The Role of Military Intelligence in the Battle for Beersheba in October 1917

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The Levantine coast is perhaps the most blood-drenched landscape in the world. Babylonians, Egyptians, Hittites, Greeks, Romans, Crusaders, Arabs, Philistines, Jews and many others have fought and died in this strategic crossroad between Asia, Europe, and Africa. Today's ongoing crisis in the Levant eerily mirrors dozens of earlier conflicts, including the British World War I Levant Campaign fought 100 years ago.[1]

In 1917, the teetering central government on the brink of collapse was that of the Ottoman Empire. Like today's regime in Damascus, Istanbul's government held on in large part due to military support from its powerful ally to the north, Germany. The Western Allies pressing on multiple fronts to defeat Germany and its allies in Central Europe then were seeking regime change on the southeastern

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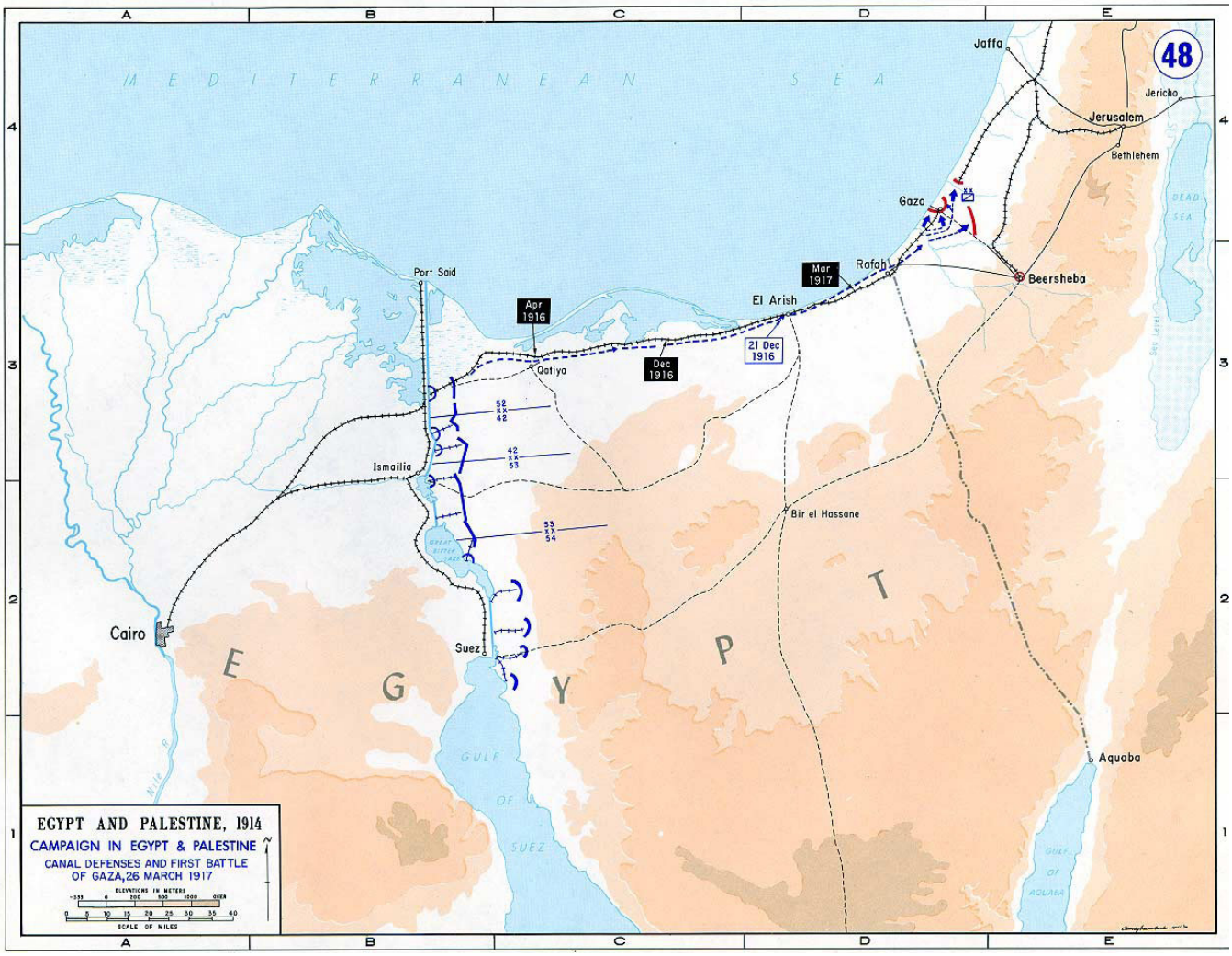
frontier of what would become the Republic of Turkey in 1923. But the Allies had been frustrated, as they are today, in their attempts to identify reliable allies among the Arab entities opposed to the Ottoman.

