

BE'ER SHEVA', NAḤAL 'ASHAN (NEVE MENAḤEM B): MODERN AMMUNITION

ASSAF PERETZ

An assemblage of modern ammunition was found in an excavation conducted prior to the expansion of Naḥal 'Ashan (Neve Menaḥem B) neighborhood in Be'er Sheva' (see Eisenberg-Degen 2017).¹ The assemblage comprises 13 items (Fig. 1). Twelve of the items belonged to rifles or machine guns—10 cartridge cases (Fig. 1:1–10), one unfired bullet (Fig. 1:13) and one item that is tentatively identified as a rifle cartridge made of iron (Fig. 1:12)—and one possibly belonged to a pistol (Fig. 1:11). Eight of these items date from World War I (Fig. 24:1–8), three from the 1948 War (Fig. 1:9–11) and two are of uncertain date (Fig. 1:12, 13). These items, recovered from Areas A and B—both dated to the late Ottoman and British Mandate periods—stand testament to the battles that took place in and around Be'er Sheva' during World War I and in 1948.

WORLD WAR I (Fig. 1:1–8)

All eight cases dated to World War I were found in Area A and closely nearby; two of the cases were spent (Fig. 1:5, 8), and the rest bore signs of looting. These may indicate that a small, armed engagement between the British Army and the Ottoman army took place at the site, as the British forces moved toward Be'er Sheva'.

The British attack on Be'er Sheva' began on the morning of October 31st, 1917. The British plan, undertaken following two failed attempts to capture Gaza, was to attack the Ottoman positions in both cities at once. The British effort focused on Be'er Sheva', while the attack on Gaza was used to keep the Ottoman forces occupied and prevent them from sending reinforcement to Be'er Sheva'. The attack on Be'er Sheva' was swift, and aimed first at capturing the wells around the city to supply the British army and its horses with the water needed to continue their attack. The British force attacked the Ottoman positions between the Be'er Sheva'–Khelasa track and Wadi es-Sabe (Naḥal Be'er Sheva'), and from the east and southeast towards Tell es-Sabe (Tel Sheva'). By nightfall, the city and Tell es-Sabe were captured. The main forces, the 60th and the 74th divisions, then made an enveloping attack on the left flank of the Ottoman forces, especially those positioned at Ḥureira and Tel Sera' (Tell esh-Sheri'a), and a small force (“Smith’s Group”) moved to the north and east to assist the main divisions that held the newly



Fig. 1. Ammunition from World War 1 (1–8), from the 1948 war (9, 10, 11) and of uncertain date (12, 13); side view of the cases (1:2) and front view of the bases (2:1).

captured Ottoman positions (Falls 1930:9, 28–29, 45, 51, 55–59). Although not mentioned on the PEF map, most probably due to its miniscule size, the Ottoman-period hamlet found in Area A was located not far—possibly a few hundred meters—from the Gaza–Be’er Sheva’ road, the route taken by the British army. It is thus possible that a short exchange of fire took place at the site on October 31st, 1917.

