel's democratic system.³ Be that as it may, the scholarly exploration of the subject is far from complete, addressing specific issues but not the episode as a whole.⁴ Apart from a handful of first-hand accounts,⁵ the two major studies published to date, both in 1978, contain an impressive array of data but are marred by political bias and evade important questions.⁶

This article seeks to fill this lacuna by re-examining the conduct of the key personalities involved in the tragic incident – notably Ben-Gurion, Begin, and former Hagana commander Israel Galili – and their attitude towards the episode in subsequent years. A special emphasis will be laid on the attempts to mediate between ETZEL and the government from the time of the ship's departure from France to its sinking off the Tel Aviv coast.

Menachem Begin and the Altalena departure

Altalena left France for Israel on 11 June 1948 on orders of ETZEL representatives in Europe without consulting or receiving prior approval from the organisation's command in Israel.⁷ By that time Begin had already announced ETZEL's intention to disband and talks had begun on its incorporation into the IDF. The Israeli defence establishment was aware of the ship well before its departure, but attempts to organise its transfer to the IDF had failed.⁸

Begin's announcement of ETZEL's disbanding and its acquiescence in the nascent state's authority covered up a bitter dispute within the organisation on whether it should become a fully-fledged political party headed by Begin, as envisaged by the latter.⁹ The ship organisers, headed by Hillel Kook, supported ETZEL's transformation into a party but not under Begin. Having bought the Altalena and assembled its crew a year before the dispute erupted, Kook and his men used their control of the ship as a trump card in the battle for internal leadership. At the same time, there were other factions within ETZEL, largely clustered in Jerusalem, which opposed its dismantling.¹⁰ The ship's sailing date and the question who controlled the purse strings were thus part of the internal power struggle, though those involved sought to present it as a tragic communication failure:

The truth of the matter is that nothing happened. Our wires got crossed, that's all. Begin assumed we would let him know in advance when the ship would sail. He was also keeping tabs on the truce talks and their possible impact on matters related to the Altalena. Much more important was that his assessment of the cumulative effects of violating the truce differed from ours. Begin was not prepared to violate the truce [by bringing weapons to Israel] without securing government consent. We were convinced the government would give its blessing after the fact.¹¹

Due to this 'miscommunication', the ship was sent on its way without Begin's authorisation and against his judgement as ETZEL's supreme commander. Unable to conceive that his men would carry out such a mission without his approval, Begin found out that the Altalena was on its way from a BBC broadcast. It was clear that the parties working on behalf of ETZEL on foreign soil did not accept Begin's authority, yet his position within ETZEL's Israel leadership was also uncertain and it is unclear whether they supported him on this matter.¹² Begin demanded that the ship stop at sea and a report be sent to the government, while his colleagues (notably ETZEL head of operations Amihai Paglin) not only tried to dissuade him from filing such a report but also sought to sabotage the ongoing talks with the government on the Altalena's transfer to the IDF. It thus seems that while Begin (and mid-level ETZEL operators) didn't know the precise date of the ship's scheduled departure, certain senior ETZEL commanders were keenly aware of this date.¹³

For Begin, informing the government team headed by Galili, which negotiated the Altalena's transfer to the IDF, was the right thing to do and part of the would-be agreement. In his understanding, the talks revolved around what should be done with the ship and its cargo, not around its very arrival in Israel. Begin and his commanders wanted 20% of the arms to be delivered to ETZEL fighters who had joined the IDF and to ETZEL units in Jerusalem. Galili rejected this demand, insisting that all weapons be handed over to the state, which would then decide how to distribute them. Galili was not present in all meetings, but was kept informed by phone every step of the way and made decisions on the key issues.¹⁴

Begin's insistence that a distinct share of the weapons be given to his fighters sprang from a sense of wounded pride and mistrust of Ben-Gurion's Mapai party that dominated the nascent state's institutions, including the IDF. As Begin put it in his memoirs: 'There was apprehension. There is no denying it. The people who were about to become the officers of our comrades were raised to hate them. It was not a simple matter'.¹⁵ ETZEL enjoyed a special status in Jerusalem, where it operated in full coordination with the Jewish institutions. However, it was a self-funded organisation. Upon joining the IDF, it was feared that ETZEL fighters would be

deliberately left out in the cold. Hence Begin felt it was his duty to ensure that all of them were fully equipped.¹⁶

