

NILI and the Issue of Divided Loyalties in the Jewish Yishuv of Ottoman Palestine

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In late 1914, Alexander Aaronsohn, a Palestine-born Jew of Romanian parentage, reported for duty at an Ottoman recruiting station at Acre, Palestine. The Ottoman Empire had recently entered World War I on the side of Germany and was now calling upon its subjects of all religions to support the war effort. Aaronsohn's brief time as a conscript in the sultan's army was the starting point of a wartime journey in which he forged new alliances and traversed identities to ensure survival and success in a rapidly changing world. The First World War produced changing power relationships that made Jewish membership in the Ottoman polity precarious and intensified the importance of political Zionism as a means of maintaining residence in Palestine following the disintegration of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire. The wartime context of shifting loyalties and narrowing concepts of citizenship resulted in the need for new alliances that would help Jews like Aaronsohn subvert the threat of physical violence and manage an uncertain political environment to their advantage. It was in this context that Aaronsohn and his family made the strategic decision to realign their loyalties away from the Ottoman Empire and toward Great Britain, the rising power in the region.

Together with several family members and friends, Aaronsohn formed the NILI spy ring, providing intelligence about the situation in Palestine to the British government between 1915 and their discovery in 1917. Capitalizing on his cultural and linguistic fluidity, Aaronsohn became an indispensable asset for the British war effort as an agent and prolific source of anti-Ottoman, anti-Arab, and pro-Zionist propaganda. His position enabled him not only to survive the war, but also to support the survival of his community in Palestine through political Zionism.

Aaronsohn's decision to act as an interlocutor between the Ottoman Empire and the West positioned him within a long established tradition of Jews who used their status as outsiders to forge networks of alliances that ensured their safety and livelihood in a rapidly changing world.

Aaronsohn's positionality provides a window into the rapidly changing political and social context of Ottoman Palestine during the First World War.¹ Aaronsohn's transition from a nominally loyal Ottoman subject to a collaborator with the British mirrors the decline of what Michelle U. Campos has described as "civic Ottomanism," the transition from religious and ethnic diversity within an Ottoman framework to rupture between the Ottoman state and its minorities during World War I.² Meanwhile, Aaronsohn's activities must be seen within the larger context of British intelligence operations in the Middle East during World War I, and as part of the "information order" of the British empire, in which intelligence was not merely a tool of colonial control but a key to understanding social change.³

A Man of Three Worlds

Alexander Aaronsohn was a man of at least three worlds: European, Ottoman, and Jewish. While Aaronsohn's Palestinian childhood was a relatively idyllic one in which he was protected from the prejudice and suffering his parents had experienced in Eastern Europe, the outbreak of World War I changed everything. Aaronsohn and his family again sought safety and protection from yet another global power. An understanding of Aaronsohn's pre-war positionality and his membership in a long line of Jewish interlocutors helps to set the stage for an analysis of his choices during the war and their eventual results.

Alexander Aaronsohn was born in 1888 in Palestine, the fourth of six children.⁴ His parents, Ephraim and Malka Aaronsohn, were members of group of Romanian Jews who had founded Zikhron Ya'akov, an early Jewish settlement near Mount Carmel in northern Palestine, in 1882. These early settlers were members of Hovevei Zion, a proto-Zionist movement with roots in Russia and Eastern Europe that encouraged immigration to Palestine for agricultural settlement, Hebrew language revival, and promotion of a Jewish national consciousness.⁵ While grounded in specific ideological principles, the Hovevei Zion movement was also shaped by circumstances in Europe during the late nineteenth century. Anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia (1881–1882) and the rise of ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe threatened the survival of local Jewish communities and led them to question the viability of their efforts to assimilate into their host countries.⁶ The Hovevei Zion movement offered a solution to the social and economic pressures of Europe that was both practical and ideologically attractive in its promise to create a space in which Jews could live freely.

The Ottoman Empire, moreover, was not uncharted territory for Ephraim and Malka Aaronsohn. As Romanians from Bacau they had lived under Ottoman rule until 1878, when the country became independent. Although Palestine was ultimately a foreign land

populated mostly by Arab Muslims, their previous experiences as Ottoman subjects, their Jewish faith, and their Zionist ideology made it seem like a relatively safe and familiar destination.

The family's early years in Zikhron Ya'akov were not easy. Many members of the original group from Romania succumbed to disease or returned home in despair during the first year. The incorporation of the settlement into the holdings of Baron Edmund de Rothschild in 1883 ensured its economic survival. By the time of Alexander Aaronsohn's birth, the settlement was relatively well established, if not profitable, with Rothschild's financial support still supporting its livelihood. Growing up in Zikhron Ya'akov, a Romanian Jewish settlement surrounded by Arab villages and under the sovereignty of the Ottoman state, Aaronsohn became a cultural and linguistic polyglot. Yiddish and Hebrew were spoken at home, and Aaronsohn also knew English, Arabic, Turkish, French, German, and some Italian. Education at the local village school was interspersed with work in the settlement's agricultural fields and adventures on horseback in the surrounding countryside and the nearby city of Haifa.