However, the United Kingdom, the leading Western nation in the region, had a huge force multiplier in the conflict: state of the art military intelligence. The British had honed their techniques for building spy networks, intercepting communications, conducting strategic reconnaissance, and performing deception operations during three years of conflict with the German-led Central Powers.

Although initially under-resourced and disorganized, by 1917 British intelligence, with access to the newest technologies, possessed true all-source intelligence capabilities enhanced by its Western partners and by Jewish and Arab spy networks. After three years of losses and stalemates, the British had finally managed to effectively integrate most of these intelligence capabilities at a little known yet pivotal battle of the Palestine Campaign, the Battle for Beersheba in October 1917. Military intelligence and deception proved to be keys to the Allies' success during their third attempt that year to penetrate the Turk's Gaza-to-Beersheba defensive line. (See below.)

The Strategic Setting

The strategic rationale for the Palestine Campaign and the timing for the third battle of Gaza were determined by developments outside of the Levant. Ironically, since the Crimean War (1854–56) the United Kingdom had been a major proponent of sustaining the Ottoman Empire, which was also known as the "Sick Man of Europe." Similarly, in 1908, many secular "Young Turks" felt deep ideological ties to the West.



However, more conservative Turkish nationalists were skeptical, pointing to a string of Ottoman territorial losses to European nations in the Balkans and the Italian invasion of modern day Libya. Moreover, Istanbul was well aware of historical Russian avarice for Ottoman territory, especially the Turkish Straits through which Russia could gain access to the Mediterranean Sea. Those factors, recent German investments in Ottoman infrastructure networks, and German battlefield successes at the opening of World War I, drove the Turkish government to an alliance with the Kaiser and declaration of war against the Allies on 31 October 1914, two days after German ships bombarded Russian territory on the Black Sea coast.

Within days of Turkey's engagement in the war, the British began a naval campaign to force opening of the well-defended Turkish Straits to Russian and Allied war ships and commerce. The campaign was also expected to lead to the capture of Istanbul and the withdrawal of Turkey from the war. Unable early in 1915 to penetrate the defenses of the Dardanelles, the western-most of the Turkish Straits, and lacking a substantial troop component, the naval campaign failed and led to a decision to attempt, beginning in late April, to take the Gallipoli Peninsula, which formed the northern shore of the Dardanelles.

Logistical support for the Gallipoli Campaign, which ended in costly failure eight months later, came from bases in Egypt, a former Ottoman client state which Britain had occupied in 1869. Following the evacuation of British forces from Gallipoli in January 1916, British attention shifted from the Turkish Straits to the Turkish southeastern flank, which we now refer to as the Middle East.

There, the British attention was turned to defending Mesopotamia and operating in the Levant. A Levant Campaign was necessary to secure continued access to the Suez Canal and defend the Sinai Peninsula, which the British had taken two years to take back from Turkish forces that had occupied it in January 1915. The canal was the lifeline to both British possessions in the Persian Gulf and to India, "the Jewel in the Crown" of the British Empire.

In addition, the March 1917 abdication of Russia's Tsar Nicholas II and the chaotic situation in the country increased British concerns about a Russian declaration of peace, which would free up massive numbers of Turkish troops defending against Russia in the Caucasus. Britain feared these forces would be shifted to Mesopotamia to retake Baghdad, which they had only recently recaptured. Therefore, an offensive along the Levantine coast was seen as a means of diverting Turkish forces to Palestine and relieving pressure on Baghdad.

Most importantly, the war in Western Europe was not going well and civilian morale was flagging. Although two attempts in the spring of 1917 to move up from the Sinai Peninsula to take Gaza had failed, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George told his new commanding general in the region, Sir Edmund Allenby, that "he wanted Jerusalem as a Christmas present for the British nation."[2] Allenby's first step in achieving that prize would be to dismantle the Turk's Gaza-to-Beersheba line of defense.

Looking Back: British Intelligence Ramps Up

Before the outbreak of war, most of Britain's intelligence capabilities and processes were modern in the terms of the day; however, knowledge of Turkey in government was almost non-existent. In 1929, Sir Winston Churchill wrote in *The Aftermath*, "I can recall no great sphere of policy about which the British government was less completely informed than the Turkish."[3] The reasons for such ignorance are unclear as the British had been working with Turkish officials for years, including, for example, a British admiral who had been reorganizing the Turkish Navy right up to the outbreak of the war.[4]

Clearly, there were at least some senior officials in Britain with a deep understanding of the Turkish military. Fortunately for the British, they did actively pursue British civilians who could offer deep insights into the Arab world. Unfortunately, the government also set up a convoluted intelligence structure for the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF), which the Brits had established in March 1916 after the failure on Gallipoli. Originally formed of 14 divisions, the force served as a strategic reserve for the British, who transferred many of its divisions to the Western Front.