These differences notwithstanding, Begin was under the impression that the government did not object in principle to the Altalena's arrival and would not stand in the way of the arms being unloaded even without an agreement on distribution. Indeed, early on, when the talks were mainly technical, the delivery of arms to Jerusalem was confirmed. The choice of the Kfar Vitkin moshav, near the coastal town of Netanya, as the landing site and the detailed discussion of logistics only reinforced Begin's basic assumption. As he recalled in his memoirs:

The government could have said: 'We will not let you unload the arms.' It could have said: 'Under the circumstances, we forbid you to bring the ship to our shores.' It could have added a warning, which would have been entirely unnecessary in any case. But it simply never occurred to us that the cabinet decision and the IDF's opinion would be disregarded, and the ship, from the moment it departed, would be sailing straight into the hands of the government!¹⁷

Over the years, this claim was repeated inter alia by Yaacov Meridor, Begin's predecessor as ETZEL commander, and Hillel Kook.¹⁸ Meridor's testimony is particularly important because, unlike Paglin, he was steadfast in his loyalty to Begin and never challenged him in public. Meridor participated in all the talks, sometimes as ETZEL's representative. On June 19, Galili phoned Begin to tell him that the government decided to renege on its agreement with ETZEL and that responsibility for whatever happened would rest with Begin. In Galili's claim this amounted to forbidding ETZEL to proceed with the plans for Altalena. Yet it has been argued by contemporary senior labour movement operatives that not only was the tone of Galili's phone conversation not threatening since there was no government decision to act against ETZEL, but deliberations over cargo handling in Kfar Vitkin did not stop after the call.¹⁹ In other words, Begin had no reason to believe there was a problem and it never occurred to him or to his ETZEL comrades that their actions would be considered treason.

Galili's role

Galili was a co-signatory to the agreement on ETZEL's incorporation into the IDF alongside Begin (1 June 1948), who asked that he head the government team negotiating the Altalena's arrival though the former Hagana commander held no official position at the time and his relations with Ben-Gurion were rather strained.²⁰ Consequently, the team and the man at its helm had no clear picture of what their job entailed, the scope of their authority, and the extent of backing they had from Ben-Gurion for signing an agreement on

the Altalena. According to ETZEL sources, Galili agreed to deliver 20% of the weapons to Jerusalem without specifying to whom they would be delivered. The problem arose later when Galili, speaking to Ben-Gurion after his phone call to Begin, failed to mention this point. In Galili's account, Ben-Gurion heard only his side, a fact confirmed by the prime minister. He certainly didn't hear Begin's side.

Since no protocol of this conversation has been found, its content remains obscure and has become a bone of contention between Ben-Gurion and Galili. According to latter-day second- and third-hand accounts, after hanging up Galili claimed to have told Ben-Gurion that 'a dangerous new situation is being created: a demand for a private army of sorts with private weapons for certain army units'.²¹ For his part, Ben-Gurion accused Galili of overstepping his authority,²² and in 1959 told the Knesset that 'Since then, we found out that someone with no authority – not someone who dealt with this issue before, not Galili, but a person whose name I shall refrain from mentioning – negotiated with Mr. Begin or someone from ETZEL'.²³

This was a common Ben-Gurion tactic when seeking to attack someone, knowing that his listeners were fully aware to whom he alluded.²⁴ Indeed, the day after Ben-Gurion's Knesset address, Galili gave a series of media interviews in which he described the Altalena's arrival as a 'dangerous attempt to force a private army on us'. He said nothing about the unauthorised person mentioned by Ben-Gurion but his repeated insistence that his actions were authorised was odd, and the journalists pounced on this and wondered why he felt obliged to respond to Ben-Gurion in this particular way. Ben-Gurion's remarks and Galili's response showed that despite the prime minister's seemingly clear Knesset statement, there was something 'offish' about Galili's actions, the committee he headed, and their reporting to the government.²⁵

