

The Training of the Jewish Legion at Fort Edward during the First World War

Sara Beanlands
Royal United Services Institute
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* My presentation this morning will explore a brief, yet significant, episode in the history of the First World War: the training of the Jewish Legion at Fort Edward in 1918. Yet, this is not a typical war story. It is a history born not on the battlefields of the Great War - but under canvas on the grassy slopes of a small Nova Scotia town. It is a story not of military prowess, but one of identity formation and social transformation. It is a story that, until recently, has rarely been told.

Each day, thousands of people will pass by the old eighteenth-century blockhouse of Fort Edward, standing guard atop the shrub-covered hill. Most, however, will be unaware that this is the backdrop against which a group of displaced immigrant Jewish men were converted into the first modern Jewish military formation. Few will realize that here emerged a national marching army of a utopian state that existed, for the moment, solely within their political imaginations. And fewer still will appreciate its influence on a man who arrived as almost a folk hero but left as a soldier and leader, destined to become the most important Jewish statesman in modern history.

*In 1966, Mr. Robert Dimock, then Mayor of the Town of Windsor, Nova Scotia, wrote a letter to David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of the State of Israel.

Although we don't know where the original letter is, neither do we know why it was written nor what it said, we do know Ben-Gurion's response, a copy of which is on display at the West Hants Historical Society in Windsor. This short but responsive message, torn from the pages of his enumerated notebook, preserves the words and thoughts of the founder of modern Israel and is, therefore, worth reciting in its entirety:

Dear Mr. Robert C. Dimock,

I was delighted to have a letter from the Mayor of Windsor. In Windsor, one of the great dreams of my life – to serve as a soldier in a Jewish Unit to fight for the liberation of the Land of Israel (as we always called Palestine) became a reality, and I will never forget Windsor where I received my first training as a soldier, and where I became a Corporal. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your kindness in sending me a Windsor letter. Yours, D. Ben-Gurion

*Ben-Gurion was 80 years old when he wrote these words, and it would seem the Mayor's letter had offered him some pause for reflection. Perhaps, in the closing years of his extraordinary life as a revolutionary leader who shaped the political foundations of modern Jewish existence, this letter carried with it not only the postmark of Windsor, Nova Scotia, but receding memories of his youth. *Whatever his reason for responding, it is clear Ben-Gurion maintained a lasting affection for Windsor, where, nearly a half century earlier, he and his Jewish compatriots anxiously awaited their call to arms.

* Of course, a great number of non-conscripted Jews responded to the British appeal in 1914, and many served and died on the battlefields of Europe alongside their non-Jewish compatriots. Orthodox Jews seeking to enlist, however, had resisted because of the requirement to eat kosher food and to be among other Jews for prayer. The Jewish Legion was thus seen as a chance for Jewish immigrants to join the British forces without compromising religious beliefs. Zionist ideology and the liberation of the Promised Land were also strong motivating factors, and the expansion of the war to involve Turkey and Palestine provided the opportunity for service that furthered Zionist and British military objectives alike.

The idea of the Jewish Legion was revolutionary, if not controversial, and it did not happen overnight. Its origins can be traced to a meeting in the autumn of 1914, * which included Zionist activist Vladimir Jabotinsky and Joseph Trumpeldor, a former officer in the tsarist army, who established the Zion Mule Corp in 1915 – seen as the ideological beginning of the Israel Defense Forces. * Although the Mule Corps, which engaged in fierce fighting on the Gallipoli Peninsula, was a symbolic, if not tangible, step towards the realization of the Jewish Legion, efforts to mobilize would fail until 1917.

In August of that year, the formation of a Jewish regiment was officially announced and shortly thereafter the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, considered to be the official endorsement of a Jewish national home – an event that would shape the development of the Jewish Legion and Ben-Gurion's world for years to come.

