

## ***Intelligence in Public Media***

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### ***Capturing Eichmann: The Memoir of a Mossad Spymaster***

Rafi Eitan and Anshel Pfeffer, trans. Galina Vromen (Greenhill Books, 2022), 352 pages, photographs.

### ***Reviewed by Ian B. Ericson***

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The history of Israel contains its share of covert triumphs as well as the occasional embarrassment, no doubt owing to Israel's willingness to entertain unconventional operational gambits as a survival mechanism. Rafi Eitan found himself at the center of a number of these gambits, and shortly before his death in 2019 he authored a memoir in which he describes them with an uneven—and in the instance of his handling of the American spy Jonathan Pollard criminally unsatisfying—level of detail. A much-shortened English translation of the original Hebrew edition was released by Greenhill Books in 2022 with an introduction by Ha'aretz journalist Anshel Pfeffer.

Rafi Eitan's place in the pantheon of Israeli spy legends is secure, and it is a boon to the literature on Israeli spycraft that he was able to complete his memoir shortly before his death in March 2019 at age 92. Despite the book's title, the account of Eichmann's capture accounts for only 50 out of 330 pages. Eitan's biography is that of an unapologetic, committed Zionist whose life was spent in service of the security and prosperity of pre- and post-independence Israel.

Eitan was born on Kibbutz Ein Harod in 1926 in the British Mandate of Palestine, both his parents having emigrated from Soviet Belarus shortly before. The British, Arabs, and other real or potential opponents of Jewish nationhood barely register in Eitan's memory except as amorphous foils to be dealt with methodically and, at times, remorselessly. One particularly harrowing example is Eitan's chronicle of his execution, as part of a terrorist campaign to discourage German immigration, of two unarmed German settlers who were seeking a return to their settlements near Haifa in 1946. It is disconcerting to read Eitan describe his point-blank summary execution of two men with no known ties to Nazism in front of their screaming wives. It would be inaccurate to argue that Eitan had no moral compass, but there is little doubt his scruples were subservient to the realization of an independent and secure Israel.

Eitan's experience in the Palmach, the Zionist military's special forces entity in the Mandate period, made him a natural fit to help stand up the Israeli intelligence services following independence in 1948. The fact that Eitan's second cousin was Isser Harel, the godfather of Israeli intelligence and the first head of both Israel's internal (Shin Bet) and external (Mossad) services, also played a role in his hiring. Eitan regarded his early intelligence work on behalf of Israel as hardly distinguishable from his work on behalf of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's Mapai Party, for which Eitan even went so far as to offer to stuff ballot boxes (the offer was refused). His enthusiasm in this regard is reminiscent of G. Gordon Liddy's for Richard Nixon.

Throughout his career in Israeli intelligence, Eitan exemplifies the tactical flexibility that best explains why Israel consistently triumphed over its Arab adversaries. Israelis are simply much more adept at adapting to the inevitable fog of war.

All of his work in the 1950s is a prelude to his master act: the capture of Eichmann in Argentina in 1960. This tale has been told many times, perhaps most famously by Harel himself in *The House on Garibaldi Street* (1975), though Eitan's perspective is particularly valuable given his role as operations chief on the ground. Harel held court in a Buenos Aires café for the duration of the operation, playing little substantive role in its success but probably keeping an eye on posterity. Eitan evinces a regular frustration with Harel's micromanagement, glory-seeking, and tendency to deploy 20 officers to the field when 10 would do. The criticism of Harel is not gratuitous, however, and Eitan maintains a clear respect for Harel's contributions to Israel's security.

Eitan's riveting account of the Eichmann operation does not disappoint, not least because there was nothing at all inevitable about its success. As a wise officer once noted, the great thing about operations is that so much can go *wrong*. Eitan's description of the team's navigation of

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the many challenges of bringing one of history's greatest criminals to justice is worth the price of the book.

Eitan's other notorious accomplishment, handling US Navy analyst-turned-spy Jonathan Pollard, merits barely four pages of text, and provides no specifics on the operation or Pollard himself.<sup>a</sup> Eitan justifies the effort by pointing out that Israel had been betrayed by its friends in the past and had an obligation to act solely according to its interests, omitting from his calculation the consequences to Israel's interests in the event it got caught. The chapter concludes with a postscript in which, somewhat melodramatically, Eitan's editor claims that Eitan from his deathbed ordered all of his previous texts on the affair destroyed. A more cynical interpretation is that Israel's censors decided there was little benefit from rehashing the unpleasant dustup with Israel's patron.

Eitan had personal relationships with many if not most of the giants of Israeli history, from Ben-Gurion to Harel to Sharon, making his perspectives on these figures

a useful contribution to the literature. One of the downsides of waiting nine decades to write a memoir, however, is that many of the memories are necessarily dated and therefore less reliable. And Eitan relies on memory rather than contemporaneous notes, requiring skepticism on some of the details.

Eitan covers considerable other ground, ranging from defending his record in Lebanon in the 1980s to a description of his personal ties to Fidel Castro, which will be of less interest to an American audience. These chapters remain of value, however, as is Eitan's political analysis of the intractable conflict with the Palestinians. Eitan was a close ally of Ariel Sharon and generally supported a more rightwing Likud security platform. Nonetheless, as the book closes, Eitan asserts that "the oppression of millions of Palestinians cannot be justified by security needs" and advocates exiting most of the West Bank unilaterally. Such a platform would have him on the outside looking in of any plausible Israeli government today.



*The reviewer:* Ian B. Ericson is the pen name of a CIA officer.

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a. Pollard was arrested in 1985 and convicted in 1987 of spying for Israel. Released from federal prison in 2015, he later emigrated to Israel.