In a 1971 newspaper article, Begin publicly challenged Ben-Gurion's account. 'Did Galili give you a faithful account of what I said on June 14–15', he wrote, 'and did you authorize him to tell me that the ship should leave for Israel immediately?'²⁶ This aligned with claims by other ETZEL members that Galili had given Begin the green light for the Altalena's arrival. And while Ben-Gurion did not respond to Begin's article, Galili, who over the years had persistently claimed that everything during the negotiations was done in coordination with Ben-Gurion, stated in 1974, the year after Ben-Gurion's death, that 'Without trying to fathom what the late Ben-Gurion told *Maariv* and wrote in page 179 of his book, I acted on this matter by the power vested in me by the Minister of Defense [i.e. Ben-Gurion]'.²⁷

After Likud's 1977 rise to power, Begin repeated the deception charge at a memorial service for the Altalena victims, which he attended as prime minister and defence minister. In his remarks, he touched on two issues connected to the affair: he begged forgiveness from the victims, now that he was defence minister, and he related to Ben-Gurion and the mediating team.

Questioning what was said in the Knesset in 1959, Begin declared that ‘one of our national leaders, who is a spokesman of the Labour Party today and plays a central role in the life of the nation, told me: “We investigated the Altalena affair and reached the conclusion that Ben-Gurion was led astray”.’²⁸

While the press fingered Shimon Peres as the man who confided this fact to Begin (a fact he repeatedly denied),²⁹ Galili was quick to denounce Begin’s claim as ‘false and unworthy of reply’. He continued to deny any wrongdoing: ‘The assertion that Ben-Gurion was misled by me in the Altalena affair and the notorious claim that he was deceived are sheer nonsense. If anyone says otherwise, that person is a complete and utter liar, no matter who it is’. He went on to say that it was ‘a ridiculous fiction that somebody is anxious to promote’.³⁰

Some historians and MKs backed Peres on this, asserting that Ben-Gurion dismissed the notion that anyone told him he had been misinformed, insisting that there had been no deception and that the whole story had been made up by rightwing politicians. They argued that because Ben-Gurion was so roundly admired and hailed as the symbol of Israel’s struggle for rebirth, Begin and his friends needed someone else to toss their barbs at and hence came up with the idea that someone utterly consumed by hatred for ETZEL misled the honest (and naïve) Ben-Gurion. And who else could fit the bill better than Galili?³¹

Ben-Gurion, as we have seen, raised the matter in the Knesset. However, the debate over whether he admitted to having been deceived seems to have obscured the fundamental question: Was approval of the Altalena’s voyage under Galili’s jurisdiction or was his mandate limited to the integration of ETZEL members in the IDF? Another issue that remains in the dark is what exactly Begin was told during the negotiations. From all that has been said, it seems that the scope of Galili’s authority was not clearly delineated during the period under discussion. It can be further deduced from Ben-Gurion’s vague wording that since Galili’s mandate didn’t explicitly cover this issue, he was the unauthorised person.³²

When the ship dropped anchor in Kfar Vitkin, it was greeted by ETZEL with great euphoria. No one in the organisation’s command sensed that a clash with the IDF was in the offing. Reports that IDF units were encircling the area did not set off alarm bells. As Begin dramatically put it in his memoir: ‘Suddenly we found ourselves surrounded’, and ‘soon after I received an ultimatum’.³³

Negotiators on both sides followed their gut feelings without written agreements or even discussion drafts. Thus, a situation ensued where it was possible for Begin to believe that the ship could sail to Kfar Vitkin without a problem and be welcomed. For their part, Galili and his men didn’t believe that under the circumstances the crew would unload the weapons as this would constitute a mutiny. But the misunderstanding

between Begin and Galili was not the only weak point of the negotiations. The lack of clarity regarding Galili's role and the suspicion and distrust between him and Ben-Gurion were undoubtedly sore points that raise the question of whether there were any secret talks going on alongside the negotiations overseen by Galili.