As he grew up, Aaronsohn became acquainted with local Arab culture through his interactions with neighboring communities and engaged in Zikhron Ya'akov's dealings with the Ottoman authorities. In 1910, he moved to the United States. He worked at the Department of Agriculture until 1913, becoming fluent in English and gaining familiarity with American culture. By the time he returned to Palestine, Aaronsohn was a cosmopolitan young man capable of conversing in many different languages and familiar with a variety of cultural contexts. Despite his diverse political and cultural associations, Alexander Aaronsohn remained officially an Ottoman subject. Aaronsohn's ultimate loyalty, however, was to Zikhron Ya'akov and the wider Zionist project in Palestine. These elements of Aaronsohn's positionality, of course, were not necessarily contradictory.

Although the Aaronsohn family's experience of the Ottoman Empire was as a tolerant protector and a refuge where they could live freely as Jews and pursue their settlement project, Ottoman fears of foreign intervention led to restrictions on Jewish immigration and land purchase in Palestine, and debates about the position of Jews in the Ottoman Empire.⁷ As Ottoman subjects, the Aaronsohn family would not have been seen as a threat by the Ottoman state, which was more concerned with naturalizing or expelling those under foreign protection. At a time when the Ottoman state remained constrained by the dictates of capitulations, which gave foreign governments extra-territorial rights within its boundaries, it was crucial to prevent concentrations of foreign-protected settlers. The Ottomans tried to keep large groups of Russian Jews from settling in Palestine, as their welfare could have offered a pretext for Russian military intervention into the Holy Land, sanctioned by the terms of the capitulations.⁸

The Hovevei Zion movement was willing to cooperate outwardly with the Ottoman state's efforts to neutralize the presence of groups loyal to a foreign state. At a conference in 1884, the movement's leadership presented a resolution stating its loyalty to the Ottoman Sultan: "Our people wish to settle in the Promised Land as honest and loyal subjects, imbued with sincere love and obedience to the government of the

country . . . and without any ulterior motives.”⁹ There is no reason to believe that the Aaronsohn family, persecuted in Romania and living peacefully in Palestine, did not share the sentiments of this statement. More generally, Ottoman religious minority groups considered themselves part of an Ottoman civic project. As Campos argues, “For the vast majority of ethnic and religious groups within the empire, collectively, ethno-religious identity was expressed within the context of Ottoman imperial citizenship, not necessarily outside of or against it.”¹⁰

Zionist leader Theodor Herzl’s attempts to win the Ottoman state over to the Zionist project also demonstrate the Zionist belief during this period that plans for settlement in Palestine could take place within an Ottoman framework.¹¹ While efforts to promote Zionism within an Ottoman context took center stage, recourse to foreign powers continued to be a key strategy for Zionist groups seeking to step up Jewish immigration in Palestine following the Ottoman restrictions. As committed Zionists, the Aaronsohn family would have supported efforts to bring more Jews to settle in Palestine.¹² While this does not cast doubt on their basic acceptance of the political framework offered by the Ottoman state, it does suggest a mixed strategy: by nominally complying with Ottoman desires for enhanced loyalty while at the same time cultivating relationships with foreign governments and individuals, Jewish settlers were working to survive and secure their own interests in a volatile political climate.

As outsiders attempting to survive in a shifting landscape of social, economic, and political relationships, Jewish communities had long resorted to similar contingent strategies to ensure survival. Modern Mediterranean history is rich with examples of Jewish interlocutors who took advantage of their marginal status to move across borders and secure alliances.¹³ The hardening of ethnic, national, and religious boundaries made life more difficult for Jews while simultaneously increasing the demand for their services as interlocutors. Such alliances with different sites of political power, made to ensure success or survival in an environment where Jews held limited political power, both reflected and produced perceptions of Jews as untrustworthy or disloyal.¹⁴ In the case of the Aaronsohns and their community, these strategies aimed ultimately at ensuring the security of Jewish settlements in Palestine. So while nominally Ottoman subjects willing to work within the framework of the imperial state, Alexander Aaronsohn and his community were also conscious of their precarious situation and the need to build alternative networks to ensure survival.

A man of at least three worlds, culturally and linguistically mobile and ambiguous in appearance, Alexander Aaronsohn was well placed to put such contingent strategies in motion. The outbreak of World War I and his own experience as a conscript in the Ottoman military signaled to Aaronsohn that the time had come to seek out new strategies for survival. Following in the footsteps of other Mediterranean Jews, Aaronsohn leveraged his marginal minority status to forge strategic alliances that would ensure the survival and success of his community.

