9

Military Doctrine and Innovation

When the IDF had its beginnings in 1948 under the direction of the country’s first prime minister and minister of defense, David Ben Gurion, the British Army was both the detested ex-occupier that had striven to disarm the Jews as they faced deadly attacks, and also Ben Gurion’s favored model of an apolitical army of the entire nation.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Under British rule the Jews had gradually built up not an underground army but rather politicized militias. The *Haganah* was by far the largest, controlled by Ben Gurion’s *Mapai* social-democratic party.[[2]](#endnote-2) Its war-winning elite force, the *Palmach*, was mostly led by members of the more leftwing *Achdut Haavoda* party, including future prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and the outstanding field commander of the War of Independence, Yigal Allon.[[3]](#endnote-3) Their ideological rival, the *Irgun,* was led by the rightwing “Revisionist” party.[[4]](#endnote-4)

As the preeminent leader of the *Mapai* party that controlled the numerically greatly superior *Haganah*, Ben Gurion could in theory have made himself a dictator, given that his party’s militia controlled most Jewish areas of the country.[[5]](#endnote-5) Nevertheless, for Ben Gurion political control of the *Haganah* represented not an advantage to be exploited but rather a dangerous confusion of roles—he wanted entirely apolitical armed forces for the new democratic state. As minister of defense as well as prime minister he therefore promoted those who had volunteered to join the wartime British Army rather than the recently victorious commanders of the *Palmach,* “a political youth movement in arms” that despised military formalities and even proper uniforms, whose pre-1948 inspiration was the Soviet-directed partisans who had fought behind German lines. Ben Gurion by contrast wanted regular forces of disciplined, uniformed soldiers lead by professional officers, just as in the British Army.[[6]](#endnote-6)

But when it came to fighting methods, particularly for the ground forces, not even Ben-Gurion was impressed by the decidedly undynamic British style of war, which relied on vastly superior firepower—artillery barrages and air bombardment—to defeat the enemy by sheer grinding attrition, before step-by-step advances of armor and infantry to seize the ground won by firepower. This method was entirely useless for the Israelis because it required greatly superior forces, with three-to-one or greater numerical advantages in men and firepower, just as at the Battle of El Alamein, and indeed in almost every British victory against the Germans. Therefore, while the IDF was to copy the nonpolitical ways and organizational ideas of the British Army, it could not possibly copy its fighting style and operational methods, because it had to be able to win as it had won in 1948, even when inferior in numbers and firepower. Only agile, maneuver warfare could circumvent, infiltrate, dislocate, confuse, and disrupt greatly superior enemy forces by bold surprise actions or by acting and reacting faster than the enemy could. Obviously, this requires fast-thinking commanders willing to take risks—the kind of people who lead innovation in peacetime.

The *Palmach* commanders were the right ones for the task; their fast and fluid tactics, their bold operational methods in the War of Independence, exemplified maneuver warfare at its best.[[7]](#endnote-7) *Palmach* units had won their battles in 1948-1949 with some heroic, and very costly, hand-to-hand fighting (some by fifteen-year olds), but mostly with bold, fast-moving offensives that outmaneuvered Arab forces that were larger and better equipped at first, but were fatally slowed by rigid, top-down chains of command.[[8]](#endnote-8) In other words, the *Palmach*’s style of war was pitched at the “commando” end of maneuver warfare, reliant more on speed and surprise than firepower or mass—and that remained so even when the combined forces from three separate *Palmach* brigades could mount large operations in the closing months of the war together with regular IDF units.

Although the *Palmach*’s outstanding field commander Yigal Allon, who had led every major campaign of the war, left the IDF after the war to enter politics, other *Palmach* officers remained in the IDF to propagate its ethos and methods. Also, there were other officers who did not belong to the *Palmach* but nevertheless favored its methods, most notably Moshe Dayan, an exemplar of the fast-moving style of war in 1948 as commander of a jeep battalion, then in charge of the 1956 campaign as chief of staff and the 1967 war as minister of defense.