Although it would be easy to assume, based on Ben-Gurion's letter to Mayor Dimmock, that he had been, from the beginning, a steadfast supporter of the formation of the Jewish Legion, this was not the case. * In fact, he had been an outspoken opponent of the initial scheme and, while studying law in Constantinople in 1912, had actually volunteered for service in the Turkish army, along with his close friend, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi. But when Ottoman authorities began expelling Jewish residents in 1914, he found himself in a Jerusalem prison awaiting deportation to Alexandria. He eventually arrived in New York, where there were already over one million resident Jews, comprised mostly of first-generation immigrants from Eastern Europe, and three years later, having definitively switched sides, he boarded a train in Boston, bound for Nova Scotia. * He was now a recruit of the newly formed 39th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, one of four Jewish battalions, which collectively became known as the "Jewish Legion".

Following the Balfour Declaration, enrolment efforts began in earnest. * In North America, recruitment centres were established in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago and Montreal, with troops being drawn from across the continent, as far south as Argentina and Brazil. Contingents, some numbering as many as 500 men, left the recruiting centres at regular three-week intervals, bound for Windsor, Nova Scotia. The first unit left New York on 27 February 1918 as part of the newly-formed 39th Battalion and in May, the first group of Jews residing in Canada joined the American recruits at Camp Fort Edward. * Ben-Zvi, who would later serve as the Jewish state's second President, left for Windsor with the fourth group in early May, while Ben-Gurion enlisted with the fifth group, leaving Boston later that month. **Note photograph**

The formation of the Legion caused great excitement, particularly in the United States, where lively celebrations attended the departure of volunteers from every city. Before boarding the train, Ben-Gurion and his fellow recruits marched through the streets of Boston accompanied by music, flags and cheering crowds. *They were received with enthusiasm at every stop and when a train carrying a group of volunteers passed through Bangor, Maine, it was flagged down to enable the crowd that lined the tracks opportunity to embrace the Legionnaires. For those living in immigrant enclaves in the United States and Canada, this public display of appreciation contributed to a sense of empowerment among individual legionnaires, greatly improved the Patriotic image of the American Jew, and led to the development of a collective sense of belonging. These experiences were also the basis for bonding among the recruits.

As a leader in the Zionist movement, Ben-Gurion was already well known in Jewish circles, and in a letter to his wife, Paula, he described his experience as the train pulled into Portland: “The moment I came out of the carriage, and the crowd saw me, they lifted me up and shouted ‘Hurray!’, and when I managed with difficulty to free myself, they caught hold of me again and carried me high above the heads of hundreds of people who had gathered next to the railway station”.

It took three days to travel by train from Boston to Windsor, with stops in Newport, Portsmouth, Bangor and Saint John. On board the crowded transport, the mood was also one of enthusiasm, and Ben-Gurion was amazed that his new comrades did not tire of singing, dancing and playing jokes.

*At ten o'clock, the train rolled into the Windsor railway station, where the reception was somewhat more subdued. Ben Zvi and a number of Legionnaires were there to greet the new recruits and marched them in military formation to the Imperial Recruiting and Training Depot at Camp Fort Edward. They were accompanied by some applause, but as Ben-Gurion noted, without any singing. Nevertheless, the presence of Ben-Gurion was greatly anticipated and news of his arrival spread quickly. "From all sides they came to shake my hand", he wrote, "The whole camp knew I was coming, and they waited for me impatiently".

*Fort Edward was established by British forces in 1750 and functioned as a military centre throughout the Seven Years War. Although it remained in service during the American Revolution and the War of 1812, its strategic importance steadily declined and the facilities gradually fell into ruin; by the late nineteenth century, most of the original buildings had disappeared. Following the outbreak of the war, however, Fort Edward became one of numerous facilities across the country used to train local recruits for the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF).

When the 112th Overseas* Infantry Battalion departed for England in July of 1916, it became the first local military unit from Fort Edward to go to war since the American Revolution.

The role of Fort Edward expanded in late September of 1917, when the Imperial Recruits Depot, which was initially located at Camp Aldershot in Kentville, was transferred to Halifax to accommodate non-Canadian volunteers for the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). Recruits were quartered in the Halifax Armouries under the command of Major John Walkley, formerly in charge of the Jewish Legion recruiting centre in Boston.* But, two months later the

disastrous Halifax Explosion resulted in major damage to the Armoury building and the Imperial Recruiting Depot was moved to Windsor, with Major Walkley still in command.