Brig. Gen. Sir Gilbert Clayton was the chief military spymaster in Cairo. With the formation of the EEF, he came to have three commanders: British High Commissioner Henry McMahon; Governor General of the Sudan Reginald Wingate; and the

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EEF's commander (initially General Sir Archibald James Murray and then led, after June 1917, by Edmund Allenby, a veteran of numerous campaigns on the Western Front). Clayton's organization actually had different titles under each of his three "masters."[a] This could have diminished his effectiveness, but the experienced Clayton—who had served in the region in civilian and military capacities almost continuously since joining the British Army in 1895—used this ambiguity to his advantage.[b]

The EEF's Military Intelligence Department (MID), which answered to the commander of the EEF in Cairo, was led by Clayton and contained only a half dozen officers, but they were highly competent. Two of them were concurrently serving as members of Parliament. Two others were uniquely suited to the intelligence mission. One, a newly commissioned officer in the army and soon to become legendary, T. E. Lawrence, was an archaeologist. He had been living and traveling in the region years before the war broke out and had learned Arabic. The other was an army veteran seasoned by campaigns in the UK's African possessions in the previous century, Richard Meinertzhagen.[c]

Early in the war, Lawrence held a dreary desk job in Cairo but he embarked on what in today's parlance would be called an extremely career-enhancing rotational assignment, and gleefully accepted a transfer from Military Intelligence to the Arab Bureau, which reported to the Foreign Office. That unit would focus on political issues such as the potential for a revolt against Ottoman rule by the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. The bureau also frequently squabbled with the MID, notwithstanding Clayton's leadership of both.[5]

The initial point of debate between the Arab Bureau and MID concerned a central strategic question: Was deployment of a large Allied army needed to liberate Arabia and greater Syria from occupying Turkish forces? Arab Bureau members led by Captain Lawrence opposed use of such a force, arguing that it would be seen as another Western crusade and push potential Arab allies into neutrality or into the Turkish camp. To settle the question, Clayton decided to take advantage of Lawrence's skills and sent him on a fact-finding mission into Arabia. That decision would eventually have major implications for the battle of Beersheba.

Meanwhile, the British strengthened and honed their military intelligence capabilities in the region as they expanded the size of the EEF and the MID. By August 1916, MID comprised more than 30 officers. By October 1917, the number had nearly doubled. Historian of British military intelligence Anthony Clayton described the MID's duties as "air reconnaissance; air photography; tactical questioning of prisoners; with later adding agent handling and signals intelligence together with security duties." He also wrote that it had responsibility for the "briefing of visitors, publicity, and propaganda."[d,6]

Adaptation to a Revolution in Intelligence Technologies

One hundred years ago, military intelligence was also in the midst of a technological revolution. Just as the circumstances in the Levant in 1917 bore similarities to today's

a. For example, unbeknownst to EEF Commander Murray, Clayton was also maintaining a direct correspondence to the British Foreign Office. The chain of command was eventually, at least partially, clarified. By June of 1916, Britain's military focus had clearly shifted from Sudan to Egypt. This enabled Murray to successfully insist that Wingate and McMahon cut off all direct contact with Cairo military intelligence. (Sheffy, 130–31).

b. Based on 28 years of experience as a federal government manager, my observation is that anyone who has two government bosses is probably not spending 50 percent of his or her time on either leader's priorities. Similarly, Clayton's lack of a clear chain of command allowed him to, by and large, pursue his own priorities.

c. Meinertzhagen came to be seen after the war as something of a hero, in large measure the product of his own published war diaries and some uncritical biographies. The veracity of his diary entries have credibly been called into question, most notably in Brian Garfield's *Meinertzhagen Mystery: The Life and Legend of the Colossal Fraud* (Potomac Books, 2007). The reknowned intelligence scholar on the practice of deception, Barton Whaley, essentially labeled both T.E. Lawrence and Meinertzhagen frauds. See http://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-61-no-3/pdfs/io-bookshelf.pdf for a review of Barton Whaley, *Practise to Deceive: Learning Curves of Military Deception Planners* (Naval Institute Press, 2016).

d. Entertaining VIP visitors remains a burden on every military intelligence crisis center to this day. It is, however, a very necessary evil. Those VIPs set policy and strategy and provide resources for intelligence operations.

situation, it is worth remembering that the profession of intelligence during World War I was undergoing a technological revolution as profound as ours is today. Today's profession is being transformed by the advent of space, counterspace, cyber, and nanotechnologies; in 1917, intelligence was adapting to the introduction of transoceanic cables, radio intercepts, and aerial reconnaissance. All of the modern categories of intelligence, from a just-emerging measurements and signatures intelligence to imagery analysis[7] and then to the most ancient techniques of human intelligence and open source intelligence, were present and influencing events on the battlefield.

The telephone and wireless radio greatly increased military command and control, as well as situational awareness, but introduced new signals intelligence vulnerabilities. Advances in mathematics resulted in prodigious leaps in both sides' ability to encrypt and decrypt communications. Although initially at a disadvantage, British military intelligence had noticeably outclassed its German and Turkish rivals by the summer of 1917.

How did the combined capabilities of the Arab Bureau and the MID serve the British? Let us take a bit of literary license to use today's terminology and examine each intelligence discipline, individually and when fused together.

