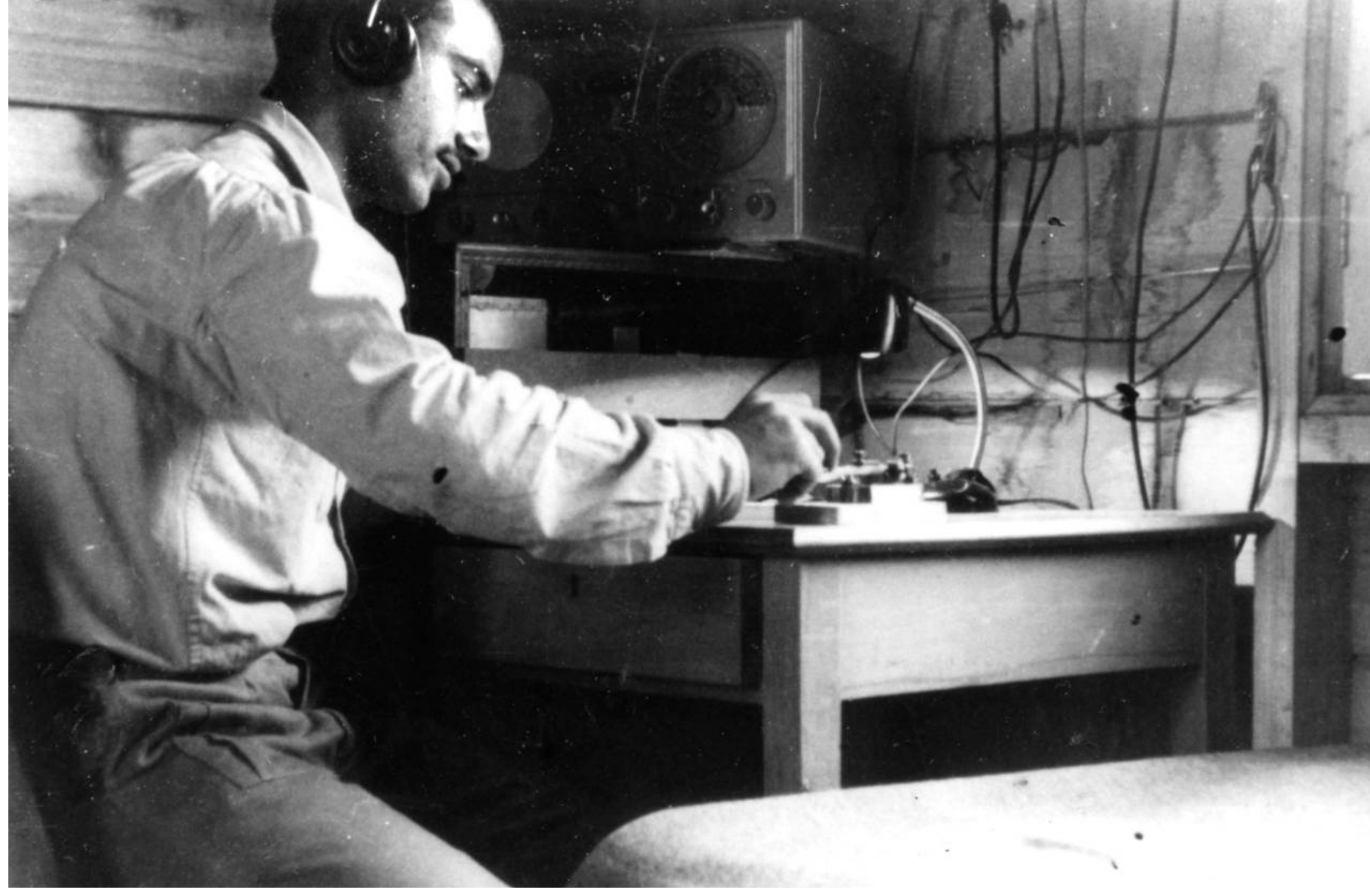




'Spies of No Country' Review: The Dawn of Mossad

Agents were taught rudimentary spycraft on a kibbutz, then sent off to gather intelligence and occasionally to blow something up.