*When Ben-Gurion arrived on the first of June 1918, the only remaining structures of the original fort were the Blockhouse and the Officer's Quarters. But there were already about 400 Legionnaires in camp and as he cast his gaze across the large open compound, there were bell tents "stretched as far as the eye could see". *

*He was now a bonified soldier, Private D. Ben-Gurion, No. 3831, Platoon 11 of the Jewish Legion. I would just like to draw your attention to this image for a moment. This is one of the most famous photographs of David Ben-Gurion. I am certain that it was taken in Windsor, where he first received his uniform. You can see the emblem of the Jewish Legion, the Star of David, on his arm, but by the time Ben-Gurion departed for overseas, he had been promoted and would have had additional stripes designating his rank - so it must have been taken after he received his uniform but before his promotion – and that could only have been in Windsor. * Ben Zvi

*His enthusiasm for his new surroundings was immediate and palpable: "My first day in camp has been so rich in experiences and fresh impressions that I hardly know where to begin", he shared in a letter to his wife, whom he had married only a few short months before his departure. "Everything here is better, more pleasant and more interesting than I thought it would be or expected ... True enough there is an iron military discipline here. Yet for some reason I feel myself much freer and less inhibited than I have ever done before."

Evidently, the “iron military discipline” to which he referred was delivered by a Sergeant-Major who was a “gold mine of unprintable English”. In the words of one Jewish recruit:

I am indebted to him for a world of picturesque and inimitable abuse which I had known to abound in the Russian language, but whose existence in the mother tongue of Shakespeare and Tennyson I had not suspected. That first lesson enriched my vocabulary far more than my knowledge of drill.

*Indeed, the Sergeant-Major, who I believe was Major WFD Bremner, second in command at Fort Edward, to whom I will return, was rather unorthodox, even beyond his military profanity, as revealed in Harry Cohen’s recollection of his first line-up in Windsor:

An old major had charge of the camp... I remember our first line-up. When the Major had to pick a leader, he called me, and asked if I’d ever had any military training. I answered “No”. “You’ll do,” he said. The sergeant, a tall Canadian, gave me three stripes to sew on my sleeve, and when I asked why he picked me, he said: “You are the only one who stood like a soldier should,” ... That’s how I became Sergeant Cohen”.

Life at Fort Edward differed little from that in other transit training camps. Activities included basic drill, marching formations, physical training, and occasional fatigue duty outside the fort. The daily routine began at 05:30 with reveille, followed by roll-call and a wash and mandatory shave before breakfast. The men were then engaged in

physical training, followed by military drill until lunch. There was more training in the afternoon, after which there was mail call and dinner. In the evening, there were special courses for non-commissioned officers, while regular troops were able to stroll the streets of Windsor or visit the YMCA.

*The Legionnaires included men from all walks of life, with a broad range of backgrounds and personalities. Indeed, the main feature of the Jewish recruits was their heterogeneity. As Roman Freulich recorded in his memoirs, "Most were ardent Zionists, but among them were also men who were seeking adventure, running away from their wives or from their creditors. The caliber of men ranged from high to low: from gentle idealists who hated war, to men of violent passions who enjoyed the idea of combat and danger".

Others were simply naïve, as was the case of one young soldier who was recruited in a Chicago coffee shop. Although he had no idea where Promised Land was, nor did he have any understanding of Zionism, the recruiting officers enticed him into service by assuring that his name would be written in a Golden Book, covered with precious stones and kept in magnificent palace in Paris. This appealed to the young man and he signed up on the spot. But his experience was disappointing, if not disillusioning, and, in the end, he concluded: "I don't care about their Golden Book. I just want to go home."

*With no military tradition for two thousand years, the Jewish recruits found it difficult to adjust to army life. The Legionnaires tents were only "twenty five or thirty feet away from those of the British rookies", yet there was a clear separation between them. There was an "indefinable something" that kept them apart. Elias Gilner, a veteran of the Jewish Legion and soldier at Fort Edward, understood the underlying tension and described the situation in his

book, *War and Hope: A History of the Jewish Legion*”:

We were going toward a homeland while these boys had been sent far away from home. We were pursuing a dream that would infuse new life into a long- dispersed people; they were being driven to chase a myth that was draining their lifeblood away.