Human Intelligence (HUMINT)

Multiple aspects of HUMINT supported the Levant Campaign. The British had very active spy networks in Egypt, using the Bedouin across the desert and Jewish settlers of Palestine along the coast. T. E. Lawrence fed invaluable HUMINT reports into this network and also benefited from it.[a] For example, after the capture of Aqaba, Lawrence received two telegrams from Cairo warning him that his powerful ally, the Howeitat Chieftain Auda abu Tayi, was in treasonous discussions with the Turks.[8] Lawrence confronted Auda with this intelligence and was able to retain his allegiance.

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Bedouin riders photographed in 1915, reportedly on the way from Jericho to Jerusalem. Photo © Berliner Verlag/Archiv via dpa picture alliance/Alamy Stock Photo

Of course, the Germans also were active in the spying game. Under the leadership of Kurt Prufer, they attempted to stir up a revolt in Egypt against British authority in Cairo. This in turn led to a robust British counterintelligence (CI) presence.[9] CI, seen to resemble police work, was treated as a subset of HUMINT and was manned by civilian policemen, who quickly adapted their methods to suit CI's requirements. The CI unit in MID uncovered and trapped numerous Turkish and German spies, most famously the Jewish doctor, Minna Weizmann.[b] Moreover, 25 years before the WWII "Double-Cross System," the British were already quite adept at using double agents. They fed intentionally corrupted, dated, or partially true intelligence to the Germans via unwitting Arabs who were being paid by both sides.[10]

a. See in this issue J. R. Seeger's review essay of the recently republished collection T. E. Lawrence's work, *27 Articles* (page 51). In it he further details Lawrence's and British thinking about intelligence gathering in the region.

b. Weizmann was a Russian-born, German-educated physician, who practiced medicine in Palestine and the Levant. She was caught on a mission to Italy, briefly imprisoned, and generously returned to Russia. She was the youngest sister of Chaim Wiezmann—then a prominent Zionist in touch with senior British leaders about the future of Palestine. He would become Israel's first president in 1948. Minna's lenient treatment has led to speculation she was herself a double agent.

Military attachés and Turkish and German prisoners also were lucrative sources of intelligence. Allied military attachés were especially important for providing enemy order of battle (OOB) information—enemy's military command structure and personnel, unit locations, and equipment. Before the October Revolution, Russian attachés were the most valuable sources of such information. Perhaps more surprising, substantial contributions were made by attachés of smaller countries such as Romania and Bulgaria.[11]

With respect to prisoners, there were plenty to debrief. For example, in August 1917, German troops attacked a rail line the British were building along the Mediterranean coast from the Suez Canal toward Gaza. The attack failed, with the Germans suffering 9,000 casualties, including the loss of 3,000 prisoners.[12]

Geospatial Intelligence (GEOINT)

Detailed maps have long been the backbone of military planning. Lawrence and Meinertzhagen were both adept at producing them because both had acquired geospatial skills in the course of years of living in the region. Meinertzhagen was said to be an especially good artist, and Lawrence would have been familiar with the Middle East from his archaeological research and writing. Just as today, mapmakers drew from many sources of information, including such unclassified sources as newspapers, oil company surveys, and academic treatises. Firsthand accounts from cavalry units, other scouts, debriefings of enemy prisoners, and captured maps also were especially valuable. Yet, the most lucrative geospatial intelligence eventually came from the air.

A Royal Flying Corps aircraft outfitted with a camera. Illustrative of imaging capabilities during the period is the image below, taken of a British encampment in 1918. Photo © INTERFOTO/Alamy Stock Photo

In addition to strafing and bombing, pilots of the nascent Royal Flying Corps (RFC) had a considerable reporting mandate. Intelligence was based on air crew observations and the interpretation of photography taken from their aircraft. Post-strike intelligence reporting contained descriptions of "routes flown to and

from the objective, as well as the location, intensity, and effectiveness of any enemy countermeasures encountered." Information concerning casualties, damage assessments, and the tonnage of bombs dropped was sent through channels specifically intended for such reports.[a,13]

In the Middle East, aerial reconnaissance benefited from multiple factors not present on the Western Front. The weather was extremely dry and cloud free and there were fewer natural and man-made barriers to effective observation. Germany maintained a qualitative aerial superiority from 1914 to 1917, but the RFC's quantitative advantage enabled effective aerial reconnaissance. Because this method of intelligence collection was in its infancy, German and Turkish miliary leaders probably underestimated its efficacy.

When Allenby assumed command of the EEF in June, he demonstrated an insatiable thirst for intelligence. The arrival of five additional aircraft squadrons, which included reconnaissance aircraft and Bristol fighter planes, would help quench that thirst. Moreover, with their arrival in mid-1917, British combat air power became superior to its German rivals.

At about the same time, major advances were made in British geospatial capabilities. New cameras improved imagery resolution, and the British were able to continuously image linear features of interest such as railroads and defensive fortifications.[14] The experience level of photo interpreters also improved markedly.

