

Spies in Palestine: Love, Betrayal, and the Heroic Life of Sarah Aaronsohn

James Srodes (Counterpoint Press, 2016), 203 pp., endnotes, photos, index.

Reviewed by Dr. Carly Speranza, Lt. Col., USAF

This book provides an unusual view of World War I through the archival scholarship and research efforts of James Srodes. Srodes's idea for *Spies in Palestine* came about while he conducted research to produce a biography of Allen W. Dulles, a fact he shares in the prologue. While combing through British archives, he came across references to an intelligence organization referred to as "A Organization." This led him to Sarah Aaronsohn and her heroic intelligence efforts assisting the British in defeating the Ottomans during World War I. The book itself is poorly titled and misleading, as it is about so much more than Sarah Aaronsohn—and only roughly five pages of it is spent on her love life and betrayal. Instead, this is an excellent history of how, in search of a homeland, Jews worked globally through diplomatic and intelligence efforts to establish a separate state, free from Ottoman rule.

Srodes begins by introducing the Aaronsohn family. In 1882, Ephraim Aaronsohn and his family arrived in Syria-Palestine from Romania, becoming one of the most prominent families in the *First Aliyah* of Jews to migrate. Srodes deftly explains the reasons behind the Jewish migration, and the environment and challenges that the first wave of Jewish settlers faced. In fact, it was these challenges that fortified the Aaronsohn family and many others to fight for *Eretz Israel*, the biblical homeland of the Jews. In the migration, Ephraim brought over two sons, Aaron and Zvi. Aaron is a central figure in the book and is critical to the American and British Zionist movements. His relationship with his sister Sarah, who was not born until 1890, is crucial to the intelligence work they eventually embarked upon.

Aaron Aaronsohn, a well-educated young man, found his first opportunity to spread Zionism to America through his studies of wheat. In 1905, and during the *Second Aliyah* of Jews to migrate from Europe, University of California Berkeley invited Aaron to visit and share his research on wheat as America was searching for additional ways to feed its own booming population. He was offered a lucrative position at the university, turned it

down, and headed on a tour of the United States that later greatly benefitted the Zionist movement. By the end of his first trip to the United States, Aaron met with and received patronage from a number of prominent Americans, including Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis and US Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau. In 1910, he returned to Palestine with \$20,000 to support the Zionist movement and to establish an agricultural research station named Athlit. Over time, this research station—in Ottoman territory—provided the Aaronsohns the opportunity and cover to conduct clandestine intelligence operations.

After Srodes introduces the Aaronsohn family, he breaks from the storyline to focus on the Three Pashas, Ottoman rulers established through conflicts in the region. While the dialogue of the book takes on a journalistic style at this juncture, the background is critical to the storyline. By 1913, the Ottoman Empire was ruled by a trio of war heroes, Ismail Enver, Mehmed Talaat, and Ahmed Gamal Djamal, who established power through the invasion of Libya in 1911, and the First Balkan War that ended in 1913. Once in power, they sought to cleanse the Ottoman territory of foreigners. As history reports, Constantinople set its sights first on cleansing the territory of Greeks and Armenians. During this period, Arabs in the territory also experienced executions and police action against them. These unfortunate and reprehensible actions against foreigners provided a warning for the Jewish population and ultimately led to the founding of NILI.

What began as an attempt by the Aaronsohns to use World War I to their advantage and break free from Ottoman rule to establish a Jewish state eventually became a full-fledged intelligence organization called NILI. The name of the organization originated from the Book of Samuel, "Nitzach Israel lo Ishakari," translated to "The Eternity of Israel shall not lie." Because Sarah was a woman, she was unable to travel outside of her hometown; as such, she was left behind to run intelligence operations, while her brother Aaron traveled to garner

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funds, support, and ensure that NILI's intelligence reports made it into British hands.

As Srodes reports, NILI initially provided the British with maps of Palestine and the Gaza Desert, which included geological and cultural specifics. Then, in 1917, the British formally recognized "A Organization" as a source of "reliable" intelligence and began requesting and receiving up-to-date intelligence reports. To do this, NILI used homing pigeons, trained and provided by the British, and drops-offs in the nearby port and off-coast excursions. Until the end of the war, NILI provided up-to-date Turkish troop activity, including the movements of artillery and other weaponry and transportation vehicles. NILI's intelligence and Aaron's diplomacy won over the British High Command to eventually pursue a Jewish state.

Sarah and Aaron, working together, were able to provide critical intelligence to the British on a geographical

and cultural area sorely misunderstood by the British. In fact, throughout the book, one cannot help but think about the American struggle in the Middle East and how important knowledge and intelligence is to operational planning. In his quest to fight for a Jewish State, Aaron worked beside T.E. Lawrence, Gertrude Bell, and British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and was present at the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference that ended World War I. It took 28 more years for Israel to become a state.

Spies in Palestine reads as part novel, part history book. Srodes did an incredible job weaving history into a palatable story of human suffering and accomplishment. This book is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in intelligence operations, the Ottoman Empire, World War I, and the history of the Zionist movement and establishment of the State of Israel.