Ben-Gurion also observed some animosity in the camp. The Legionnaires, he wrote, “dance and make merry, sing Jewish songs and behave as if they were in the ‘old country’ and not in Canada. The non-Jews sit silently and look on in amazement – and I suppose also in annoyance”. In line with improving physical fitness, and possibly morale, the recruits were encouraged to participate in a variety of sporting events. In early spring of 1918, the local newspaper recorded that the “boys are looking forward to the opening of the playing field, and are already arranging baseball and football teams”. Evidently, the Jewish recruits excelled at baseball, winning by margins that embarrassed their opponents, to the point where, after one lopsided game, a brawl broke out that had to be settled by the officers.

*At the age of 29, Ben-Gurion found military life, the fresh air, and the smell of the grass, all appealed to him, and two weeks after his arrival he felt fully adjusted to the conditions at Fort Edward. “My health is first rate”, he wrote, “I’m tanned, and the skin on my face has peeled off. I’m certainly much healthier than I was before, because of the daily marching ... and the open-air life”. Although most of the volunteers hailed from urban centres and were unaccustomed to strict

military discipline, this physical transformation spread throughout the camp.

*According to Private Louis Fischer, this new environment had “given a new lease of energy to the legionnaires. Sallow cheeks have become ruddy, eyes open and brighten; movements are smarter and snappier... Five hours’ daily drill is a nerve tonic, a muscle developer, an appetizer and a sleep producer. Here we can see what proper and normal living conditions mean to the Jew.”

While their fitness level increased, so too did their complaints about the food. Breakfast constituted white bread and coffee; lunch was soup, a “good helping” of meat and bread, and dinner included bread and butter and coffee or tea. According to one recruit, the sugarless tea contained saltpeter and “tasted like dishwater”. Nevertheless, the discernable improvements to their overall fitness and general well-being served to strengthen their growing sense of unity and purpose.

Take for instance this reflective quote from a young soldier on his first full day at Camp Fort Edward:

At last I reached the place, where my fellow legionnaires were drawn up in two long lines. We were ordered to place ourselves according to size, the tall on the right and the short on the left. Ben-Gurion and I found ourselves side by side fairly close to the extreme left.

When the lines were straight and we had called out our numbers, dawn was slowly breaking through the thick, dark clouds. The bugle sounded. Slowly the Union Jack rose to its masthead, followed by the Canadian flag. Then, slowly, the blue-white colours with the Star of

David started to move up to the top. It was breathtaking, unreal. The flag of the House of Israel, the flag of a people hitherto a pariah among the nations, was going up to assume a place of equality alongside the banners of the great powers of the world.

My throat felt tight. Was the flag up there truly the herald of the Jewish State? I glanced at the man beside me but saw him only through a mist. Little did I imagine that three decades later the rookie in baggy pants now standing at attention next to me would be the one to proclaim the independence of the state of Israel.

For me, this is such a profound image. Indeed, I believe that there on the slopes of Fort Edward, in Windsor, Nova Scotia, there was an awareness that they were in the presence of something special – in the grasp of a social revolution that would change the course of history.

*In general, there was a good rapport between the Jewish Legionnaires and the local community of Windsor. In the words of Gilner, the townspeople and the farmers in the surrounding country were “sympathetic and considerate”: “Once, on a warm day,” he recalled, “when we were returning from an arduous assignment, our party stopped at a farmhouse to ask for a drink of water. In no time at all the farmer appeared with a bucket full of foaming fresh milk.”

The arduous assignment was likely a reference to the fierce forest fires that raged in the district for over a week in the summer of 1918. The Jewish Legion was instrumental in saving a large number of farms and homesteads from destruction.” One of these farms was Castle Frederick, located in Falmouth and the home of the infamous Major W.F.D. Bremner, According to Major Bremner’s

grandson, Mr. James Bremner, who still lives at Castle Frederick, David Ben-Gurion was among the soldiers who helped fight the fire and was quartered at the farm that still stands today. **Tree stump/holy well – difficulty of saying good bye to troops.**

The townspeople also offered support to the Jewish recruits by marking their customs and special occasions. Perhaps the best example of this was the celebration of the Jewish New Year on 6 September *1918 when 500 Legionnaires held a sit-down banquet in the Windsor Opera House. More than a hundred prominent Canadian and British officers and men were in attendance, as well as the Mayor and other town officials. This was probably the largest kosher dinner held in Nova Scotia to that date.

