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A lasting impression

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Tegart's shadow

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• SETH J. FRANTZMAN

The rocks tore my knees as I made my way along the side of the first terrace behind the gully, but somehow I managed to keep crawling, until I reached the wall [near] the second [terrace]. There I stopped, panting for breath. Blood was seeping from my pants, and I knew there was no way I could clamber up the second terrace... I struggled a few yards farther, then stopped dead when I saw, crawling up the slope on my left, one of the boys from my platoon.'

Like many Israelis of his generation, the trauma of the battles of Latrun in 1948 cast a long shadow over the life of former prime minister Ariel Sharon. He came back to it again and again in his autobiography, *Warrior*, from which the quotation is taken. Those who fought at Latrun recalled that during this heinous battle, Holocaust survivors who had just arrived in Israel died fighting for Israel's independence.

Latrun lies on the road to Jerusalem, in the first line of hills that sprout up from the coastal plain, about 32 kilometers southeast of Tel Aviv. It has been the traditional way station for travelers coming from Jaffa to Jerusalem since the time of the Crusades. Today its most prominent feature is the police fortress, which is used as a museum for the Israeli armored corps.

The police fort was the headquarters of the Jordanian Arab Legion in its battles to prevent Jewish forces from reaching a besieged Jerusalem in 1948. It was because of its strategic location that numerous attacks were launched on Latrun, in which around 500 Jews were killed or wounded.

The short, square police fort at Latrun is not unique, but part of a large British building plan that invested huge sums of money in a network of such forts in the 1940s. The forts are often referred to as Tegart forts, after the police expert who encouraged their construction. Today they serve as prisons, police stations, memorials and landmarks throughout Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. They're one of the most fascinating, but often overlooked parts of Israel's diverse landscape.

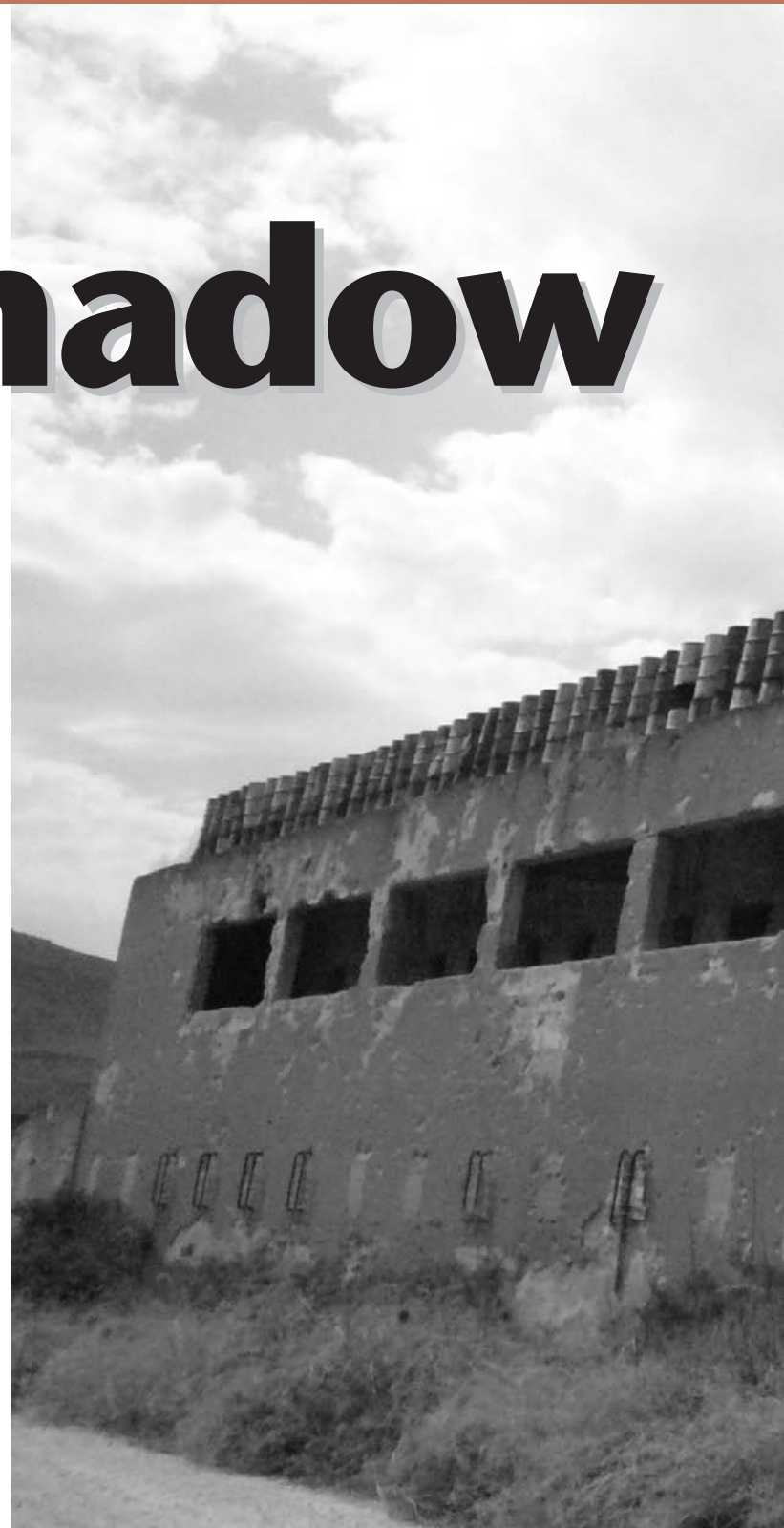
"Every place you walk you see a Tegart fort. And when you ask what it is, you don't receive an answer."