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Nonetheless, critical gaps in aerial coverage remained, and all commanders wanted the best tactical reconnaissance possible just before any operation. Detailed knowledge of Ottoman defenses still required major ground reconnaissance efforts. Army cavalry scouts frequently brought back handheld photos of enemy strong points.

Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) and Cryptology

The Germans were initially more technically proficient in SIGINT and clearly had communication security (COMSEC) superior to that of the British in the Middle East, but that changed as the war progressed. In 1915, a British radio intercept station was established near the Great Pyramid outside of Cairo. British spy ships started collecting SIGINT while patrolling the Levantine coast and reconnaissance aircraft plucked it from the sky. A prized British possession was a high-tech device called a Wireless Compass. Modified for military use by the famed scientist Guglielmo Marconi, the compass enabled intelligence officers to locate the source of enemy radio transmissions. It was particularly useful in identifying Ottoman military headquarters.[15]

SIGINT was a star at the operational level, providing the British what proved to be extremely accurate information on the arrival of Turkish reinforcements into the theater. As Anthony Clayton noted in his history, "Intercepts of signals proved especially useful in the third battle of Gaza, when Allenby deduced the German plan for strengthening the coastal flank would entail weakening the centre."[16]

Superb tactical SIGINT should have given Allenby a nearly decisive advantage, but that was not to be the case. Because of security concerns and procedural and logistical constraints, British frontline commanders rarely received decrypted and translated intercepts in time to influence an ongoing battle. Meaningful tactical SIGINT became even rarer as the Turks relied on "runners" and landline communications, vice radio, to transmit orders.

Perhaps surprisingly, this campaign did contain an early version of communications intelligence (COMINT). Both sides tapped into newly erected telephone lines and listened to unsecured conversations. The encryption used to counter this threat mainly consisted of time-honored letter substitution codes, but the addition of a second layer of mathematical encryption guaranteed much higher security.[17] The resulting improvement in COMSEC led to a requirement for increasingly sophisticated code breakers.[b]

a. For a history of aerial reconnaissance on the Western Front, see Terrence J. Finnegan, *Shooting the Front: Allied Aerial Reconnaissance and Photographic Interpretation on the Western Front—World War I* (National Defense Intelligence College Press, 2006)

b. Originally the most heavily encrypted material had to be shipped to London in a process that resembles the way today's National Media Exploitation Center in Washington, DC, handles foreign language OSINT. The 2–4 weeks required to process intercepts in London was deemed inadequate, so code breakers were forward deployed to Cairo. As the Battle for Beersheba approached, code breakers were

Deception Operations

Given Prime Minister George's insistence that Jerusalem be taken by Christmas, Allenby had less than six months to overcome two failed efforts by his predecessor to breach the Gaza-Beersheba line and open the way to Jerusalem. The third major British offensive against these fortifications could not be totally hidden, but could its specific objectives be disguised? Could the German-led Turkish forces defending the line be made to believe an attack was intended at one place and not the other, true, target?

The answer was that it was worth trying, and thus entered into the annals of military history one of the greatest exemplars of a deception operation ever conducted. Known as the "Haversack Ruse," the operation involved—just before the October 1917 offensive was to begin—the intentional loss in enemy territory by a British staff officer of an apparent dispatch case containing the British attack plan. (See box at right.) Through this ruse, Allenby hoped to fool the commanders facing him regarding both the timing and direction of the attack, with the goal of convincing the enemy that the British would conduct a third direct assault on Gaza while the actual focal point of the attack would be Beersheba, 20 miles to the east.

At the operational level of warfare, Allenby also wanted the Turks to worry that a more northerly attack, emanating from Cyprus against Syria, was imminent. Once again, his intelligence staff devised a complex deception strategy. The EEF mustered enough movement of men, horses, and materials on the island to make a looming operation seem plausible. There was increased signal traffic, and he even simulated troop movements by putting Egyptian workers on troop ships. The main goal was to pin down enemy troops along the Syrian coast, thus preventing them from reinforcing the Gaza to Beersheba frontline. Although the Germans and Turks were not fooled by all elements of the plans, their decision not to militarily reinforce Beersheba indicates the deception may have tilted the odds in this linchpin battle in favor of the British.

decrypting an average of 16 German or Turkish telegrams each day. (Sheffy, 227.)

The Haversack Ruse: Who Deceived Whom?

MID intelligence officer Richard Meinertzhagen laid claim to both the idea and its execution—a claim that has been credibly disputed. As Meinertzhagen has told the story, pretending to be on a courier mission, he intentionally rode close to the frontlines near Gaza and been taken under fire by an enemy cavalry patrol. He slumped forward in his saddle, feigning injury, and let the haversack (previously coated in blood) drop to the ground, reckoning it would be recovered by the cavalrymen. Among common items that any soldier might possess, the haversack contained official papers and rough notes on a cipher which would enable the enemy to decode any encrypted messages Britain might send later. Once the haversack was successfully "lost", British headquarters immediately began broadcasting encrypted messages in that code, that ordered urgent efforts to recover it. The sack and its contents soon were in the possession of the German commander of the Turkish force. The papers indicated that the British would yet again directly attack Gaza while moving a force to Beersheba to act as a feint. The papers also also indicated that a French force would attempt a simultaneous amphibious landing well north of Gaza on the Syrian coast.