◀ Fig. 1

	Item	Area	Locus	Basket	Caliber	Manufacturer	Production date	Remarks
1	Cartridge case	A	117	1080	7.92 × 57 mm	Königliches Munitionfabrik, Spandau	01/1917	'Spitzer' (pointed) bullet; cartridge alloy is 67% copper and 33% zinc; the neck and primer were removed (White and Burton 1963:179, No. 1616)
2	Cartridge case	A	103	1010	7.92 × 57 mm	Gustav Genschow & Company	01/1917	'Spitzer' (pointed) bullet; cartridge alloy is 67% copper and 33% zinc; the primer was removed (White and Burton 1963:115, No. 987)
3	Cartridge case	A	106	1034	7.92 × 57 mm	Königliches Munitionfabrik, Spandau	09/1914	The bullet was removed in order to take the gun powder (White and Burton 1963:179, No. 1616)
4	Cartridge case	A	102	1026	0.303 inch	Royal Laboratory, Woolwich	1915	The neck of the cartridge was broken and bent while gun powder was extracted (Edwards 2011:19–21, 122)
5	Cartridge case	A	102	1026	7.92 × 57 mm	Königliches Munitionfabrik, Spandau	04/1916	'Spitzer' (pointed) bullet; cartridge alloy is 67% copper and 33% zinc (White and Burton 1963:179, No. 1616)
6	Cartridge case	A	105	1016	7.92 × 57 mm	Deutsche Munitionsfabriken, Karlsruhe	03/1916	The neck was bent when the bullet was removed in order to extract the gun powder (White and Burton 1963:84, No. 691)
7	Cartridge case	A	116	1079	7.65 × 53 mm	Deutsche Munitionsfabriken, Karlsruhe	1332 RUMI (1916/7)	The neck was bent while the bullet was removed in order to extract the gun powder. Made in Germany for the Ottoman army (Elks 2016:13, 24–28)
8	Cartridge case	A	121	1086	7.65 × 53 mm	Unknown	1325 RUMI (1909/10)	Made in Germany for the Ottoman army (Elks 2016:13, 24–28)
9	Cartridge case	B	103	1010	7.92 × 57 mm	Zbrojovka Brno, Czechoslovakia	1948	Oval strike on the primer indicating it was fired from a Besa machine gun (White and Burton 1963:211, No. 1925)
10	Cartridge case	B	211	2039	0.303 inch	Dominion Arsenal, Canada	1944	Type VII (Edwards 2011:123; White and Burton 1963:80, No. 652)
11	Cartridge case	A	112	1055	7.65 × 17 mm (0.32 ACP)	Sellier & Bellot, Prague, Czechoslovakia		
12	Cartridge case	B	211	2039	7.92 × 57 (?) mm			Remains of steel cartridge
13	Bullet	A	118	1071	0.303 inch			

Of the eight World War I cases, six bear signs of looting: the intentional removal of either the primer (e.g., Fig. 1:2), the gunpowder (e.g., Fig. 1:7) or both (Fig. 1:1). The looting took place after the ammunition was left on the battlefield, either at the site, in Be'er Sheva' or in its vicinity. The looting of battlefields by local populations was a common practice. They sought mainly weapons and ammunition, but also shoes, cloths, money or any object which may yield profit, taken from the dead soldiers.² Cartridges and bullets were looted either to extract gunpowder for play and fireworks or to extract gunpowder and primers for use in hunting rifles held by the locals, although the powerful, smokeless gunpowder of the bullets tended to cause the thin barrels of the old hunting rifles to explode (Glick, forthcoming).

THE WAR OF 1948 (Fig. 1:9–11)

Three cases, two belonging to rifles and one to a pistol, are attributed to the 1948 War; two of the cases were found in Area B (Fig. 1:9, 10) and one in Area A (Fig. 1:11). One rifle case was manufactured and purchased in Czechoslovakia in 1948 (Fig. 1:9). This case was fired from a Besa machine gun, as is evident by the oval strike on its primer. It is the only item that can be attributed with certainty to the Israeli Defense Forces. The other rifle case is a Canadian-manufactured 0.303 inch case (Fig. 1:10). It was used by all parties involved in the war, including the Egyptian army, which was outfitted with British weapons. The pistol case (Fig. 1:11) is of a common caliber and is thus hard to date. This case may be associated with the Czechoslovakian weapons deal, but could have also been purchased in the local weapon market.

This small assemblage is evidence of the battles that took place in the area during Operation Yoav in 1948. During this operation, the bulk of the Israeli force moved from Mishmar Ha-Negev along the main Gaza–Be'er Sheva' road up to the bridge near Bir Abu Ruquiq. The force then continued along a dirt road that ran parallel to the main road until it reached a hill located about 3 km north of the city (IDF 1963:309). Although unclear, it is possible that the route that the Israeli forces took led them nearby or through the sites in Areas B and A.

UNCERTAIN DATE

Two items cannot be dated with any certainty. The item in Fig. 1:12 is an iron rifle case that lacks its lower part, and thus its origin cannot be identified, though similar cartridges were produced during World War II in Germany (*Die Patrone* n.d.). The item in Fig. 1:13 is a British 0.303 bullet bearing rifling marks. This bullet type was used in both World War I and in the 1948 War.

NOTES

¹ I thank Davida Eisenberg-Degen for inviting me to study the ammunition assemblage from her excavation. The article was edited by Dafnah Strauss.

² Such incidents from World War I were recorded by members of the 2/23rd London regiment after fighting in the village of 'Ein Karem, south of Jerusalem (Astor, Grindel and Shaw 2002:130–131) and in a photograph of a dead Ottoman soldier taken near Tell el-Full (*LOC* 1917).

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