In this early phase of the IDF’s emergence, one inspiration was the fast-moving cavalry of the Red Army at its best during the later phases of the civil war, communicated to the *Palmach* by its most senior figure, Yitzhak Sadeh, a decorated veteran and company commander in the imperial Russian army.[[9]](#endnote-9) Also much admired in the early postwar years was Soviet partisan warfare in German-occupied territories, fought by assorted volunteers under the leadership of Soviet army officers. But only a handful of Jewish partisans survived to arrive in Israel and describe it in any detail, so that it mostly influenced the Palmach’s marching songs and its non-uniforms, including the use of knitted woolen socks as headgear. But most important was the notion that sheer speed in decision and action can outweigh mass; fundamental for the *Palmach,* it remained fundamental for the IDF.

Another source of the *Palmach*’s military culture was the theory and practice of the brilliant eccentric and subsequent field commander Orde Charles Wingate, the rarest of birds as a pro-Jewish British officer in Palestine.[[10]](#endnote-10) Forming a temporary mixed British-Jewish unit for counterguerrilla operations in 1938, he taught his disciples, most notably Yigal Allon and Moshe Dayan, the two outstanding young military leaders of their generation, that enemies are best defeated by sudden raids, with all-important surprise gained by hard-marching at night on unexpected paths or by ambushes that achieve surprise by stealthy positioning and stoic patience.

Wingate’s formula could not be applied by doggedly obedient, let alone reluctant soldiers. It required highly motivated, well-trained, and physically fit fighters, but not many of them, because with surprise even small numbers could win. From this calculation, backed up by the acceptance of strenuous training exercises, still perpetuated in the IDF’s long marches, came the “commando” element in *Palmach* operations, which in turn inspired the IDF’s own raiding culture, begun in a small way with the single Unit 101 but developed over the years into a spectrum of different commando units each specialized in one task or several. Above all, in the IDF the commando element—maneuver warfare at its maximum—is not peripheral as in other armies, because many senior officers are promoted from the commando units.

Thus, two radically different military doctrines were influential in the making of the IDF: the systematic, sometimes ponderous British doctrine that minimized risks but also gains; and the high-risk/high payoff *Palmach* style of maneuver warfare that tried to exploit surprise to defeat many with few. It follows that when outsiders suggested the adoption of some new tactical or operational method, their suggestions could not be rejected out of hand because they collided with two official doctrines that contradicted each other.

As soon the War of Independence ended with the 1949 Armistice, the IDF tried to upgrade the professional education of its (young) senior officers by sending them to European war colleges or to study in universities on occasion. Thus Moshe Dayan, future chief of staff and minister of defense, attended the three-month British Army’s Senior Officers’ School in Devizes in 1952, after he had already commanded forces in war, negotiated an armistice, and headed an area command. Though the personal soldier-servant (“batman”) who woke him up each morning with tea and polished his shoes amazed Dayan, he did rather like the way problems were set and solved by the battle-experienced instructors.[[11]](#endnote-11) Conversely, Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery of El Alamein would sometimes visit Devizes to teach the “Montgomery method” of winning battles, starting with the accumulation of vastly superior artillery, armor, and infantry forces—not very useful for IDF officers who had to learn to fight outnumbered and win.

Other IDF officers sent to British or French staff schools and war colleges were grateful for the diversion at a time when foreign travel was an unattainable luxury for most Israelis, but they reported learning very little that was useful—the suggested tactics and operational methods were much too rigid and bureaucratic for the improvisational Israelis, and presumed weapons and firepower far beyond Israel’s means. Ezer Weizman, already a successful combat pilot and future air commander and president, was sent in 1951 to the Royal Air Force Staff College at RAF Andover, where he too concluded that it was important not to learn from others.[[12]](#endnote-12)