The mediators

In the interval between the ship's departure from France on June 11 and its shelling off the Tel Aviv coast on June 22, several individuals tried to mediate between ETZEL and the government outside the direct talks. One of them – Netanya mayor Oved Ben-Ami of the General Zionists party – made his bid on June 21. According to ETZEL sources, he was contacted directly by the ETZEL command in Kfar Vitkin as soon as the news broke.³⁴ Ben-Ami later offered two contradictory versions of what led to his involvement: that this was his own initiative to prevent a civil war though he didn't know Begin personally³⁵; and that he was asked to intervene by IDF officers. 'On June 21 at 5am an officer who introduced himself as a member of the Alexandroni Brigade staff command handed me a letter from the brigade commander asking me to come down to headquarters immediately', he recalled.³⁶ Ben-Ami then went to see Begin in Kfar Vitkin with a letter from Dan Even, Alexandroni Brigade commander. At the meeting, Begin proposed a deal for ending the crisis: the arms would be unloaded in Kfar Vitkin and transferred to an IDF warehouse in Netanya, which would also be guarded by ETZEL. In exchange, he sought guarantees that a portion of the weapons would be used to defend Jerusalem.³⁷

Ben-Ami repeatedly claimed that his goal was 'to prevent bloodshed'. The government negotiators asked him to get ETZEL's proposal in writing. When he realised that the crisis was worsening, he contacted Ramat Gan mayor Avraham Krinitzi, Tel Aviv mayor Israel Rokach, and Haim Ariav, one of the heads of the farmers' association (all members of the Civic Union party that had merged with the General Zionists) and together they set up a meeting with Ben-Gurion in his IDF headquarters in Ramat Gan:

As we were talking, Ben-Gurion's assistant entered with a note. Ben-Gurion read it and after a moment's silence told us: "I have just been informed that the Altalena is burning off the Tel Aviv shore" . . . We were in shock. That was the end of our efforts to resolve the crisis peacefully.³⁸

Ben-Gurion repeated Ben-Ami's story, but said that Petah Tikva mayor Yosef Sapir, also a General Zionist, had been present as well.³⁹ In his memoirs, Krinitzi describes how the delegation 'stood like beggars at Ben-Gurion's door in Ramat Gan but nobody would speak to them until the

showdown was over and the Altalena was in flames'.⁴⁰ The mediation attempt of the General Zionists mayors was thus a total fiasco. No one showed any appreciation for their undertaking and their actions did not affect the course of events.

In the 1950s, Eliezer Livneh, one of the heads of the ruling Mapai party, told researchers at the Jabotinsky Institute that he had been asked to mediate between the parties. Livneh was among Ben-Gurion's closest associates at the time, and it was believed that Begin trusted him, too. He had previously served as the liaison between them on other issues. Livneh claims he was asked to intervene by an unnamed party but declined for reasons that remain unclear. From his testimony, however, it appears that he did conduct a round of talks as the drama was unfolding. In the 1960s, he opined that 'both sides were at fault . . . ETZEL should have handed over all the weapons to the army and the State of Israel unconditionally. [On the other hand] there was no reason whatsoever for that famous cannon to shoot at the Altalena . . . Even if it is true that the tragedy was caused by a mistake . . . I believe that both sides erred grievously'.⁴¹

What mistake was Livneh speaking about? Lack of full disclosure to Ben-Gurion? Or were they Begin and ETZEL were kept in the dark? This possibility clearly comes across from the mediation efforts of Yitzhak Gruenbaum, the most senior political figure to have mediated between ETZEL, its Revisionist mother party, and the top echelons of the Jewish Yishuv. As interior minister in the provisional government and a member of the General Zionists, his contacts with the parties predated the establishment of the state and included participation in the negotiations about ETZEL's dismantling. In December 1947 he was a member of the 5-man committee that negotiated with ETZEL in the name of the Jewish Agency and the National Council (Va'ad Leumi), and in March 1948 he helped draft the proposal that the ETZEL be shut down. He continued his mediation efforts well after the Altalena affair as head of a committee that dealt with integrating ETZEL and LEHI members into the IDF, though Ben-Gurion and his Mapai colleagues were suspicious of him because of his perceived sympathy for the Right.⁴² In later years, Begin expressed appreciation for his role as go-between, first in talks between ETZEL and the Yishuv, and then between ETZEL and the state: 'We have great respect and esteem for Mr. Gruenbaum whose attitude towards us was important for us morally'.⁴³

