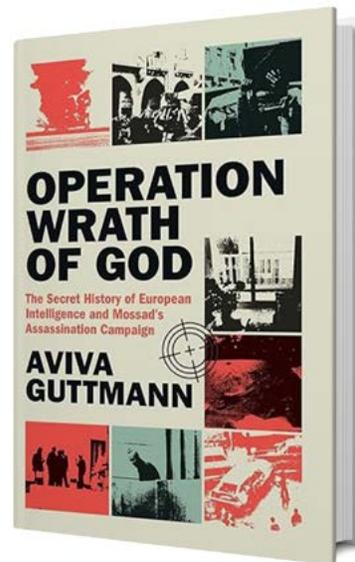


intelligence in public media

Operation Wrath of God *The Secret History of European Intelligence and Mossad's Assassination Campaign*

Reviewed by John Ehrman

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Reviewer: John Ehrman is a retired CIA officer.



How lucky can a researcher get? In a paragraph at the very end of *Operation Wrath of God*, Aviva Guttman describes how she stumbled across a cache of Club of Bern cables in the Swiss National Archives. No endless FOIA process or blacked-out passages; rather, some 40,000 operational cables hiding in plain sight, waiting for someone to pore over them. Ultimately, they enabled Guttman to piece together what she says is an entirely unknown dimension of the otherwise familiar story of Israel's revenge campaign against the Black September terrorists who carried out the Munich Olympic massacre in 1972.^a

Guttman starts her story with the founding of the Club of Bern in 1969 to provide a forum for the major West European internal intelligence services to swap information on counterterrorism and counterintelligence issues.^b Although not part of the original group, the United States, Israel, and other West European states became involved with the club during the next few years. They were not formal members but had a type of associate's role that enabled them to join in the information exchanges, through a cable channel called Kilowatt. By the time of the Munich attack, writes Guttman, the Kilowatt services had been working together for several

a. In the early morning hours of September 5, 1972, eight Black September terrorists broke into the Israeli Olympic team's quarters, killing two athletes and taking nine more hostage. Ultimately, five of the terrorists and all nine hostages were killed in a botched rescue attempt by the West Germans. For previous accounts of Mossad's post-Munich operations see Ronen Bergman, *Rise and Kill First* (Random House, 2018), reviewed in *Studies* September 2018; Aaron J. Klein, *Striking Back* (Random House, 2005); and Simon Reeve, *One Day in September* (Skyhorse, 2011).

b. The founding states were Belgium, France, Britain, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and West Germany.

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years and through the exchanges had built a solid foundation of trust.

The club swung into action immediately after the massacre in Munich. Guttman details their exchanges, with each following investigative leads on the terrorists and then sending their findings to the others, including Israel, via Kilowatt. These, of course, generated more leads and exchanges, which led to an increasingly detailed picture of Black September's European network and operations. Not coincidentally, their efforts helped foil a number of other Palestinian terror plots.

Meanwhile, and unknown to club members, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir had given Mossad secret orders to find and kill the terrorists who had planned and carried out the attack. The effort eventually came to be known as Operation Wrath of God. It soon expanded to target Palestinians who had not been in the Olympic raid but were involved in planning, supporting, or executing other terrorist plots and activities. Through the Kilowatt exchanges, club members unwittingly provided Mossad's operations with targeting information that filled Israel's collection gaps; while they likely would have identified and tracked down the surviving Munich perpetrators and others on their own, Guttman's detailed reviews of the Kilowatt reporting show how it enabled Mossad to speed up and refine its targeting.

The Kilowatt information was important not only for the Wrath of God operations. Perhaps the best example, which Guttman details, is the hunt for Mohamed Boudia, a major Palestinian terrorist coordinator in Europe. An Israeli tip in early 1973 about a terrorist plot set off a Kilowatt investigation that eventually uncovered Boudia's networks and locations. While long known to the Europeans and Israelis, he moved constantly and used disguises to change his appearance, making him exceptionally hard to track down. The Israelis took advantage of the investigation to levy requirements and gather information on Boudia. As Guttman notes, they used a "current investigation as a pretext to ask a partner to help find a terrorist who was on its kill list." (192) Eventually, the Swiss learned Boudia's Paris address and details about his car. Passed to the Israelis, the information enabled

Mossad in June 1973 to place a bomb under Boudia's driver's seat and blow him and his car to pieces.