But the young Israeli commanders did learn planning methods, logistic calculations, and orderly staff-work procedures useful for the often too informal, too improvisational IDF. Nor could extreme antipathy completely deny the obvious virtues of that other model, the German style of fast and fluid maneuver warfare, propelled by bottom-up leadership from the front, in turn made possible by the Prussian General Staff invention of supervising but noninterfering higher-echelon headquarters, whose staff officers were only to step in to coordinate separate forces advancing under their own opportunistic leaders if they are about to collide or when they can converge against the enemy. At the time, the most recent expression of that style of warfare was the *Blitzkrieg* campaigns of 1939-1943, in which columns of trucked infantry spearheaded by tanks would advance as rapidly as possible, bypassing any strong local resistance instead of stopping to fight it, unless the enemy could quickly be dispersed by artillery fires or highly focused air attacks.

Although most of the German army of the Second World War consisted of foot infantry and horse-drawn artillery rather than armored forces, while the bombing capacity of the Luftwaffe was not large by later Anglo-American standards, the propaganda of the time shows columns of tanks rushing forward and waves of *Stuka* dive-bombers descending on targets. That misrepresentation was actually the very essence of the *Blitzkrieg,* in which the enemy was to be shocked into retreating pell-mell, with panic making up for the German army’s lack of much armor or firepower. (Once the Russians acquired both in vast amounts, the ruse was over). There were important lessons in this for the IDF, which had to learn to both exploit psychological effects, and also not to rely on them overmuch.

Another dimension to German-style warfare long predated the Nazis and *Blitzkrieg*: the careful cultivation of tactical skills in serious training courses, which was the German army’s most enduring strength, persisting even when firepower superiority and all else were lost. Even in the last weeks of the Second World War, a German infantry unit holding a position that still had some experienced NCOs and enough ammunition for its machine guns was an immovable object even without massive firepower superiority.

More specifically, German tactics had the effect of turning the defensive into something resembling the offensive by seeking every opportunity to counterattack, even if only with a handful of soldiers; on the offensive on the other hand, most important was to find a way to reach behind the enemy force instead of driving it back with frontal attacks. That was the offense/defense doctrine the IDF needed to capitalize on its bright soldiers and the training intensity possible with prolonged military service.

In 1924, long before the IDF was born, three *Haganah* members traveled to Germany to be personally trained by Paul Emil von Lettow Vorbeck, the extraordinary German commander who had been trained as a regular Prussian military officer for warfare in Europe, but then achieved impossible guerrilla victories as commander in East Africa.[[13]](#endnote-13) With German East Africa blockaded from August 1914, von Lettow received no further supplies or reinforcements. Surrender to the superior British forces coming up from South Africa was the only realistic option, but von Lettow counterattacked, to then advance, retreat, and counterattack again many more times during the next four and a half years, surrendering only on November 23, 1918, two weeks after the official German surrender. With a handful of German officers and the African troops he often trained personally throughout the war, von Lettow had successfully waged a war of relentless maneuver, supplying himself by infinite improvisations, including the production of his own gunpowder.