Dr. Gad Kroizer, of Bar-Ilan University's department of Land of Israel Studies and Archeology, is animated as he talks about the forts. Kroizer was born in Jerusalem in 1951 and served in a combat unit in the IDF. When he was searching for his doctoral thesis, he decided to focus on internal security and the police.

"I started to check it and came upon Sir Charles Tegart. I didn't look at him personally, [but] rather his world, how he came [to Palestine], how he came to the [field of] internal security. I looked at the Indian perspective, because he had been in India."

Sir Charles Tegart, the son of an Anglican clergyman, was born in Ireland in 1881. When he was only 19 he was appointed head of the detective department in Calcutta in British India. Dr. Georgina Sinclair, a research associate at the Open University in the UK and an expert on international policing, argues that "Tegart, it is quite clear – when he arrived in Palestine, he turned down the post ➡

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Gesher is an abandoned fort but still accessible; the strategically located Latrun fort; Gesher from afar. (Seth J. Frantzman)







THE KATRA fort and a sign there (top right).

(Courtesy: Tal Ben-Nun Glass)

‘Tegart fought in the war of independence in Ireland, and there the police were in barracks, unable to mix with the local community. You get this fortress mentality. I think that was in Tegart’s mind’

of commissioner of police. I call him a ‘roving police adviser.’

“These were high-ranking police officers who were called upon to go and inspect a constabulary, somewhere in the empire where there was a problem. Tegart... had tremendous policing experience in India and within that, what they were interested in was his expertise in managing political violence. His main interest was intelligence work.”

Sinclair and Kroizer, both experts on the Palestine Police under the Mandate, say that the arrival of Tegart in Palestine represented a break with the past. He was called upon at a time when the British Mandate was faced with a major rural rebellion by Palestinian Arabs. During his stay in Palestine the number of British police in Palestine would almost triple from 1,000 to almost 3,000, and the budget for internal security would be quadrupled from £842,000 to £3,500,000.

Tegart replaced Herbert Dowbiggin, the previous police adviser in Palestine, who had been highly successful in policing the British colony of Ceylon (Sri Lanka). However, Dowbiggin’s Palestine Police department had been routed by the revolt, its rural police stations burnt and its wooden police buildings and barracks were unable to protect the men housed in them.