From Ottoman Conscript to British Agent

Prior to being drafted into the Ottoman army in 1914, Aaronsohn had been living and working in the United States for several years and had taken out naturalization papers. However, he had not yet become an American citizen and was therefore not entitled to protection under capitulations. He must also not have had the funds to purchase exemption from military conscription, a common practice among religious minorities and wealthy Muslims in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁵ He later wrote a book about his experiences during the brief period in which he served as a conscript and laborer in the Ottoman garrison at Safad. The book covers the period between fall 1914 and summer 1915. This text is key to understanding Aaronsohn's positionality at the time of writing, and offers important insights into his wartime propaganda activities.

Written in English in 1916 after Aaronsohn's experience as an Ottoman conscript and his flight to the United States, the text was originally serialized in the July and August 1916 issues of the *Atlantic Monthly* under the title "Saifna Ahmar Ya Sultan!" (Our Sword Is Red, O Sultan). It was published in the United States soon thereafter in book form under the title *With the Turks in Palestine*. In 1917, it was re-published in Great Britain at the request of the British government, which hoped to use the book for propaganda purposes. It was translated into six languages, including German, and distributed widely throughout Europe.

Aaronsohn's book must be read carefully with special attention to the ways it interacts with its intended audience.¹⁶ Although billed as a memoir, the book is best described as a stylized work of propaganda. As a supporter of the Allies and a Zionist organizer writing a text intended to sway its audience toward the Allied cause, Aaronsohn portrayed the Allies as noble saviors, the Germans and Ottomans as brutal invaders, and the Arabs as a backward race incapable of caring for the land.¹⁷ The text reveals several ideological and political aims. First, it sought to demonstrate the moral superiority of the Allied forces over the German-Ottoman alliance by detailing the humanistic actions of Great Britain, and highlighting the offenses committed by the German and Turkish forces. Second, it attempts to align Ottoman religious minority communities with the West to garner sympathy for their plight. Detailed descriptions of how Christians and Jews were treated by the Ottomans are interspersed with insinuations that the West was responsible for their wellbeing. Finally, the book promotes Zionism by offering Palestine's Jewish settlers as an example of productivity and enlightenment in the midst of a despotic and decaying Ottoman Empire. Aaronsohn invites readers to sympathize with the Jews' plight and to admire their ingenuity in the face of Arab and Ottoman backwardness. He links his community's fate to the fate of Palestine on a broader scale, lamenting the loss of the ideal of a "regenerated Palestine" at the hands of the Turks, and pledging to return after the war to "help in rebuilding the country."¹⁸

While Aaronsohn's book emphasizes his post-1915 view of the Ottoman Empire, let us consider Aaronsohn's service in the Ottoman military. His conscription was made possible by the institution of universal recruitment in October 1909, before which the Ottoman army had been composed entirely of Muslim recruits and conscripts.¹⁹ As a

young Ottoman subject in good health, Aaronsohn was compelled to report for duty. In his book, Aaronsohn expresses a willingness to serve in the Ottoman army, noting that Ottoman reforms had compelled religious minorities to serve in the army, but had compensated them with “equal rights.”²⁰ He also conveys gratitude for the empire’s assistance to Jews, noting that it had opened its doors to Jews for over six hundred years.²¹ The Ottoman decision to enter the war as an ally of Germany, however, seems to have been a turning point; this alliance, rather than the neutrality that had been widely expected of the Ottomans, brought the empire into a direct confrontation with its subjects, many of whom felt religious, cultural, or economic allegiance to the Allied countries and disagreed with the decision to take up arms against them. Had he known what would happen, Aaronsohn claims, he would never have willingly joined the ranks of the Ottoman army.²²

A reconfiguration of associations and power relationships characterized this period in Aaronsohn’s life. A neutral, even moderately supportive Ottoman subject at conscription, his relationship to the protecting power deteriorated quickly into outright opposition by the time of his discharge. Several main factors contributed to this. First, the material conditions among recruits and the morality of the officer corps appear to have engendered disgust and disdain in Aaronsohn. Second, living in close quarters with Arab Muslim fellow recruits and Turkish officers seems to have strengthened his feelings of association with cultures he viewed as civilized, including his own Jewish community, Christian Arabs, and Western Europe. By contrast, Muslim Arabs were ignorant and unclean, and the Turkish officers corrupt and ineffective. Third, the decision to disarm non-Muslim soldiers after the Ottoman Empire’s declaration of *jihad* on 14 November 1914 appears to have heightened Aaronsohn’s feelings of separation and difference from his fellow Ottoman subjects. His deteriorating relationship with the Ottoman Empire was combined with a growing affinity with the Allied powers of Western Europe.