Despite ETZEL's trust in Gruenbaum and his mediating role, by mid-September 1948 they had come to suspect that 'he had been deceiving them the whole time, and recently they began to feel that he was not representing the government'.⁴⁴ While the suspicion that Gruenbaum acted on his own with respect to the ETZEL units in Jerusalem seems to be vindicated by Ben-Gurion's diary,⁴⁵ it is unclear whether he acted in a similar fashion during the Altalena crisis. Speaking about the affair in later years, Gruenbaum admitted

that he had taken part in the negotiations and made suggestions. 'I backed the government and didn't join ministers Rabbi Y. Maimon and Moshe Shapira in their short-lived walkout', he recalled. 'True, I submitted several proposals on the issue that were turned down. But matters took a sharp turn when the ship arrived in Tel Aviv and ETZEL members in the IDF left their positions and headed for Tel Aviv on orders of the ETZEL command'.⁴⁶

The question is whether these suggestions were only raised in government deliberations or were presented to ETZEL beforehand. Is it possible that prior to the cabinet meeting Gruenbaum held informal talks with ETZEL as he had done in the past? And what did ETZEL leaders assume as a result of these talks?

Begin and the Altalena's arrival

As IDF forces surrounded Kfar Vitkin, ETZEL command reversed course. It was the result of a disagreement between Begin and Paglin, the ETZEL operations officer and field commander in Kfar Vitkin, over how to respond to the encirclement. Paglin demanded that ETZEL fighters who had gathered on the beach be dispersed and the ship sent to Tel Aviv but Begin rejected both suggestions, replacing Paglin with ETZEL's deputy commander Meridor.⁴⁷ From this point onwards, there is no clear information of Begin's precise actions and all evidence points that Meridor seized the reins until the sinking of the ship.⁴⁸ Begin's account of the Kfar Vitkin events in his memoirs is confused and inaccurate, and he mixes up the chronology. But even he makes it clear that the person overseeing ETZEL's operations in Kfar Vitkin from the arrival of IDF troops was Meridor. It was Meridor who oversaw the ceasefire negotiations and ended the standoff in Kfar Vitkin; he was the one who decided that the Altalena should proceed in the direction of Tel Aviv, to which Begin originally objected, and he was the one mainly responsible for ordering Begin to board the ship. As he observed years later: 'I think it was the only time in Begin's career as a commander that he took orders from someone else'.⁴⁹

Underlying Meridor's decision to send the ship to Tel Aviv, which was supported by the ETZEL field officers, was the fear that the purpose of the Kfar Vitkin showdown was to assassinate Begin. This point also comes up clearly in the testimony of ETZEL and LEHI members.⁵⁰ Be that as it may, the important point for our purposes is that Begin didn't orchestrate this sequence of events but was drawn into it against his will.

When the Altalena reached Tel Aviv on the morning of June 22, there was no change in the chain of command. Begin heeded the instructions of Meridor, ship commander Eliyahu Lankin, and its captain, Monroe Fein.⁵¹ The affair reached a climax as the IDF surrounded the ship and opened fire, including direct artillery shelling from the Tel Aviv shore. The ship went up

in flames and the ammunition on board exploded. ETZEL fighters on deck leapt into the water with comrades on the beach trying to rescue them. Begin was not the one giving the orders, and the field commanders acted against his judgement, especially in the matter of surrender and raising a white flag. According to eye witnesses, Begin seemed to be very confused throughout the ordeal and his responses didn't correspond to what was happening on the ground. On the one hand, he called upon them to refrain from shooting, and on the other, he was against surrendering. From witness reports it appears that while the ship was burning, Begin was literally dragged off the vessel.⁵² His teary-eyed speech a few hours after abandoning ship reinforces this testimony.