*Ben-Gurion was already well-known when he arrived at camp and he immediately made his presence known to both his compatriots and superiors. He negotiated with Major Walkley for improvements at the camp and was surprised to find the commander approved their requests at once. This resulted in an overall improvement in the meals and their own kosher kitchen. He also improvised a library and a place to write letters in the camp itself, consisting of a large tent with a few tables and a cupboard for books. The willingness to accommodate these requests reflected the positive attitude held by the senior officers towards the Jewish soldiers. According to the Major, “everything possible was done so as not to interfere with their strict religious views”, although this treatment did not go unnoticed by the British recruits, who complained that the Jewish soldiers were given special privileges.

*Ben-Gurion's status in camp also brought him more responsibility than the average soldier. "My popularity here makes things difficult", he wrote, "Almost nothing happens in camp which is not brought to me". This popularity may have prompted the Sergeant-Major to suggest he be promoted, only thirteen days after his arrival. But Ben-Gurion strongly objected, explaining that he was a representative of the company in Windsor and that as a private he had greater authority among the men than he would have if he became a corporal. The sergeant replied that he understood, and so it came as a surprise when Ben-Gurion learned, later that same day, that an order had been published announcing his promotion to corporal.

"I have not agreed to take this post", he complained, "and unless they force me to accept it because of military discipline, I won't do so". Meanwhile, the camp was buzzing with the news of his promotion and his refusal, which could only have enhanced his moral authority among the men. Three days later, he seemed resigned to the fact that, whether he liked it or not, he could not remain a private, and on June 15 reluctantly wrote that "by next week, I'll probably be a corporal".

Given his reference to the rank of corporal in his letter to Mayor Dimock, one can assume that, despite his initial apprehension, he later took pride in this achievement. And in fact, he seems to have enjoyed the intellectual stimulation that accompanied his promotion. "I have become a student again", he wrote, "But this time I am being given lessons not in school or university but underneath the blue skies, sitting in the green grass in an open field... We learn in a short time what privates take months to pick up".

*With each passing day, his influence and abilities grew – and we begin to see some of the hallmarks, in terms of leadership style and acumen, that Ben-Gurion would carry with him for the rest of his life. As I mentioned previously, the diverse nature of the Jewish troops, in terms of their social class, educational background and personal motivations, was a distinctive characteristic of the Legion at Camp Fort Edward. Ben-Gurion understood this and it offered, consciously or otherwise, the opportunity to refine his leadership style, his rhetoric and his actions. “In this camp”, he wrote, “there are all the types to be found among the Jewish people, from the most lofty-minded idealists and the highly educated to coarse and evil-minded individuals, born criminals...There are also intrigues and insults, and some of the Legionnaires seem to respect nothing, neither God nor Satan. What is strange is that the only person in camp whom they respect and will listen to is yours truly.” ...Because of this they come to me every moment of the day with a complaint or a request, until I wish sometimes that I was just an ordinary soldier and that no one would bother me”.

By July 9, he had been promoted again to full Corporal. If he had arrived at the train station in Windsor as a popular folk hero, here, at Fort Edward, he was transforming himself into a leader. He demonstrated organizational ability, adaptation to the military structure, diligence and perseverance, verified by his influence on both the men with whom he trained and the superiors under which he served. *When the troops noticed that the Jewish flag was not flying with those of Canada, Britain and Australia for the 1918 Dominion Day parade through Windsor, Ben-Gurion did not hesitate to approach the Major and demand this oversight be corrected, and, of course, the Major obliged at once.

The experience was transformative for the troops as well. The notion that formerly displaced immigrants were fighting for the Promised Land, and the consistency of this notion with the overall aims of the allies of the First World War, promoted the development of a unique Jewish identity. Fort Edward was the point of departure for all North American troops of the Jewish legion and, by the time they left, this group of diverse men had united to become the foundation of Jewish national aspirations in both Israel and North America.