Aaronsohn’s interpretation of the Ottoman decision to disarm religious minorities and organize them into labor battalions may provide the most interesting insight into his shifting relationship with the Ottoman government and other salient poles of political influence. In his memoirs, Aaronsohn writes: “The object of this action, plainly enough, was to conciliate and flatter the Mohamedan population, and at the same time to put the Jews and Christians, who for the most part favored the cause of the Allies, in a position where they would be least dangerous.”²³ This interpretation is certainly influenced by hindsight; Aaronsohn wrote this account from the United States in 1916 after he had already left the army, fled Palestine, and joined forces with the Allies. It is unclear whether the Ottoman regime took this decision for doctrinal reasons related to the call for *jihad* or because the perfidy of religious minorities was a genuine concern. In the case of Armenian and Greek subjects, doubts about loyalty appear to have been a main determinant of their disarmament and recruitment into labor battalions, but the decision to disarm Armenians did not take place until early 1915, after Aaronsohn had left the military.²⁴ Regardless of the Ottoman rationale, Aaronsohn experienced the move as a signal of distrust and rejection, and the actual physical labor that this reassignment

entailed was brutal and humiliating. The physical separation of minorities from the Muslim army was a turning point for Aaronsohn, signaling that Ottoman protection was no longer reliable, and requiring the adoption of a new strategy.

Aaronsohn's changing relationship with the Ottoman Empire mirrored the decline of civic Ottomanism during the war. Civic Ottomanism had served as a unifying doctrine for the empire's diverse ethnic and religious groups, providing a way for Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike to be part of a political and ideological project rooted in a shared faith in the Ottoman state as a viable alternative to ethnic nation-state polities. Civic Ottomanism was attractive in its promise to provide equal rights to subjects, some of whom, including some Jewish communities, had taken refuge from persecution in the empire. The Ottoman Empire's decision to enter World War I necessarily changed the relationship between the central state and its subjects as the loyalty of religious minority groups came under scrutiny. As Aaronsohn's own experience shows, this was a mutual process: minority groups were excluded and targeted by the state in the name of wartime security and, in turn, these groups began to rethink their positions within the Ottoman state and to question the viability of civic Ottomanism as a unifying ideology. As Campos puts it, "Ottomans sought to reconcile citizenship paradigms with the existing corporate status and shifting political power of the ethno-religious group. Oftentimes, these different understandings of citizenship were simply not compatible."²⁵ Alternative understandings of group belonging filled the void that civic Ottomanism had left. Armenian nationalism and political Zionism are just two examples. It was only when the ideal of Ottomanism was no longer tenable, due to the central state's decision to treat religious minority groups with suspicion, leading these groups to rethink their strategies, that Zionism and ethnic identification began to be conceptualized as independent ideologies operating outside of and at odds with, the goals of the Ottoman state.²⁶

This rupture with the Ottoman Empire led Aaronsohn to shift his attention to the safety of his community in Zikhron Ya'akov. According to his memoirs, he had heard reports of requisitioning and violence toward villagers in Palestine on the part of the Ottoman military and local Arabs. He feared for his community, left unprotected due to the conscription of its men, and resolved to return home.²⁷ Back in Zikhron Ya'akov, Aaronsohn describes a palpable feeling of isolation and imminent threat, the community vulnerable to attack amid the lawlessness prompted by the war. Instead of helping to protect it, the Ottoman authorities insisted on disarming the community, leaving it even more vulnerable.²⁸ To make matters worse for Aaronsohn, his sister Sarah had returned to the colony from Istanbul, fleeing an unhappy marriage. On the way, she had witnessed the massacre of Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman authorities. The trauma and horror of what she had witnessed seems to have deeply affected the members of the Aaronsohn family, including Alexander, who associated the fate of the Armenians with the potential threat of violence against the Jewish community in Palestine.

The fear that a massacre of Jews would follow the pattern of Armenian massacres is a major trope in Aaronsohn's book. This was certainly used as a literary device to appeal to his audience, who would have been familiar with the Armenian massacres. Beyond

an effective tool of propaganda, though, his fear must also have been real, heightened by his intimacy with Sarah's first hand witnessing of the event. He first invokes the trope when describing the forced disarmament of Zikhron Ya'akov, a measure that he notes had also taken place among Armenian communities prior to the "terrible Armenian massacres, and we felt that some such fate might be in preparation for our people."²⁹ In the aftermath of the disarmament, he writes, "Whenever the Turkish authorities wished, the horrors of the Armenian massacres would live again in Zicron-Jacob, and we should be powerless to raise a hand to protect ourselves."³⁰ The specter of violence loomed large for Aaronsohn and his family during this period as the dream of civic Ottomanism deteriorated and new political, social, and economic relationships took root as a result of the war. Making decisions that manipulated the contours of his social world allowed Aaronsohn to manage the political changes that were beginning to threaten the pillars of his world: Zikhron Ya'akov and Palestine.