Havakuk. PHOTO: PALMACH ARCHIVE

By Edward Kosner March 4, 2019 6:08 pm ET

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24

No intelligence agency in the world has quite the crafty mystique of Mossad, Israel's spy service. Shrewd, patient and ruthless, Mossad's spooks are celebrated for their triumphs, and even the rare known failures are legendary in their way.

It was Mossad agents who captured Adolf Eichmann in Argentina in 1960 and spirited him to Israel for trial as a mastermind of the Holocaust. They hunted down and executed the Black September terrorists who murdered Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics; paved the way for the rescue of hijacked Jewish hostages at Entebbe, Uganda, in 1976; gathered intelligence used to destroy a Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007; and (with the U.S.) brewed the Stuxnet virus that disabled Iran's uranium centrifuges a decade later.

Still, Mossad and Israeli army intelligence failed to warn of the Arabs' surprise attack in 1973. Nine years ago, 26 Mossad agents killed a Hamas bigwig in Dubai but managed to get themselves photographed by security cameras and wind up on an Interpol most-wanted list.

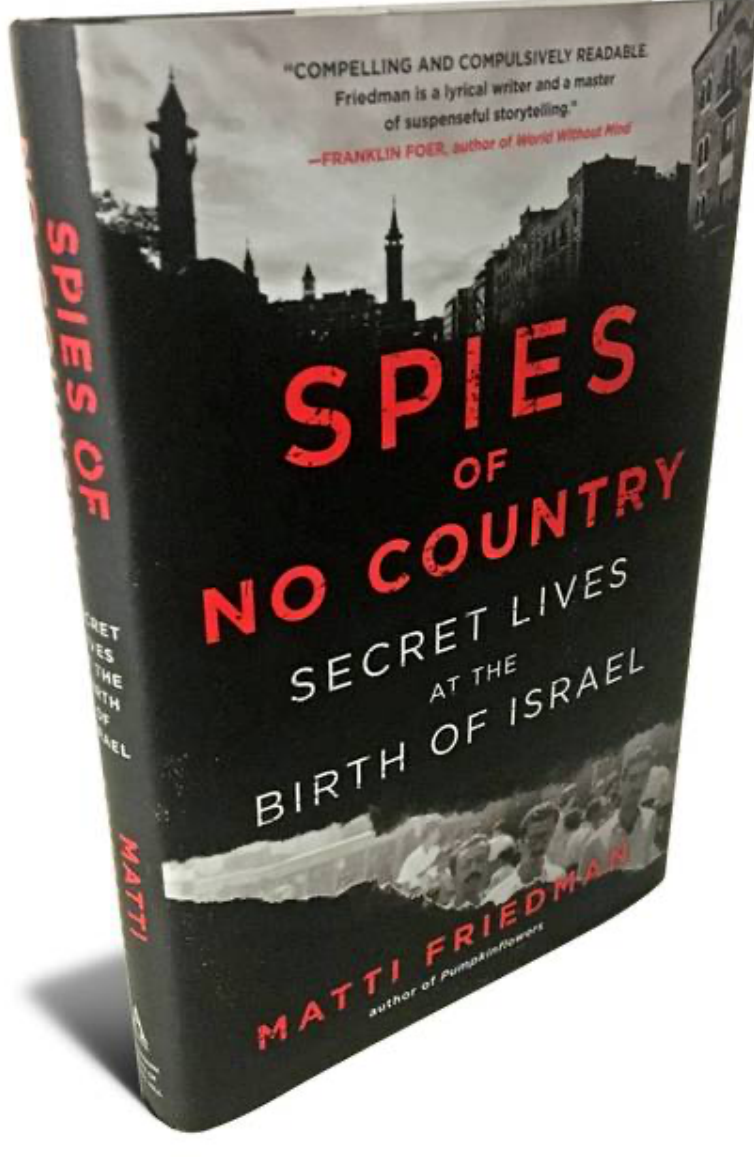


PHOTO: WSJ

SPIES OF NO COUNTRY

By Matti Friedman (Algonquin, 248 pages, \$26.95)



Yakuba. PHOTO: PALMACH ARCHIVE

All these exploits are a far cry from the harum-scarum, low-tech origins of the spy service at the start of World War II, when some Zionist settlers collaborated with the British, who governed Palestine under a League of Nations mandate, to infiltrate Arab groups allied with the Nazis. Once the British left in 1947-48, the Jews had to fight the local Arabs and then the invading armies of Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq to secure the new state of Israel. Spying on the enemy was a key to survival.