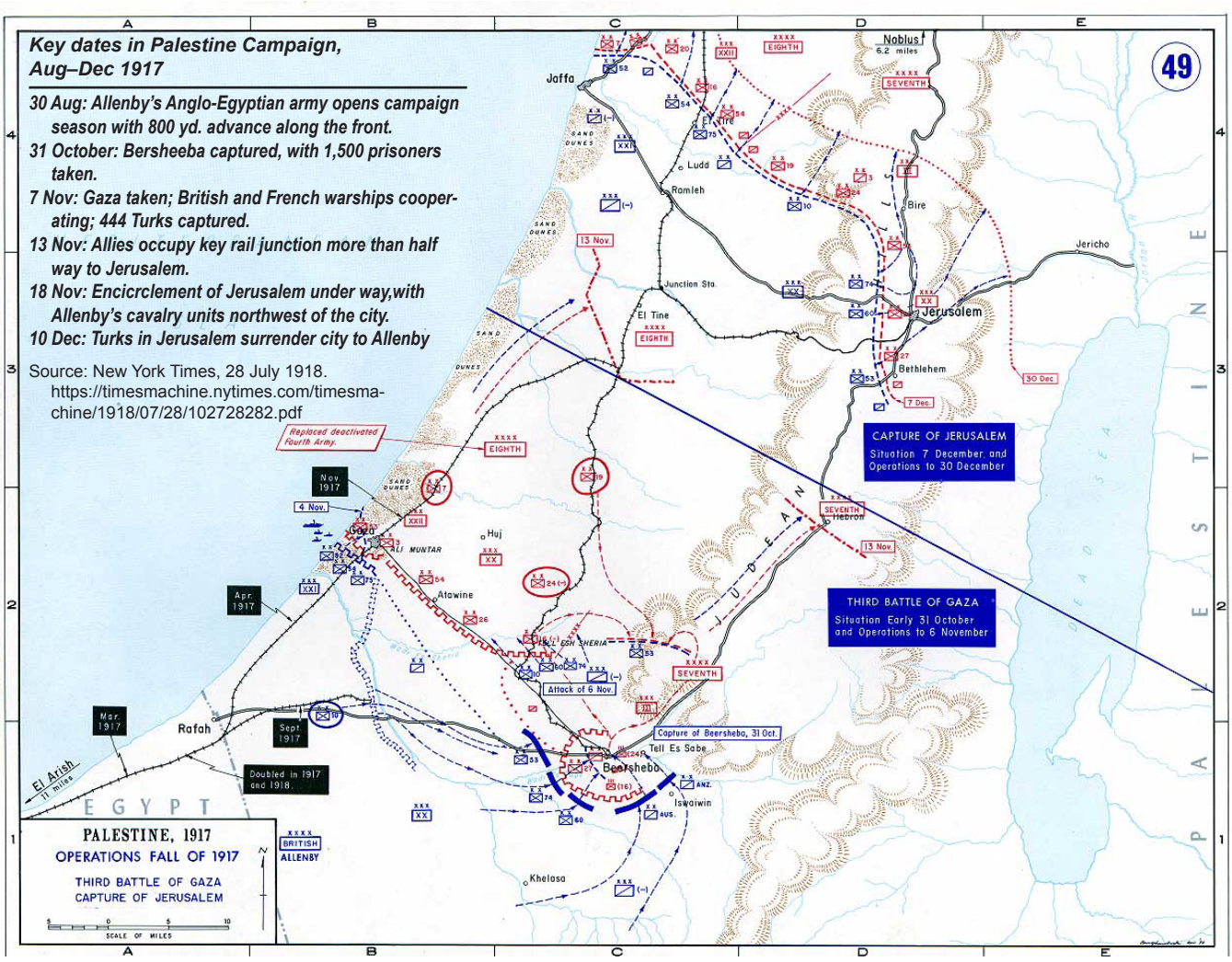
Most historians accept that the Turks and Germans both fell for the deception, thus enabling the Australian and New Zealand (ANZAC) light horse brigade to capture the strategic water wells at Beersheba and begin to roll up the Gaza-Beersheba line from the east and move on to Jerusalem in December. As noted above, Brian Garfield put forth a compelling argument in his book, *The Meinertzhagen Mystery*, that although the deception took place, almost every claim Meinertzhagen made for himself was false. According to Garfield, Meinertzhagen was neither the author of the plan nor the British rider who dropped the haversack. Moreover, the enemy clearly dismissed several elements of a larger allied deception plan. Perhaps some elements of this plan helped the British at Beersheba, but the biggest deception *may* have been Meinertzhagen's elaborate postwar scheme to use the incident to enhance his reputation.[18]

All-Source Analysis

All-source analysis is simply making use of all sources available to an intelligence analyst. Therefore, it has been a staple of intelligence since the time of the ancient Assyrians, Chinese, and Egyptians. The key variables have been the analyst's intellectual capabilities, as well as the relevance, timeliness, and reliability of available sources. During the Levant Campaign, the Allies developed excellent all-source analysis, but it was a bifurcated effort, divided between the Arab Bureau and the MID.

