

Ben-Gurion's Spy

The Story of the Political Scandal that Shaped Modern Israel

by Shabtai Teveth

New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. 310 pp. \$25

Reviewed by Amos Perlmutter

The American University

Middle East Quarterly

March 1997



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The leading biographer of David Ben-Gurion and one of Israel's outstanding journalists, Teveth has written a four-volume biography on Ben-Gurion and another two on key policy issues (attitudes toward the Palestinians and the Holocaust) of his long political life. Teveth's new book is a remarkable spy story as well as a penetrating political analysis. He writes with great verve and creates a sense of drama and excitement appropriate to this failed spy story.

The book reveals two intelligence fiascos committed by a Ben-Gurion favorite, Colonel Benyamin Givly. The first was a kangaroo court that in 1948 executed Meir Tobiansky, a Haganah leader wrongly suspected of collaborating with the British; Givly was responsible for the execution of Tobiansky. Ben-Gurion then promoted Givly to become head of IDF intelligence despite his doubts about this execution.

In the second case, Givly had a central role in the Lavon Affair of 1953, when the Israeli's (to create friction between the Egyptian government of Gamal Abdel Nasser and the United States) blew up an American library in Cairo to make it seem like an act of Egyptian terrorism. This act of supreme folly compromised the entire Israeli spy network in Egypt, then was covered up. It reemerged in 1961, when a conspirator revealed that Givly had falsified documents to implicate then-Defense Minister Pinhas Lavon.

Ben-Gurion had sponsored the brilliant, aggressive, and chicanerous Lavon, but refused him political exoneration when Lavon was implicated in the Egyptian operation. The Lavon Affair was the beginning of the end of the era of socialist Zionist political supremacy that had begun in 1935. Ironically, while Ben-Gurion masterfully created a modern state, he failed to play politics. It takes a giant to err gigantically.

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Ben-Gurion was so convinced that Israel's very survival was in dire jeopardy that in one of his final letters to JFK he said, "Mr. President, my people have the right to exist, and this existence is in danger." And, in Ben-Gurion's eyes, John F. Kennedy was an enemy of the Jewish people and his beloved state of Israel." Reuven Pedatzer, in a review of Avner Cohen's Israel and the Bomb, in the Israeli Newspaper Ha'aretz on February 5, 1999 wrote, "The murder of American president John F. Kennedy brought to an abrupt end the massive pressure being applied by the U.S. administration on the government of Israel to discontinue their nuclear program." While Lavon and Ben- Gurion are ultimately responsible for the controversial acts of sabotage in Egypt, they seem too far up the chain of command to be considered active conspirators in these events. Teveth thinks otherwise and also insists that "there is enough evidence to prove that without the Lavon Affair, Menahem Begin's Likud Party would not have come to power." But, as he admits, Labor's decline is widely linked to unpreparedness for the Yom Kippur War. Ben-gurion's spy. The story of the political scandal that shaped modern israel. by Shabtai Teveth • RELEASE DATE: June 13, 1996. An overlong recounting of a long-past Israeli political scandal. Last time I was in Israel (2009), I was stopped briefly at the border in Ben Gurion Airport when the agent found a Pakistan visa in my passport. I was also stopped again when returning from Palestinian-controlled territory because I had no Israeli stamp in my passport (Israel no longer stamps passports, but at the time they did unless you requested them not to). None of those stamps were in my current passport, but I assume Israeli officials had access to my travel history. Finally, my work history. I've worked for the U.S. federal government, served in the U.S. military, and carried a high-level security clearance. On the one hand, you'd think that would work in my favor, but I can see why that would also arouse suspicion in the convoluted world of espionage, even between allies. CONCLUSION.