According to Kroizer, “Dowbiggin thought that a ‘notebook to the policeman is what the rifle is to the soldier,’ and Tegart said ‘gangs of banditry armed with rifles cannot be dealt with by policeman with notebooks.’ Tegart transferred the police from a citizen’s police to a paramilitary one.”

Sinclair sees Tegart’s style as deriving from his background and concern for the safety of his men.

“Tegart fought in the war of independence in Ireland, and in Ireland the

police were in barracks, not able to mix with the local community. You get this fortress mentality. I think that was in Tegart’s mind.”

Tegart was a quick study and rapidly arrived at the conclusion that a radical change had to be made in terms of how the police were operating in the country. In 1938 he headed a committee that concluded it was essential to “consider every aspect of the future housing of the Palestine Police as a whole, and not merely the British personnel, and to consider the inclusion within the perimeter of the rural police stations accommodation for the District Administration and essential departments of government.”

His recommendations came amid the backdrop of the killing of 94 policemen in 1938 by Arab gangs. Nineteen had been killed the year before. The irony perhaps is that while Tegart’s plan was



A MONUMENT at Nebi Yusha. (Seth Frantzman)

Visiting Israel's Tegart forts, listed from most to least accessible:

- The fort at Latrun is the centerpiece of the Armored Corps Museum. Located at the junction of routes 1 and 3, it receives around 350,000 visitors a year. Open daily from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Cost: NIS 30. (08) 978-4300, (08) 978-4321, (03) 569-2425; <http://www.yad-lashiryon.com>.
- The Iraq el-Suweidan fort is ensconced in the Beit Hagivati/Metzudat Yoav 1948 battle site and museum. It is located on Route 35 near Kiryat Gat. There is an entrance fee, and it is open 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday through Friday. (08) 661-1315, www.givati.org.il.
- The beautiful little fort at Nahalal is located outside the moshav on Route 75. It is home to the Center for Commemorating the Jewish Supernumerary Police. It is also used by the traffic police, but visitors can wander around the outside of the fort. (04) 641-5073.
- The Nebi Yusha fort is of a different sort than the rest, being part of the "Tegart wall" constructed along the Lebanese border. Located on Route 899, it is used by the Border Police, but the area in front of the fort is open to the public and has a memorial. There are several other pillboxes associated with the Tegart wall that still exist, but visitors will have to drive along the Lebanese border and pay attention to find them all.
- The abandoned forts (visit at your own risk): The impressive fort at Gesher on Route 90 north of Beit She'an is maintained and includes plaques detailing the battles that took place there in 1948; the fort at Abu Ghosh is above the village and is best accessed by Route 425; the fort called Katra is near Route 40 in Gadera; the fort on Mount Canaan above Safed is reported to be in ruins, and it may be possible to visit it. The same is the case with the forts at Be'er Tuviya in the South and near Moshav Shefer in the Galilee.
- The fort at Neveh Tzuf (Halamish) near Route 465 in Samaria is in the eponymous Jewish settlement in West Bank.
- The following forts are police stations; some can be seen from the road: Hadera (Route 4), Zichron Ya'acov (Route 4), Beit Shemesh (Route 38), Beit She'an, Afula, Ma'alot-Tarshiha, Acre, Petah Tikva, Ramat Gan, Beit Dagan, Lod (Border Police Headquarters), Rehovot, Ramle, Majd al-Krum.
- The fort near Shfaram at Givat Hamishtara near Route 781 is a police museum, but unfortunately is closed to the public. There is no good place to view the fort.
- Forts at Ramallah, Jericho, Bethlehem, Kalkilya, Tulkarm, Nablus, Jenin, Hebron, Yatta, Dhahiriya, Gaza, Khan Yunis (ruined 1955), Hebron (ruined 2001), Rafah and Sukat as-Sufi are in the Palestinian Authority-controlled Area A, where entrance is prohibited to Israelis. In many cases they are used by the PA's various security services, and photographing and visiting them is prohibited.
- Photographing the forts that are used as prisons (as at Beit Lid on Route 4 or Damun in the Carmel), police stations or military/Border Police sites is not recommended and is illegal in some cases. Visitors should use their good sense and take proper precautions when exploring the abandoned sites.
- There are very few existing maps that show all the Tegart forts. Gad Kroizer's *Hategartim*, Roza El-Eini's *Mandated Landscape* (Routledge, 2005), Appendix 13, and Tal Ben-Nun at Shimur.org.il are several sources worth consulting. There is also information available online. — S.F.