The Arab Bureau. The Arab Bureau focused on political and economic intelligence. Its flagship product was the *Arab Bulletin,* which was distributed to fewer than 40 people. Basically, it was a regional version of today's *Presidential Daily Brief*. Many of the Arab Bureau's insights are still worth consideration today, among them, for example, that any Western military troops in the Hijaz would eventual be seen as "crusaders" and become the enemy. Moreover, Lawrence judged and wrote that Turkish railroad locomotives were critical nodes for targeting. Railroad tracks could easily be replaced; locomotives could not.

Yet, the bureau's analysis was not always correct. Lawrence told Allenby that a successful attack on Beersheba would have to take place by mid-September before his Bedouin fighters had to move their flocks to better pastures in the east. Although this timeline was not met (the battle actually took place at the end of October—see timeline in box below), Allenby managed to take Beersheba



fairly easily.[a] Even the world's best intelligence analysts make some bad calls.

MID Analysis. Rather than politics and economics, the parallel all-source effort of the EEF's MID focused on order of battle analysis and targeting. A number of bad analytic judgements were made during the first and second battles for Gaza, when MID assessments were largely dependent on debriefings of ignorant or intentionally deceptive prisoners of war. EEF tradecraft improved markedly as SIGINT and GEOINT became increasingly available to enable true all-source analysis. By the third battle, the enemy force deployed on the Gaza to Beersheba front was accurately estimated to consist of one cavalry and six infantry divisions, totaling 46,000 rifles, 2,800 sabers, 250 machine guns and 200 guns.[19]

EEF officers also developed skills and instincts possessed by the best modern military infrastructure analysts. This included Clausewitzian[b] "center of gravity" analysis. They realized the first two attacks on Gaza had been failures in part because of the lack of sufficient water. An 88,000-man desert operation required massive amounts of water, especially for the Desert Mounted Corps, which contained both light horses and camels. The legendary wells at Beersheba could provide just such sustenance for the army's march north to Jerusalem. Beersheba also had other militarily significant infrastructure attractions, such as an airfield, railroad, and paved roads.

Access to water was a "center of gravity" in defining the region's most important military objectives. Allied mounted troops required huge amounts of water for themselves and for their horses and camels. Shown here is a single squadron of the Australian Light Horse Brigade in Gaza. Photo © Prisma by Dukas Presseagentur GmbH/Alamy Stock Photo

In addition to identifying critical infrastructure to protect or obtain, the EEF also targeted command posts, telegraph lines, bridges, ports such as Aqaba, and railroads. Captain Lawrence's Bedouin became quite adept at disrupting the latter.

Allied Intelligence Collaboration

During the campaign, the Allies developed what we might today call intelligence sharing among the "Three Eyes" partners. The British served as the clear senior partners, working closely with the French and incorporating an infantile US effort into the arrangement. Like today, the Allies also had secondary and tertiary levels of foreign intelligence exchanges. Useful tidbits were traded, but the quality and sensitivity of the data varied based on the level of trust. For example, the British periodically exchanged information with the Russians on Turkish military movements—at least they did so until the Russian Revolution in 1917. As we will see, the United Kingdom also maintained similar exchanges during the Gaza Campaign, including an intelligence relationship with several local irregular forces. Although these sources would prove immensely valuable on several occasions, their reliability and responsiveness were always in question.

What, then, did each major nation or ethnic group bring to the military intelligence table?

a. Lawrence himself was the main factor in holding together the Arab insurgents.

b. Lawrence was quite familiar with Clausewitz's famous opus of military theory, *On War*, which was published in 1832. Although not intending to become a professional soldier, Lawrence notes in Book II of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* that he had studied military theorists such as Clausewitz, Jomini, Mahan, and Foch while at Oxford.

"Playing the Long Game"—France

Clearly it was in France's best interest to divert German attention away from Western Europe and to knock the kaiser's weakest ally out of the war. France invested a small military presence of approximately 200 men in Cairo. Its leader, Col. Edouard Bremond, was not an intelligence officer, but he possessed years of experience dealing with Arabs, having had previous assignments in Morocco and Algeria. He has been described as a fluent Arabist, but his version of Maghreb Arabic may have been incomprehensible to the average Egyptian or Palestinian. Overall, French intelligence contributions to the British war effort were minor. In sharp contrast, it had excellent access to British intelligence and campaign plans.