As relations with the Ottoman Empire began to sour, Aaronsohn made a bold decision that would put him on the winning side of the war and, he figured, would allow him to save his community and help realize the goal of a regenerated Palestine. Together with family and community members, he worked to forge relationships with Western powers while maintaining a façade of loyalty to the Ottoman state. Securing the good graces of Britain and the United States, Aaronsohn radically altered the contours of his social, political, and geographic positionality, setting the stage for a strategic project that he believed would help ensure the survival of his community through a time of upheaval and change.

Information, Propaganda, and a New Vision for the Middle East

In July 1915, Aaronsohn's brother Aaron, his sister Sarah, and friends from the Palestinian Jewish community took the first steps toward a pro-British alliance that would ultimately result in the formation of the NILI espionage ring.³¹ Britain, which occupied Egypt at the time, was the most accessible Allied power for the group to contact. Probably due to his superior English skills, it was decided that Alexander Aaronsohn would travel to Egypt to meet with the British authorities based there and offer the group's services. Because he offered intelligence services without asking for anything in return, however, the British did not trust his motives. Trying in vain to forge an alliance, Aaronsohn was expelled from Egypt in August, from whence he journeyed on to the United States, where he remained until 1917.³²

Of the decision to leave for America, Aaronsohn wrote, "After weeks of fruitless waiting, writer despairing of any action left for America with a view of working up American Jewry against Turkey and bring pressure upon Washington to join the Allies (these activities and in a measure of their success were known at the British Embassy, Washington)."³³ Aaronsohn's determination to garner sympathy for the Allied cause among American Jews was grounded in his belief that British hegemony in the Middle East provided the best chance for the Zionist project in Palestine. Describing the decision

to pursue an alliance with Britain, he wrote:

The German aspiration to seize the Near East made the Jews feel that all the Zionist hopes for a regenerated Jewish Palestine will come to naught, and a few Palestine Jews after careful deliberation came to the following decisions: 1) The Turco-German hold over Palestine must be broken forever. 2) The British Government is the most suitable for a Jewish Palestine. 3) That the International Jewry must be won over to the British cause.³⁴

Britain would be the guarantor of a future Zionist state and Aaronsohn was determined to do everything he could in the United States to ensure Britain's dominance in the Middle East.

After another failed attempt to make contact with the British, Aaron Aaronsohn managed to make his way to London where he secured British interest in the group's intelligence services. Led by Aaron, Alexander, and Sarah Aaronsohn, and their friend Avshalom Feinberg, the NILI espionage ring provided valuable intelligence to the British in Cairo.³⁵ The group was composed of nearly forty operatives, some of whom held important posts in the Ottoman military and in the government. These operatives would pass intelligence to traveling agents, who would regroup at Atlit, a port city jutting into the Mediterranean Sea near Haifa, where Aaron Aaronsohn had built his American-financed scientific research station. Additional operatives on a boat trawling the coast would collect the intelligence from Atlit and transport it to Port Said in Egypt, translating it from Hebrew to English en route.³⁶

Becoming a part of Britain's network of informants in the region was an expedient solution: the group's knowledge of languages, their ambiguous appearances, and their local connections would make them an indispensable tool for the nascent British intelligence apparatus.³⁷ Tapping into local networks of knowledge was crucial to Britain's wartime operations. As Christopher Bayly observed in the Indian context:

The quality of military and political intelligence available to European colonial powers was evidently a critical determinant of their success in conquest and profitable governance. Equally, this information provided the raw material on which Europeans drew when they tried to understand the politics, economic activities, and culture of their indigenous subjects.³⁸

Priya Satia has described the weakness and disorganization of British intelligence networks in the Middle East during World War I; local knowledge was needed to advance their wartime aims in the region.³⁹ The NILI group offered the British a crucial source of information on the key Palestine front. The group also succeeded in providing the British with the "raw material" needed to form opinions about the nature of Palestinian Jews, their utility to the British state, and their future aspirations. The British got the intelligence they desperately needed, while the NILI group gained a foothold within the most powerful Western government in the region. This would allow the group to

make their own views of Palestine's future heard by the people that mattered. The political advantages of the alliance with the British were central from the beginning. As Alexander Aaronsohn put it:

But great as this military intelligence work was, the political results were even greater. With a statesman's vision Aaron Aaronsohn grasped the importance of winning over International Zionism to the British cause. Through the 'A' [NILI group] International Jewry was kept *au courant* with events in Palestine. . . . Thus while furnishing Great Britain the most important military information, the 'A' accomplished the giant task of handing over to England International Jewry.⁴⁰

Knowledge procured through spying offered a path to social change for Palestine, transforming it from an Ottoman territory to a British-controlled Jewish enclave. The concept of the information order views the structures that facilitate the gathering and diffusion of information as an independent force for change rather than as an adjunct to more powerful social, political, and economic factors.⁴¹ This framework is particularly applicable to Aaronsohn's wartime propaganda efforts, through which he created a body of knowledge about the Ottoman Empire, Palestine's Jewish population, and the Zionist project that had real political consequences in the Middle East.