The Knesset debates

Over the years, the Knesset became a stage for conjuring up the spectre of the Altalena. Contrary to popular belief, Begin was notably closed-mouthed on the issue in the 1950s and failed to respond if it ever came up. His silence is attested to in Knesset protocols, most prominently on 2 January 1950, when the parliament discussed Jerusalem.⁵³ In an exhausting days-long debate following the announcement of Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett that some government offices would be moved to Jerusalem, Begin spoke on behalf of the Herut party.⁵⁴ He talked about the War of Independence, the shortage of weapons and ETZEL's operations, but said not a word about Altalena. This is particularly noteworthy considering that from the 1960s onwards, it was almost a ritual for him to bring up the subject and demand a commission of inquiry.

During the debate, remarks were heard by MKs from across the political spectrum. The speech of Natan Yellin-Mor, the only MK of the Fighters' List (established by former LEHI fighters), triggered a debate that brought the Altalena affair back to the table in the Jerusalem context. Yellin-Mor declared that the partition of Jerusalem, implicit in the government's decision to transfer its offices to West Jerusalem, would never happen. David Hacohen of Mapai interrupted him: 'If the majority decides, it will'. To which Begin countered: 'It won't happen. You once voted against the establishment of the state, but the state was founded'. Begin's comment provoked an uproar and irritated Prime Minister Ben-Gurion. 'If we vote, it will happen', he shot back. 'We voted to sink the Altalena, and we got what we wanted'.⁵⁵ Surprisingly, there was no reaction, either from Begin or from any other Herut MK – this at a time when Begin and his colleagues responded instinctively to every comment that was made, even the most trivial. This was also true for biting and cynical remarks inserted into the discussion with the sole purpose of putting down Begin and his party members. So it seems odd that such a statement would be passed over in deafening silence.

There is no evidence that Begin ever brought the Altalena tragedy to the Knesset before 1959. Herut never submitted a motion to discuss the matter and there is no record of Begin ever uttering the name from the rostrum or during committee meetings. The 'watershed moment' in terms of Begin's responses and commentary on Altalena can be traced to two plenary sessions of the Knesset: on January 7 and 12, 1959.

The first session took place following Herut MK Yohanan Bader's motion to establish a parliamentary commission to investigate media reports about a conspiracy to seize power.⁵⁶ Bader's motion was based on a reported remark by Ben-Gurion at a Mapai central committee meeting where he allegedly claimed that prior to the 3rd Knesset elections (July 1955) he had been advised to grab the reins of power by force. Upon hearing this, Herut let out a howl, having been stung so often by similar accusations. In retaliation, Ben-Gurion pulled out the 'Altalena card' claiming that the very act of sending the ship was an attempted putsch. The PM's words created an uproar in the hall and drew a round of heckling from Herut and Begin himself. When Begin took the floor to respond, he broke new ground. For the first time he publicly spoke about the Altalena and acknowledged his silence. He apologised on both scores. He and his party had been under attack, he explained, and Ben-Gurion had privately requested that he refrain from dwelling on the past:

This is a fact you cannot deny, because we wanted to talk with you about the past – about everything that happened – but you asked us not to, and I think it made sense not to spend our time in the Knesset lingering on what is over and done. The state was born; we have a parliament; there were different approaches on establishing a state. Various battles were fought, and we shared some very rough moments, the two of us, even threats. So should the Knesset sit here now discussing some past event based on malicious distortions because it suits you? Look how you have taken advantage of this forum today to distract us from a concrete parliamentary proposal by introducing a warped version of something that happened in the past, although you yourself requested a moratorium for certain very personal reasons.⁵⁷

Begin's attempt at public self-justification shows how important the Altalena episode was to him, and how imperative it was to explain why he had kept silent on the matter. Perceived by his men as a person who fought for the truth, he had to come up with some line of defence, all the more so in the face of the accusations against his movement and a deep sense of persecution that cut his followers to the quick.