Improvisation, not least coming up with equipment and supplies that would not just be “issued,” was one art von Lettow could teach in spades, along with the central and unusual idea that the offensive was the only proper stance for an inferior force, attributes that both the pre-state Haganah and the early IDF would desperately need. And the 1924 visitors could also learn much from the *Reichswehr*, the post-armistice German army limited by treaty to 100,000 personnel in all (with another 15,000 for the navy) and severely restricted in equipment (no tanks). It had to make much from little, notably by training every soldier to the level of an instructor to make feasible a rapid mobilization of civilians.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The *Haganah’s* own officers’ course began in 1937 under the entirely self-taught Yosef Avidar, who relied on military journals to keep abreast of European military thinking.[[15]](#endnote-15) He envisioned a small army of well-trained leaders, similar to the *Reichswehr*, in which every soldier would be trained at least to the level of a sergeant. Avidar held that the German texts were best, but he also relied on Soviet, British, and Polish publications.[[16]](#endnote-16) Many future leaders of the IDF were Avidar’s trainees, including both Moshe Dayan and Yigal Allon. And though *Haganah* units were very small, Avidar trained his pupils to command battalions and even brigades, which was fortunate because in the 1948 fighting, the newborn IDF went from fighting by platoons of 30 to fighting by combined brigades of thousands in just a few months.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In structuring the IDF’s general staff, its high command, Ben Gurion’s model was again British, but he was also influenced by the recommendations of another foreign influence, the newly retired US Army Colonel Fred Harris-Grunich, who argued for example that the intelligence branch should be separated from the general staff, as in the US Army.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Another influence on the structure of the IDF was the impact of wartime volunteers in the British forces, including those who had become pilots in the Royal Air Force. They pressed for an entirely independent force like the RAF, which was the first air force to become a separate service at a time when armies and navies elsewhere each had their own air branch, and there was no independent air force anywhere. That demand was rejected but as a compromise, the *Heyl Avir*, or Air Corps, was granted a higher status than the artillery or armor because it was allowed to have its own command headquarters, though it remained subordinate to the General Staff. A similar solution was found for the *Heyl Hayam*, the IDF’s Sea Corps.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Everything had to be done on a shoestring and in a great hurry, but the officers who designed the IDF piece by piece were well informed about the organization of the general staffs of Western forces, and tried to pick and choose among their components to design a headquarters organization that would suit the IDF's special circumstances, including the need to rely heavily on reserves and address extreme scarcities.

In September 1947, six months before the establishment of the IDF, a British Army veteran, Major (Ret.) Haim Laskov, set out to translate more than 30 British training manuals, and wrote out course programs based on them.[[20]](#endnote-20) What could not be learned from the British Army was learned from other armies, notably the Swiss and Finnish, for their reserve army model, to which female conscription was added in response to the extreme shortage of fit manpower.

Eventually when some IDF officers visited the US and French armies in the 1950s, they were awed by their magnitude and traditions but unimpressed by their methods.[[21]](#endnote-21) When the IDF started to develop armored forces, interest in German armor operations focused on their methods and tactics in the Western Desert, which resembles the Negev and Sinai in both terrain and climate. Uri Ben Ari, one of the founders of the IDF’s Armored Corps, was born in Berlin and a native German speaker. He read the original German armored warfare manuals and conducted various trials to try to determine if they suited IDF needs.[[22]](#endnote-22) It was mainly because of his work that the IDF adopted, among other things, armored tactics based on German rather than British combat doctrines.[[23]](#endnote-23) Following the establishment of diplomatic relations with Germany in 1965, the IDF even sent – not without hesitation – officers to study at the German staff college.[[24]](#endnote-24) The rapid advance of the IDF’s armored forces into the Sinai in the 1967 war certainly evoked memories of the German *Blitzkrieg*.[[25]](#endnote-25)

As for naval doctrine, Israel needed something rather unusual, because it had no combat vessels at all nor any prospect of acquiring any, while Egypt had several. As noted earlier, largely because of Yohai Ben-Nun, an answer was found in Italy’s highly successful Second World War combat frogmen, who used newly invented masks, fins, and air tanks of amateur divers, and their own inventions of manned torpedoes, explosive boats, and magnetic “limpet” mines, to sink several major British warships. Ben-Nun started the *Shayetet* [flotilla] 13 sea commando force, for which he brought Italian war-surplus diving and frogman equipment, along with Italian expert Fiorenzo Capriotti, a veteran of the famed and notorious *Decima MAS* (whose land troops were guilty of many atrocities) with the approval of Ben Gurion.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Capriotti started training his Israeli pupils with the simplest technique: explosive boats, where the trick was to keep steering at the target vessel, only jumping off at the last minute. Before the training was complete, the pupils put their skills to the test on October 22, 1948, when the Egyptian flagship *Amir Farouq* and an escorting vessel were detected sailing off the Gaza shore. Ben-Nun and three other Capriotti pupils went into action, sinking the Amir Farouq with its 500 crew members, and severely damaging the escort vessel. Capriotti had very much wanted to join in, but his pupils refused, to his great frustration.[[27]](#endnote-27) Ben-Nun, who drove the boat, was to continue as Israel’s naval innovator by conceptualizing a navy consisting of small but highly capable missile boats armed with the *Gabriel* missile he initiated.