Safely in the United States in late 1915, Aaronsohn undertook a propaganda campaign to promote a pro-British stance among American Jews and to turn American opinion against the Turco-German alliance. He penned a subversive call for Armenians and Jews to unite against the Ottoman Empire, published his serialized memoir in the *Atlantic Monthly* in late 1916, and lectured in New York on the situation in the Middle East.⁴² This campaign seems to have been launched without consultation with the rest of the group. A 1916 letter from Aaron took Alexander Aaronsohn to task for his propaganda activities, noting the necessity of maintaining the façade of Ottoman loyalty in order to protect family members living in Palestine and not call attention to the NILI group's activities.⁴³ At this time, the Aaronsohn family's overall strategy for survival was to appease their Ottoman protectors while actively seeking out alternative options to ensure their safety and the viability of their community in Palestine. This was a front that the family would maintain throughout the war due to the covert nature of their alliance with the British.

Despite his brother's warning, Alexander Aaronsohn persisted in his campaign, which did not garner negative attention from the Ottoman authorities and was ultimately effective in shaping public opinion both in the United States and in Europe. By 1916, opinion in the British Foreign Office had already begun to tilt in favor of the Zionist project.⁴⁴ Zionism seemed like an attractive solution to the ongoing question of how to divide the Middle East after the war. Indeed, correspondence to this end was already well underway between the British and their Arab and French allies.

This was a crucial moment in the evolution of public opinion with regard to the future of Palestine, and Aaronsohn was determined to take advantage of it. Using

crude stereotypes, vitriolic pronouncements, and simplistic dichotomies, he painted a picture of a land ravished by greedy Turks and wild Arabs, in desperate need of revival to its former perfection in ancient times. This narrative played on contemporary prejudices in several ways. First, the alliance of Turks and Arabs with the Germans allowed Aaronsohn to tap into popular vilifications of Germany in the Western media and mindset. Turks and Arabs were as bad as Germans or worse, because they were uncivilized, uneducated, and belonged to a different religion. By comparing Turks and Arabs to Germans, Aaronsohn was able to bypass the issue of Western ignorance of the Ottoman Empire to tap into existing stereotypes. Second, he gained sympathy for the plight of Ottoman Jews and Christians by associating them under the banner of civilization and rationality, and linking them across space through religion and notions of a shared civilization to the West. This tapped into emerging notions of a Judeo-Christian civilization fundamentally superior to Muslim civilization, making Eastern Christians and Jews comprehensible as fellow human beings, while dehumanizing Arab and Turkish Muslims. The East became the purview of Islam, while the West became the cradle of a shared Judeo-Christian civilization. This shared Judeo-Christian civilization is what, through the pursuit of Zionism, would ultimately salvage the East, at least in Aaronsohn's narrative. Only through Western rationality and modernity could Palestine be restored to its former glory and preserved in its rightful state.

In helping to construct this narrative, Aaronsohn contributed to a set of ideas that would eventually gain currency and facilitate the birth of a Jewish state. His influence was only made possible by his location in the United States, which placed him out of the reach of the Ottoman Empire and within the centers of Western power. Through his strategic location within the borders of the United States, where public opinion was ripe for information about the Ottoman Empire that fed into an existing framework of prejudices shaped by wartime alliances. His alliance with Britain offered him political legitimacy and wider access to a global propaganda machine. His association with the Ottoman Empire, in turn, provided the guise of authenticity and exoticism that Alexander needed to sell his message. Ultimately, Alexander's strategic manipulation of the power structures that shaped his world allowed him to evade the risks and restrictions of the Ottoman context while giving his opinions and associations clout and currency.

Cultural constructions of the Middle East gave rise to a certain type of intelligence apparatus in the region during World War I. As Satiya writes, "Intelligence agents were part of this cultural industry. Almost all of them eventually produced books based on their experiences, writing with a particular audience in mind, one that relished tales of mystery and adventure in the Orient."⁴⁵ Although located in the United States, the fact that Aaronsohn was working with the British and that his book was published in England and distributed as pro-Allied propaganda made him part of the cultural industry that Satiya describes. Aaronsohn fed the public imagination with his account of life in the Orient, helping produce specific understandings about the Middle East that in turn contributed to the development of a particular type of British intelligence apparatus and, later, imperial state in the region. This was particularly relevant in Palestine, where, as Satiya puts it, "The cultural imagination mattered especially in a region conceived in its

very essence as a space for the imagination.”⁴⁶ In a space laid bare to the imaginations of those producing it, the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine, for example, was not so farfetched.