In "Spies of No Country," Matti Friedman, a Canadian-Israeli journalist, resurrects early operations of the intelligence service of the Palmach, the nascent military that ultimately grew into the mighty Israel Defense Forces. The book is a slim but intriguing string of anecdotes in which members of the unit risk their lives under cover in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq as Jewish settlers and refugees fought to preserve their foothold in Palestine.

The group was called the "Arab Section," later code-named "the Dawn," or "Ones Who Become Like Arabs." The idea was to recruit swarthy Jews who had been raised speaking Arabic and thus could pass as locals in Beirut, Damascus and Amman. The men were taught rudimentary spycraft on a kibbutz, and then sent off to gather intelligence and occasionally to blow something up.

Mr. Friedman focuses on four of these Mizrahim — Jews born in the Mideast, in contrast to the Ashkenazim from Europe who dominated Zionist politics and the military. They were Gamliel Cohen, 25, born in Damascus; Isaac Shoshan, 23, from Aleppo, Syria; Havakuk Cohen, just 20, from Yemen; and Yakuba Cohen, 23, born in Jerusalem. The author retrieves their stories from Mossad archives and other records and from long talks with Isaac Shoshan, in his 90s the last survivor of the group.

With the 1948 war for independence looming, agents were sent to Haifa in northern Palestine and to Beirut in Lebanon to pick up what they could about the enemy's morale and preparations. Improvisation was crucial. Checking an Arab cafe in Haifa one day, Isaac spotted a vehicle in a nearby garage being painted with red crosses. It turned out to be a truck bomb destined for an attack on the Jewish section of town. He returned in a few days with Yakuba in two cars, one of them rigged by other fighters as a bomb. Already familiar in the neighborhood, they talked their way past three checkpoints, distracted suspicious mechanics in the garage, set the bomb to go off in seven minutes—and fled in a getaway car. In an operation in Beirut, Gamliel, Isaac, Yakuba and a frogman-saboteur managed to blow up Hitler's sumptuous yacht, commandeered after the war and destined for Egypt's sybaritic King Farouk. They ambushed and nearly killed a militant cleric who fled Haifa, never to return.

But most of the work involved patient intelligence gathering. Gamliel established himself as a shopkeeper in Beirut. He was soon joined by Isaac and Havakuk, who bought a busy kiosk selling sweets and cigarettes. They installed a Morse transmitter with an antenna disguised as a laundry line and sent a steady stream of coded dispatches to their handlers. Gamliel smuggled home a list of targets complete with coordinates for attack. Yakuba bought an old Oldsmobile, had it registered as a taxi, and used it for reconnaissance and operations.

"Double identity has always been part of life for Jews," Mr. Friedman observes. "In the real world this characteristic has fed the idea that Jews are tricking everyone with their appearance while reporting to a secret conspiracy—that is, that they're all a kind of spy."

For the "Ones Who Become Like Arabs," living their lies was nerve-racking. Their dress, demeanor and Arabic were near-faultless, but any hint of otherness risked detection and certain death. The agents had to think fast. One member of the section raised suspicion when he was found to use toilet paper, because the Arabs cleansed themselves with water. On the spot, he invented a digestive ailment to explain his fastidiousness.

Mr. Friedman draws a larger point from the pioneering role of the Mizrahim in intelligence: It foreshadowed the transformation of the population of the Jewish state from essentially one of native-born Sabras and Levantined left-wing Europeans with little or no religious belief to a blended people in which Palestinian Jews and their descendants have ever-greater influence. "Israel's Middle Eastern soul has come out of the basement," he writes. "Israelis have been free to discover that being Jewish in this region is not, in fact, new; that half the people in the country have been doing it for centuries."

With their ancestral memory of oppression by their Arab countrymen across the Middle East, these Mizrahim may be increasingly less inclined to negotiate a territorial solution with the Palestinians. The conflict in which the young members of the Dawn played their secret part seven decades ago may last longer than they could have ever imagined.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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