Thus, with British military traditions, German maneuver warfare, Italian asymmetrical naval warfare, Wingate’s commando methods, and homegrown variations of all of the above, the IDF did not start off with a coherent military doctrine—and it would never acquire one. Nor did the leading minds of the IDF ever subscribe to the idea that long-term planning, based on forecasts of the strategic environment ten years out and more, could guide the development of the IDF. In the unending turmoil of the Middle East, even five-year plans are soon overtaken by events, so that any multiyear programs mandated by the mechanics of procurement soon require changes and adaptations—the IDF slogan that “plans are merely a basis for changes” is certainly validated by the record. In 2003 a five-year force-building plan was initiated but after the 2006 Second Lebanon War most of it was scrapped to pursue a completely different focus, but that plan was stopped halfway because of funding problems. Following a period of indecision, a new plan was formed that also incurred financing problems just being remedied when the 2011 Arab upheavals took away the Syrian military threat and largely changed the Arabian scene. That in turn prompted a new plan resembling the 2003 plan, until the Gaza fighting in the summer of 2014 revealed the plan’s limitations, eventually prompting an all-new “Gideon” plan of radical innovations launched in July 2015, followed in 2019 with a new plan, “Tnufa,” to exploit emerging technological capabilities.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Without a coherent military doctrine, and without force-building plans that last long enough to matter, there is no controlling set of ideas, an absence that leaves some uneasy but certainly leaves the door wide open for new ideas in the IDF—ideas from anywhere, which certainly favors innovation.[[29]](#endnote-29)

1. David Ben Gurion was leader of the pre-independence Zionist community as chairman of its largest political party *Mapai* and Israel’s first prime minister in the formative years. He was, relentlessly, a statist among ideologues. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Acronym for *Mifleget poalei eretz Israel,* "Party of the Workers of the Land of Israel.” It dominated pre-independence Jewish politics, policies, and institutions, including the trade unions, the cooperatives, and most collective settlements, and was Israel’s ruling party from independence until 1977. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Achdut Haavoda,* “Labor Unity,” merged into the Marxist-Zionist, pro-Soviet *Mapam* in 1948. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Also known as *ETZEL,* acronym for *Irgun tzvayi leumi,* “National Military Organization.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. By contrast, when Arafat was given control of a Palestinian mini-state, he refused to disband his own party militia, the other party militias also persisted, and no unified army ever emerged. The official security organizations of the Palestinian Authority are all controlled by the Fatah party to this day. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Luttwak and Horowitz, *The Israeli Army* (London: Allen Lane, 1975), 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the US, British and Israeli Armies*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2011), 84-85. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. During Operation “Nachshon” and the subsequent fighting in Latrun, some twenty-five fighters under the age of 18 were killed in action. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. By 1921, Sadeh was in charge of the emerging [*Haganah*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haganah) militia in [Jerusalem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem). In 1937, while commander in the British-salaried [Jewish Settlement Police](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_Settlement_Police), he founded the FO'SH, *Plugot Sadeh* (Field Companies), the first properly trained force in the [*Haganah*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haganah). In 1941, he was a founder of the [*Palmach*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmach), heading it until 1945, when elevated to Chief of Staff of the *Haganah*. In 1948 he formed an “[armored” brigade](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/8th_Armoured_Brigade_%28Israel%29) of the [IDF](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel_Defense_Forces) with 3 tanks. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. There are several, rather contradictory biographies of Wingate. See Peter Mead **“**Orde Wingate and the Official Historians,**”** *Journal of Contemporary History***,** Vol. 14, No. 1 (Jan. 1979), 55-82. He is commemorated in the [Wingate Institute](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wingate_Institute), Israel’s National Centre for Physical Education and Sport and elsewhere in Israel. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Moshe Dayan: *Story of My Life* (Tel-Aviv: Edanim Publishers, 1976), 104. (H). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ezer Weizmann, *On Eagles’ Wings* (Tel-Aviv: Ma’ariv, 1975), 101. (H). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Yehuda Slutsky, *History of the Haganah, Volume II: From Defense to Struggle* (Tel-Aviv: Ma’arachot, 1959), 230-231. (H). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Yigal Shefi, *The Platoon Leader’s Clip: Military Thinking in Officers Courses in the Haganah.*