By 1916, Aaronsohn’s success in manipulating the network of power relationships had transformed him from a conscript in the Ottoman military to a strategic position within a political and social context that was both safer and more advantageous to his aims. He had accomplished this by imagining new alliances and allegiances and taking drastic steps to implement them across political and geographical boundaries. Safely out of reach of the Ottoman state, comfortably associated with Europe’s strongest Allied power, and residing within the borders of the United States, a rising power with growing influence, Aaronsohn had secured his future and an effective platform from which to support the Allied cause and political Zionism. Leveraging the emerging British information order in the Middle East to promote a specific agenda, Aaronsohn was able to have a real impact on social change in the region, contributing to the cultural milieu that helped to produce a specific type of British imperialism friendly to the Zionist project.

Conclusion

The NILI espionage ring was discovered by the Ottoman state in 1917 when a carrier pigeon traveling from Atlit to Egypt was intercepted. Sarah Aaronsohn and other operatives on the ground in Palestine were captured and killed.⁴⁷ Although the NILI group was short-lived and ended in disaster, its long-term effect on the relationship between Britain and Jews in Palestine had far-reaching consequences, contributing to the foundation of a Jewish state in Palestine with British backing several decades later. The British-Jewish alliance in the Middle East was not an inevitable result of the onward march of European modernity and ethnic nationalism; the Ottoman Empire and the ideology of civic Ottomanism remained viable until World War I. However, the Ottomans’ decision to enter the war, and its actions during it, contributed to the empire’s religious minorities view that the future of their communities lay outside an Ottoman framework – a view that led many to seek European support for their goals. Alexander Aaronsohn’s own experiences parallel this transition in loyalties and worldviews from Ottomanism to ethnic separatism. Prior to his experience in the Ottoman military, Aaronsohn had been willing to envision the Zionist project from within the framework of the empire. After Ottoman alignment with Germany, which he viewed as unfavorable to Zionist aims, and experiences of discrimination due to his religious association, this approach was no longer tenable.

Aaronsohn subsequently took a series of steps that radically altered his positionality. By aligning with the British and moving to the United States, Aaronsohn inserted himself into a hegemonic information order that allowed him to contribute to the process of Western knowledge production on the Middle East. His participation in this process allowed him to help shape Western understandings of the Ottoman Empire, Palestinian Jews, and the Zionist project, and to promote the creation of a particular Western

political order in the Middle East that viewed the Palestinian Jewish community as a bastion of modernity and progress in the region and favored their empowerment through political Zionism. As a result of his realignment of political and physical positionalities, Alexander Aaronsohn found himself at the forefront of an information movement that sought to ally the Zionist Jewish community with the West, forging bonds of cultural and political kinship that would pave the way for the foundation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

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Endnotes

- 1 Linda Alcoff uses the term “positionality” to account for how categories of identity function as relational markers rather than inherent or essential qualities, adapting and shifting as needed to suit current circumstances. See Linda Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,” *Signs* 13 (1988): 405–436.
- 2 Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).
- 3 C. A. Bayly’s concept of the information order, which considers knowledge as a social formation key to understanding social change, is helpful in understanding how and why information was critical to Great Britain’s success in the war and the significance of Aaronsohn’s intelligence and propaganda activities. See C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Priya Satia’s work on the interplay between the British cultural imagination and intelligence in World War I contextualizes Aaronsohn’s propaganda activities within the wider scope of British intelligence operations in the Middle East. Priya Satiya, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain’s Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- 4 Two older brothers, Aaron and Zvi, were born in Romania in 1876 and 1878, respectively. Sarah followed Alexander in 1890 and Rivka was born in 1892. The birth year of another brother, Samuel, is unknown, but it is probable that he was older than Alexander given the close two year age gaps between Alexander, Sarah, and Rivka.
- 5 See Isaiah Friedman, “The System of Capitulations and Its Effects on Turco-Jewish Relations in Palestine, 1856–1897” in *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period*, ed. David Kushner (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 284; Yossi Katz, “Agricultural Settlements in Palestine, 1882–1914,” *Jewish Social Studies* 50 (1992): 64.
- 6 Katz, “Agricultural Settlements,” 63.
- 7 Esther Benbassa, “Zionism in the Ottoman Empire at the End of the 19th and the Beginning of the 20th Century,” *Studies in Zionism* 11 (1990): 128.
- 8 Friedman, “System of Capitulations,” 284.
- 9 Friedman, “System of Capitulations,” 287–88.
- 10 Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*, 248.
- 11 Campos notes that many Ottoman Jews viewed European territorial-political Zionism as a betrayal of the Ottoman homeland and suggests that an “Ottoman Zionism” that advocated Jewish cultural, but not political and territorial, goals. See Michelle U. Campos, “Between ‘Beloved Ottomania’ and ‘The Land of Israel’: The Struggle over Ottomanism and Zionism among Palestine’s Sephardi Jews, 1908–13,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37 (2005): 461–483.
- 12 Friedman, “System of Capitulations,” 287.
- 13 Mercedes Garcia-Arenal and Gerard Wiegiers, for example, describe how Samuel Pallache, a sixteenth-century Moroccan Jew, used his position as representative of the Moroccan sultan to forge alliances with the courts of Western Europe. In so doing, Pallache created contingent safety networks that would see his family through tumultuous times in which the situation of Jews in Europe was precarious. Mercedes Garcia-Arenal and Gerard Wiegiers, *A Man of Three Worlds: Samuel Pallache, a Moroccan Jew in Catholic and Protestant Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
- 14 Writing about Pallache in the sixteenth century, Garcia-Arenal and Wiegiers note that, “we have no way to judge the loyalty of an individual

