

FOUR

DECLARATION OF REBELLION

In January 1944, when Begin decided—after serving only three months as Etzel commander, aware of the doubts surrounding his ability to lead the organization—to announce to Etzel headquarters members that he would declare the beginning of a military revolt against the British, it was pouring rain. When he entered the conference room in which the members were waiting, wearing his gray suit, they stood to attention. Military discipline still appealed to him, and even his close associates at Etzel headquarters were instructed to refer to him as “sir.”²¹ His face revealed his distress, like someone who had not left himself an escape route, as he strode to and fro across the room.

As in all the meetings Begin had attended during the prior three months, everyone remained standing until he had shaken the hand of every single member. The gap between the standing to attention and the personal handshake was characteristic of Begin, whose actions involved something of ritual and sentiment. He also decided that Etzel decisions would not be voted upon but rather that no decision would be accepted until every last member had been convinced to support it. Since Begin was an adamant man, his overbearing insistence was imposed on the members, to the point that they were convinced to accept.

The importance Begin attached to ceremony and the historical perspective that was evident in all Etzel activities were reflected in his very first decision as a leader—the dictation of protocols. Until January 1944 Etzel protocols had been written irregularly, mainly due to the assumption that a documentation of events might damage the or-