Take, for example, one unit, who set sail for England in early June, at which time the soldiers already perceived themselves as a national army. As one recruit recalled, “our Jewish army went marching toward the railway station, lifting our three beloved flags: the Jewish, the American and the British. We marched proudly, singing national songs. On the way we received blessing from the local inhabitants, including women who wiped their tears”. A similar scene played out on the streets of Halifax, where the Sergeant-Major marched in the first row, carrying the Torah scrolls of the Legion... and were applauded by all the residents of Halifax as they marched past.

Ben Gurion spent little over a month in Windsor. His final letter from Fort Edward is dated July 9, 1918, in which he states that he will be leaving the next morning. For weeks, he had been anticipating his call, and although time had passed quickly, he had grown impatient. Notwithstanding the briefness of his sojourn in Nova Scotia, it was a critical moment in the life of this young soldier who picked Nova Scotia apples in his spare time for pocket money; a period that shaped his understanding of leadership, won him the commitment of his men, and prepared him for the arduous odyssey that lay ahead.

*Upon leaving Fort Edward, members of the 39th battalion went to the Regimental Depot at Crown Hill barracks, near Plymouth in southern England, which was the permanent holding and training area for the Royal Fusiliers. Here, the Legionnaires received 13 weeks of additional, and more rigorous, military training prior to being posted to conflict areas in Palestine.

Although the first Jewish contingent from North America reached England in early April of 1918, the recruitment cycle was extended so that some of the Jewish volunteers were, in fact, still receiving their initial training at Fort Edward at the time of the armistice with Turkey. Indeed, the training depot would close on November 9, 1918, ten days after the armistice with turkey.

*From England, they were sent to various military holding facilities outside Cairo, where members of the Jewish battalions received additional training in desert warfare before being sent to Palestine. Eventually, both the 38th and 39th battalions were deployed to the front lines and fought in General Allenby's battles in the Jordan Valley during the latter stages of the war, including the Battle of Megiddo, widely considered to have been one of the final and decisive victories of the Ottoman front. Members of both battalions were among the British troops that marched into Jerusalem with Turkish prisoners in the fall of 1918.

*In addition to marginalization and mistreatment by Allenby, who displayed continual hostility to the Jewish volunteers, the Legion suffered significant losses during the campaign in Palestine. For example, by the time it reached Jerusalem in October of 1918, the 38th

battalion had been reduced from an original complement of 1,000 to six officers and 150 soldiers. While some of the loss resulted from men killed or wounded in action, the major drain on human life was attributable to malaria, which was pervasive in the region. They, nevertheless, sacrificed their lives.

Demobilization started shortly after the armistice with Germany, at which time the 39th battalion was disbanded. By April of 1921 the First Judean Regiment was down to 32 men and a month later the last small group of Legionnaires was released, thus marking the end of the Jewish Legion.

*On 14 May 1948, the British colonial mandate over Palestine ended and David Ben-Gurion, then head of the Jewish Agency, proclaimed the establishment of the independent State of Israel, becoming the first Jewish state in 2,000 years. The formation of the Jewish Legion was, in the words of Martin Watts “a transitional moment between Jewry’s existence solely as a Diaspora and the formation of a Jewish nation state being placed on the international political agenda”. Its historical significance, however, lies more in its symbolism to the Jewish people, than its military contributions during the First World War.

*At the 50th anniversary celebrations, held in London, Bernard Joseph, a Canadian volunteer who trained at Fort Edward and went on to become a prominent cabinet minister in Israel, expressed the following: “The Jewish legion was a living symbol of the will and fervent aspirations of the Jews to national revival. The very idea of establishment of a Jewish Legion ... was in the nature of a revolution in the life of the Jewish people dispersed as it was among the nations of the world...The recruitment and actual existence of such a Jewish

Legion was decisive proof of the existence of a Jewish People, since it entailed, in a measure, the normalization of the people.”

Although the initial military training the Jewish Legionnaires received in Nova Scotia was not unique, Fort Edward and the Town of Windsor played a significant role in the development of a Jewish national identity. The training of the Jewish Legion in Windsor was a significant event in the history of the First World War, in the history of David Ben-Gurion, of Canada and of Nova Scotia, but it is most significant to the Jewish people around the world. **Post script: Dimock Letter and Jewish Legion Centennial Society – Col. Sussman – defence attache form the Israeli embassy - first time star of David – September 23.**