(Tel-Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1991), 32. (H). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Yosef Avidar (1906-1995), born in Russia, joined the *Haganah* at 19, was a founder of the Ayalon Institute (the *Haganah*’s secret ammunition plant), chief of the Quartermaster Corps 1948-1949, then Commander of the Northern Command and then the Central command. Post-retirement, he became ambassador to the USSR and later Argentina. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Shefi, *Platoon Leader’s Clip,* 56-57. [needs Hebrew translit. title] [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Anita Shapira, *Yigal Allon: Spring of His Life* (Tel-Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, 2004), 141. (H) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Dori Pinkas, "The Sources for the Establishment of the IDF General Staff" (MA Thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 2006), 43. (H) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Zehava Ostfeld, *An Army is Born* (Tel-Aviv: The Ministry of Defense, 1994), 560. (H) [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Mordechai Naor, *Laskov* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1988), 177-178. (H). Laskov was IDF Chief of Staff 1958-1961. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Yitzhak Rabin, *Service Notebook, Part A* (Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Ma’ariv, 1979), 94. (H) [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Aryeh J.S. Nusacher, *Sweet Irony: The German Origins of Israel Maneuver Warfare Doctrine* (MA Thesis, Royal Military College, Canada, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. “About ‘The Ways of Armor”, *Ma’arachot* 104, January 1957, 29-31. (H); Haim Bar Lev, *“*Patterns of Armor Warfare Inside the Margins of Maneuver,” *Ma’arachot* 130, August 1960, 13-15. (H); Uri Ben Ari, *The Battle for Modern Warfare, A Story of Israel's Armour* (Tel-Aviv: Ma'arachot 1998), 50, 102-104, 114. (H). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Martin L. Van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive: A Critical History of the Israeli Defense Forces* (New York: Public Affairs, 1998), 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. BG Julian Thompson, “Foreword,” in Martin L. van Creveld, *Moshe Dayan* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004), 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. The *Decima Flottiglia Motoscafi Armati Siluranti*, aka Xª MAS, the world’s first combat frogman unit. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Nevertheless *Shayetet* 13 kept touch with Fiorenzo Capriotti till his 2009 death. Mike Eldar, *Flotilla 13: The Story of Israel's Naval Commandos* (Tel Aviv: Ma'ariv Book Guild, 1993), 138-152. (H). Gorgio Rachach,"An Honorable Place," *Beyn Hagalim (Between the Waves)*, no. 175, August 1988. (H) And Capriotti’s own *Diario di un fascista alla corte di Gerusalemme (prima puntata).*  [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Motty Basuk, “Chief of Staff, Eizenkot’s plan to revolutionize the IDF’s fund management,” *The Marker*, April 16, 2015. (H); Editorial, “Everything you may have wanted to know about *Tarash* Gideon,” *IDF Online*, July 26, 2015. (H). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. As an example, in 2019 Edward Luttwak visited an IDF training site where he saw how a severe tactical problem was to be solved, a process requiring much courage and skill. He communicated a safer hardware-based modification solution to the escort officer. In short order, the MG in charge of the relevant branch came to his hotel, a conceptual development contract was signed in three days, and the engineering work was underway in months. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)