Epilogue

Looking at Knesset debates over the years, one can see how different narratives of the Altalena affair evolved. These narratives were

reinforced by periodic repetition but were unsubstantiated. Begin became etched in the public mind as someone who fought for the appointment of a commission of inquiry, though he never said a word about Altalena for ten years. Ben-Gurion's Knesset provocations never wore down Begin's vow of silence, in contrast to his ready response to other historic controversies discussed at the time (notably the German reparations). Even after Likud's rise to power in 1977 Begin didn't take serious steps to pursue legal or investigative action despite declaring such intentions earlier. By way of comparison, he did appoint a commission of inquiry to investigate the murder of Haim Arlosoroff, for which the dominant Labour movement had long accused the Revisionist movement.

The tough questions do not end there. What about Galili's role? What exactly did he tell Ben-Gurion? Did the strained relations between him and Ben-Gurion influence the course of events? Did Ben-Gurion take advantage of the situation to promote other political agendas? Why are Ben-Gurion's remarks about an unauthorised mediator and Galili's denials consistently ignored? Similarly, Gruenbaum's involvement in the negotiations, which linked the Altalena affair to Jerusalem, has yet to be studied.

From the available evidence it seems that the actual putsch was directed against Begin, but he was not fully with it during these critical moments. Paradoxically, ETZEL, apparently unwittingly, became a tool in the hands of figures in the Israeli political system seeking to promote agendas not necessarily connected to this organisation or its leaders. Raising the sunken ship from the depths of the Mediterranean, for which certain groups are pushing, will not solve the riddle. In the end, the phantom narrative will be determined by whatever party is in power. The real answers are probably buried somewhere in the Israel State Archives and the archives of the Israeli secret service, which are still off-limits to the public and the scholarly community. Meanwhile, it seems that the ghost of the Altalena will continue to intermittently haunt the Israeli public sphere.

Notes

1. <https://www.mako.co.il/news-israel/local/Article-d5d335b5deab031004.htm>.
2. Galnoor and Blander, *The Political System of Israel*, vol. 1, 44; Sprinzak, "Altalena"; Shapira, *The Army Controversy*; Medding, *The Development of the Israeli Political System*; Pedahzur, *The Israeli response to Jewish extremism*, 17; and Pedahzur, *The Triumph of Israel's Radical Right*, 24–6.
3. Shapiro, *Chosen to Command*, 76; Shindler, *Israel, Likud and the Zionist Dream*, 36–8; Weitz, *From Militant Underground to Political Party*; and Segev, *David Ben-Gurion*, 414.
4. Shilon, *I am Responsible*; and Zamir, "Bid for Altalena."