- whose status is defined by a society's logic as disloyal. We find ourselves in something like the Cretan paradox: in a world that defines all Jews as changeable and duplicitous, it becomes impossible to establish the Jews' true identity." Garcia-Arenal and Weigers, *Man of Three Worlds*, ix.
- 15 Erik-Jan Zürcher, "The Ottoman Conscript System in Theory and Practice, 1844–1918," *International Review of Social History* 43 (1998): 444.
 - 16 Yair Auron, *The Banality of Indifference: Israel and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 174–75.
 - 17 Alexander Aaronsohn, *With the Turks in Palestine* (London: Constable and Co., 1917), 77.
 - 18 Aaronsohn, *With the Turks*, 51, 118.
 - 19 Erik-Jan Zürcher, "Ottoman Labour Battalions in World War I: Internet Essay," *Hist.net*, online at www.hist.net/kieser/agnet/Essays/EssayZurcher.html (accessed 11 March 2013).
 - 20 Aaronsohn, *With the Turks*, 14.
 - 21 Aaronsohn, *With the Turks*, 14.
 - 22 Aaronsohn, *With the Turks*, 14.
 - 23 Aaronsohn, *With the Turks*, 39.
 - 24 Zürcher, "Ottoman Labour Battalions."
 - 25 Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*, 246.
 - 26 Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*, 7.
 - 27 Aaronsohn, *With the Turks*, 43.
 - 28 Aaronsohn, *With the Turks*, 47.
 - 29 Aaronsohn, *With the Turks*, 47–48.
 - 30 Aaronsohn, *With the Turks*, 55.
 - 31 Auron, *Banality*, 171–72.
 - 32 Auron, *Banality*, 171–72.
 - 33 Quoted in Anthony Verrier, *Agents of Empire: Anglo-Zionist Intelligence Operations, 1915–1919 – Brigadier Walter Gribbon, Aaron Aaronsohn, and the NILI Ring* (London: Brassey's, 1985), 308.
 - 34 "A few Palestine Jews" refers to Aaronsohn and his inner circle. Quoted in Verrier, *Agents of Empire*, 307.
 - 35 NILI is an acronym for a Hebrew phrase that translates as "The Eternity of Israel Will Not Lie."
 - 36 Verrier, *Agents of Empire*, 310–11. See also Johnny Mansour, "Secrets of Espionage Hidden in Family Papers: Charles Boutagy and the NILI Network," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 66 (Summer 2016): 55–64.
 - 37 Aaronsohn was awarded the Distinguished Service Order by King George V in 1920 for his wartime services in the British military. In an article about the event, he was described as follows: "Tall, fair, with blue eyes and curly hair, clean-shaven, and a frank and easy countenance, which might belong to any race." See "Our Brave Secret Agent," *Poverty Bay Herald* 47 (1920): 11.
 - 38 Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 1.
 - 39 Satiya, *Spies in Arabia*, 5.
 - 40 Quoted in Verrier, *Agents of Empire*, 312.
 - 41 Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 4.
 - 42 Alexander Aaronsohn, "Saifna Ahmar Ya Sultan!" *Atlantic Monthly* 118 (July 1916): 1–12; and *Atlantic Monthly* 119 (August 1916): 188–196.
 - 43 Shmuel Katz, *The Aaronsohn Saga* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2007), 126–27.
 - 44 A. L. Tibawi, *Anglo-Arab Relations and the Question of Palestine* (London: Luzac and Co., 1978).
 - 45 Satiya, *Spies in Arabia*, 60.
 - 46 Satiya, *Spies in Arabia*, 5.
 - 47 Sarah managed to commit suicide while being questioned by the Ottoman authorities. Other members of the group were executed. Aaron was not in Palestine at the time, but died in mysterious circumstances in 1917 while flying over the English Channel.