approved by the British government in Palestine, it came too late to help end the Arab revolt, which was crushed using regular army and police units in 1939.

"The forts played no part in suppressing the revolt. When you talk about Tegart forts, you have to talk about two different projects. One is the north fence, built during May, 1938 along the border with Lebanon to interdict the flow of arms into Palestine. Then [there are] the forts built in 1940-1941. The Tegarts in the north fence area are different in structure," explains Kroizer.

The forts were built on six different models and in three phases. The first was a line of five posts along the Lebanese border, anchored by the massive fort at Nebi Yusha, which overlooks the Hula valley. In a May 31, 1938, article *The Palestine Post* called this "The Fence Around Palestine: Tegart's Wall." The article explained that for £90,000, a fence was being constructed to "prevent the [Arab] bands from fleeing from justice, smuggling arms or

entering for terrorism... the fence is to vary in thickness according to local conditions... it will consist of two parallel barbed wire fences some 6 feet high and 5 feet apart... the space between the two fences not only criss-crossed with barbed wire but also filled with loose masses of tangled wire below."

Kroizer sees an Indian connection in the types of forts that were built in the north.

"One of the architects, Foster Turner, had served in India. He had built fortresses there. He brought with him plans... I know it because I found a note from him to the commissioner of police. He says 'I have a good plan for this fort, I built one in India,' and the commissioner replied 'I need one in north-west Palestine.'"

Tegart next set his eyes on the rest of his plan; the construction of 62 police forts throughout Palestine. According to Sinclair the buildings were at first credited to the head of the public works department, rather than Tegart.

"They were first called Wilson Brown ➡



LOD FORT.

(Seth Frantzman)

'At a time when even Israelis are having trouble remembering their recent history and the lessons it affords us, there is a great importance to preserving historical sites from the 1948 war'

buildings. Of course that name didn't stick because Tegart was well known in policing circles, he had a fan club, so they became known as Tegarts in the official correspondence."

The Palestine Post first referred to the buildings as "Tegart Buildings" in an article dated June 9, 1941 describing the police being moved into a fort in Acre, "named in honour of the originator of the idea of large and solidly constructed Police posts, Sir Charles Tegart. The building will provide greater facilities for Government personnel than is obtainable elsewhere here."

THERE ARE several unresolved questions about Tegart himself. Sinclair wrote in a 2006 paper: "Tegart is said to have had strong views about the political situation in Palestine, believing in Zionism... an example of this was the contract awarded to the Histadrut's [labor federation] construction company, Solel Boneh."

However, Kroizer argues that "he was pro-British. Solel Boneh built part of the northern fence, but not all the Tegart forts. This I revealed in my book

The Tegarts. Why did he hire Solel Boneh? Because the British administration was against him and if he used the public works department they would not do their job well... Solel Boneh [built] ten of the forts very quickly... for the other forts many construction contracts were awarded, to mostly Christian Arabs and Jews."

In 2004 another controversy erupted regarding the fort builder. Kroizer wrote in a footnote to an article he published in Hebrew that he had found another site connected to Tegart that he hadn't previously known about.

The *Guardian* claimed that the facility "has been airbrushed from Israeli aerial photographs and purged from modern maps. Where once a police station was marked there is now a blank space."

According to Sinclair, much of the tempest about Tegart's involvement is probably mistaken.