Similarly and especially in early operations, Mossad took advantage of Kilowatt's post-assassination reporting. Whenever a terrorist in Europe was mysteriously shot or blown up, the Kilowatt services began swapping information to support the ensuing investigation. Guttman describes how these reports provided Mossad with an invaluable feedback loop, enabling it to identify and correct weaknesses in their tradecraft and thereby improve future operations. Among the lessons Mossad learned were that parking a rented getaway car too close to the scene of a shooting helps police obtain physical descriptions of team members and that fabricating a car bomb to appear like a homemade design that went off by accident will deceive investigators. It did not take the Europeans long to suspect that Mossad was behind the rising body count but, Guttman concludes, they were content to look past the mounting evidence of Israeli culpability and let them get on with their dirty work.

Mossad enjoyed this best of all worlds for almost a year, with eight successful targeted killings in eight operations. Then, notoriously, it all unraveled in late July 1973, when, in Lillehammer, Norway, Mossad killed an innocent Arab waiter it had mistaken for a terrorist leader. Guttman believes the misidentification was the result of Mossad becoming overconfident—the Lillehammer team had been composed of inexperienced officers operating in a country in which Mossad had no support infrastructure. The team members were wrapped up quickly. In the weeks that followed, the campaign was exposed in the press, making it impossible for the Europeans to continue to pretend Operation Wrath of God wasn't happening. Thus, Mossad had to end the operation and close down its networks across the continent. Tel Aviv, moreover, absorbed a wave of international condemnation. Interestingly, however, Guttman demonstrates how the cables show how day-to-day Mossad-Club of Bern cooperation continued uninterrupted after Lillehammer, as if nothing had happened.

Guttman, a former Swiss diplomat who teaches strategy and intelligence at Aberystwyth University in Wales, tells this story in a style that can only be

described as Germanic-academic. Starting with thorough research—beyond the cables, the 70 pages of notes and bibliography show an impressive mastery of the secondary literature—Guttman proceeds in meticulously organized chronological order, recounting each operation and investigation at length and in fine detail, frequently going Kilowatt cable by Kilowatt cable. The result is a wealth of information, but hardly a spy thriller. Guttman's prose is dense, often repetitive, and tends toward no small amount of self-congratulation for having uncovered and used the Kilowatt cables. *Operation Wrath of God* is for specialists, not the general reader.

The book works best when Guttman's claims are modest. That is, by filling in and expanding the historical record—demonstrating that no, Mossad is not a superhuman organization in need of no help from others—Guttman does a service to historians of the post-Munich campaign. Her descriptions of how liaison relationships operate at the working level, too, are spot-on: it's the low- and mid-level officers who build trust by talking to one another every day that make the relationships work. Liaison work can be

frustrating and time consuming, but *Operation Wrath of God* shows the potential of focused, long-term efforts.

It is when Guttman tries to draw additional lessons from the Kilowatt cables that the book disappoints. No doubt Guttman is correct when she observes that Kilowatt cooperation continued post-Lillehammer, despite the Europeans' condemnations of Israel, because all parties gained from it. She also is correct in noting that governments often say one thing while they do another, and that intelligence services will work to advance their own interests, even if they might conflict with their governments' stated policies. But these behaviors have long been known and documented; while Guttman is right to take note of them in this context, she spends too many pages on these familiar points.

Overall, *Operation Wrath of God* is a solid contribution to the history of counterterrorism operations and liaison relationships, and especially useful for revealing an unknown side of Mossad's post-Munich targeted killing operations. As a theoretical work, however, its claims are somewhat overstated. ■