5. For example, Lankin, *The Story of the Altalena Commander*; Katz, *Inside the Miracle*; and Vazeh, *Hamesima – Rekhes*.
6. Nakdimon, *Altalena*; and Brener, *Altalena*.
7. Nakdimon, *Altalena*, 126–36.
8. *Ben-Gurion Dairy*, May 16, 1948, Ben-Gurion archives.
9. Weitz, *The First Step to Power*, 14–15; and Sofer, *Begin*, 72–8.
10. Gruweis-Kovalsky, “Between ideology and reality.”
11. Katz, *Inside the Miracle*, 398–9.
12. Begin, *The Revolt*, 212–13; Sofer, *Begin*, 72–8; and Weitz, *The First Step*, 21–4.
13. Testimony of Avraham Assaf (Rubin) and others, K-4 10/20. Jabotinsky Institute Archive (Tel Aviv); Brener, *Altalena*, 116–9; Sherman, *Like Fire*, 148; Vazeh, *Hamesima – Rekhes*, 212; and Nakdimon, *Altalena*, 134–6.
14. Begin, *The Revolt*, 213; Vazeh, *Hamesima – Rekhes*, 207; Katz, *Inside the Miracle*, 398; Brener, *Altalena*, 110–11; letter of Israel Galili on Altalena, December 4, 1974. O. Gruweis private archive (henceforth: Galili letter).
15. Begin, *The Revolt*, 243.
16. *Ibid.*, 242.
17. *Ibid.*, 245.
18. See, for example, *Maariv*, August 29, 1988.
19. Brener, *Altalena*, 110–16.
20. Shifris, *Israel Galili*, 41–64; and Shapira, *The Army controversy*, 41.
21. Vahze, *Hamesima – Rekhes*; and Brener, *Altalena*, 110–19.
22. Shapira, *The Army Controversy*, 13–24.
23. Session 14573, January 12, 1959, *Divrei Haknesset*, 830 (Hebrew).
24. Segev, *David Ben-Gurion*, 410–11.
25. *Haaretz*, January 13, 1959; and *Yediot Ahronot*, January 14, 1959 (Hebrew).
26. Menachem Begin, “Secession, the Saison and Altalena,” *Ma’ariv*, August 13, 1971 (Hebrew).
27. Galili letter.
28. *Davar*, June 3, 7, 1977, August 18, 1978; and *Maariv*, June 3, 1977.
29. *Davar*, August 18, 1978; *Maariv*, January 23, 1980; and Nakdimon, *Altalena*, 470.
30. *Davar*, October 14, 1977, August 18, 1978.
31. *Davar*, September 22, 26 1978.
32. Nakdimon, “The Myth and the Lie.”
33. Begin, *The Revolt*, 247–8; Brener, *Altalena*, 120–8; Vazeh, *Hamesima Rekhes*, 216–21; Hagana Archive, “Shai report, June 1948,” B-112/1230, 42; Jabotinsky Institute Archive, “Monroe Fein’s Testimony,” K-4-9/20, June 1948; and *Hamashkif*, June 23, 1948.
34. Jabotinsky Institute Archive, “Testimony of Avraham Assaf (Rubin), ETZEL district commander,” 1957, K-4 10/20.
35. *Maariv*, October 18, 1988.
36. *Ibid.*, March 16, 1966.
37. Hacohen, “Witness to the Altalena Negotiations.”
38. *Maariv*, March 16, 1966.
39. *Davar*, April 16, 1965.
40. Krinitzi, *Bekoakh Hama’aseh*.
41. Jabotinsky Institute Archive, “Eliezer Livneh’s Testimony,” TS12-4; *Maariv*, April 24, 1966.

42. Ben-Gurion, *Yoman Hamilhama*, Vol. I, December 15, 1947, p. 47, Vol. II, July 15–September 20, 1948; Jabotinsky Institute Archive, “Gruenbaum-Shapira proposal for dismantling ETZEL,” March 11, 1948, K-4 1/35.
43. Central Zionist Archives, “Letter by Attorney Abraham Schubert to Yitzhak Gruenbaum,” February 25, 1964, S/127-555/2.
44. Ben-Gurion, *Yoman Hamilhama*, Vol. II, September 20, 1948.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Maariv*, April 30, 1968; *Davar*, December 2, 1979.
47. Brener, *Altalena*, 127.
48. Vazeh, *Hamesima – Rekhes*, 216–21.
49. Nakdimon, *Altalena*, 229; Begin, *The Revolt*, 247–8; Jabotinsky Institute Archive, “Agreement between the IDF and ETZEL commanders in the Kfar Vitkin district, June 22, 1948,” K4-1/35.
50. Begin, *The Revolt*, 248–9; and Nakdimon, *Altalena*, 229.
51. Begin, *The Revolt*, 249–50; “Monroe Fein’s Testimony,” Jabotinsky Institute Archive.
52. Begin, *The Revolt*, 249–50; “Monroe Fein’s Testimony,” Jabotinsky Institute Archive; Nakdimon, *Altalena*, 310–11; and Grosbard, “Personality Study of Menachem Begin,” 212–19.
53. *Divrei haknesset*, vol. 3, catalogues 1–10 (Second Session), November 7, 1950–January 17, 1949, 411; and *Herut*, January 4, 1950.
54. *Divrei haknesset*, 383.
55. *Ibid.*, 411.
56. Session 1812, January 7, 1959, *Divrei haknesset*, 797–805.
57. *Ibid.*, 804.

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Notes on contributor

Ofira Gruweis Kovalsky is a Senior Lecturer at Zefat Academic College and an Associate Researcher at the Herzl Institute, University of Haifa, Israel.

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