"There are lots of rumors I can't substantiate in some academic circles that he was responsible for building of interrogation centers in Palestine and that he developed new torture techniques. I've seen no evidence of this in his personal papers."

TEGART'S FORTS were mostly constructed inside what became the Green Line in 1948. This is perhaps not surprising since the Arab revolt targeted both the British police and Jewish communities. Since Jews lived mostly on the coastal plain in the 1940s, around 33 of the forts were constructed in low-lying areas, where Jews were present. The forts were usually constructed next to large towns and were designed to control not only the landscape around them but important crossroads as well. The forts next to the large Arab towns of Nablus, Hebron and Gaza were absolutely monstrous, so large that they could house all the police in their district as well as all the government employees. They were some of the biggest, if not the largest buildings in Palestine at the time, and many of them serve a similar purpose today as they did in the 1940s. For instance, the Palestinian police and Palestinian Authority officials make use of the Mukata in Ramallah, a former Tegart fort, and also the forts in Kalkilya, Tulkarm, Jenin, Nablus and Jericho.

The forts played an essential role in Israel's War of Independence. Beginning in December 1947, several of those in Jewish areas were evacuated by the British police and their Arab auxiliaries and handed over to Jewish policemen who worked for the British government. On April 18, 1948, a month before Israel's declaration of Independence, *The Palestine Post* reported that "Jewish police forces have moved into the Tegart Fortress at Katra, five miles southwest of Rehovot." There was great relief when local Jews saw the Star of David flying over the police posts. On November 10, 1948, it was reported with great joy that "the Tegart Fortress at Iraq El Sueidan, 15 km. east of Majdal [Ashdod], was in Israeli hands this after-

noon and the commander of the Egyptian garrison... was captured."

One of the last forts to be occupied by Israeli forces was the one at Metulla, abandoned by the British in 1941 due to fears of a French invasion from Syria. It was reoccupied in June 1949.

Already in 1950, the press was reporting that several of the old forts, at Ramle and Tel Mond, were going to be converted into prisons. The forts again played a role in the border wars of the 1950s between Israel, Jordan and Egypt. After 1967, when Jews set out to settle Neveh Tzuf in the West Bank, they moved into the local Tegart fort first. In the 1980s the Katra fort near Gadera was temporarily used to house Ethiopian immigrants.

Tal Ben-Nun Glass, the regional director of the Society for Preservation of Israel Heritage Sites, is passionate in her interest in preserving the forts in her area.

"I am responsible for preservation of historic buildings in the central part of the country, [from] Hadera to Gadera. Basically the way I see the Tegarts is like the Crusader forts. They are a series of buildings that represent a time in the history of this country and a concept of security that the British enforced after the Arab rebellion. It is still part of the scenery of Israel today... most of them still exist. Having the police use them helps their upkeep. The beauty of it is that their original use is still maintained."

Ben-Nun Glass explains that preservation of the forts is impeded by lack of resources and awareness.

"We have few resources and these buildings mostly are not endangered... there are a few that are abandoned, like Gesher, Abu Ghosh, Gadera [Katra]."

She helps advise the government when it wants to know how to best preserve places like the Tegart forts.

THE TEGARTS have long interested Avi Margolin, a licensed tour guide.

"As a student of Israeli history, I find the Tegart fortresses to be very interesting because of their connections to the 1948 war and their dominance of the landscape even today. Writing about the Tegart forts for an academic paper it was easy to find parallels to the Israeli army's modus operandi in the Palestinian territories."

He sees some possibility in developing the tourist aspect of the forts.

"Family groups love going to Latrun, mostly to see the tank museum. During our tour guide course we also went to see the Givati memorial at Iraq el-Sueidan. Besides Latrun all the other ones would appeal more to a historical tour.

"At a time when even Israelis are having trouble remembering their recent history and the lessons it affords us, there is a great importance to preserving historical sites from the 1948 war and preventing them from becoming run down and misused, which is a common occurrence in Israel. These are amazing sites that more people should know about."