The French were keenly interested in the work of T. E. Lawrence. Bremond's instructions from Paris appeared to require him to support the Arab revolt while simultaneously making sure that it was not too successful. Bremond and his political counterpart in Cairo, Marc Picot, were pleased that Lawrence's Arab forces were harassing and tying up the Turks, but they feared too much success in the Hijaz would encourage the Arabs to turn their liberating gaze northward to Lebanon and Syria.[a]

By early 1916, Bremond's correspondence with Paris was describing Lawrence as a threat to France's own colonial Middle East ambitions,

a. Ironically, Bremond also recommended Lawrence for the Croix de Guerre, which Lawrence refused to wear largely because of the Arab delegation's treatment at the Versailles Conference. (Korda, 458.)

Modern military intelligence exchanges are almost never equitable affairs. Junior partners tend mainly to be on the receiving end. . . .

which were codified in a secret British promise (Sykes-Picot Agreement) granting the French dominion over most of the Levant. The French generally supported British military operations in Palestine, as they did during the third Gaza Campaign, but they always remained bore-sighted on their ultimate territorial objectives further north.[20]

"Mainly Just Watching" —The United States

Modern military intelligence exchanges are almost never equitable affairs. Junior partners tend mainly to be on the receiving end, but senior partners hope the junior member can provide useful intelligence "nuggets" that may contain niche information or cultural insights to help close intelligence gaps. To the British, US intelligence must have seemed a particularly weak junior partner during the 1917 Levant Campaign.

In fact, to call the United States a "bit player" in Middle East military intelligence would be an exaggeration. Unlike today, the United States had no standing national defense intelligence organizations. In *For the President's Eyes Only*, British intelligence historian Christopher Andrew makes a compelling case that no nation was less ready than the United States for World War I.[21]

The closest thing to a US intelligence footprint in the Middle East in this period of 1917 was a lone, newly appointed, State Department officer in Palestine. His name was William Yale. He not only attended Yale University, he was a direct descendant of the university's founder. William Yale had come to the State Department's attention because of his extensive travels in Palestine, where he had been able to pinpoint the German military installations around Jerusalem. Yet, by his own assessment, Yale was less than ideally suited for the job, saying "I lacked a historic knowledge of the problem I was studying. I had no philosophy of history, no method of interpretation, and very little understanding of the fundamental nature and function of the [regional] economic and social system."[22] In short, he was a less than ideal intelligence officer.

When Yale traveled to Alexandria, Egypt, to meet General Allenby, he had so little military experience that he actually practiced saluting while standing outside Allenby's door. At first Allenby ignored Yale, but then turned to him and yelled, "What are you going to do at my Headquarters!" Yale stammered that his job was to send reports back to Washington. Allenby, clearly not pleased, told Yale that he did not care if Washington sent a butcher to his HQ, but he would have to at least act like a military officer. That was a rough way for any intelligence officer to meet the commanding general.[23]

Like Lawrence, Yale spoke Arabic fluently; had a vast network of Arab, Turkish, and Jewish associates; and frequently traveled in Arab garb throughout the Levant. Unlike Lawrence's academic missions to the region, Yale's pre-war assignment to the Middle East was on behalf of the commercial interests of the Standard Oil Company of New York (SOCO-

With the world's attention fixed on the trenches of Western Europe, military operations in the Levant, with much justification, had been described as a sideshow.

NY).[a] Also unlike Lawrence, Yale was slow to master the tradecraft of the intelligence game. The Jewish spy Aaron Aaronsohn once gave Yale a letter detailing British and Zionist negotiations concerning the future of Palestine. Yale, seeming not to recognize its importance, took more than three months to have it translated from Hebrew to English.[24]

Yale had supervised the construction of the highway from Jerusalem to Beersheba before the war and should have possessed considerable local expertise. However, it is not clear that British planning benefited in any way from this knowledge. In sharp contrast, the Americans, like the French, had excellent access to Britain's considerable intelligence trove. Yale was one of only 33 people (30 high British officials and three allies) to get access to the British *Arab Bulletin*.

Yale promised not to quote the bulletin in his reports back to Washington, but he admitted in his memoir that he lied.[25] It is less clear how much information about Middle East oil deposits he later shared with his employer, SOCONY. Like the French, Yale and SOCONY seemed more interested in what would happen to oil concessions after the war than in supporting the British, Jewish, and Arab efforts against the Turks.

"A Sideshow to a Sideshow"—The Arabs

With the world's attention fixed on the trenches of Western Europe, military operations in the Levant, with much justification, had been described as a sideshow. Therefore, given the far greater scale of Allenby's military operations along the Mediterranean coast, the inland Arab revolt against the Turks was, in T. E. Lawrence's own words, "a sideshow to a sideshow." The undisciplined Bedouin fighters did play an important role in the Gaza Campaign, but, one of the great dangers of relying on Arab allies was their fickleness.[b] Although he was not the most objective observer, Aaron Aaronsohn might have been close to the truth when he observed that he was "still waiting for the first Arab who could not be bribed by the Turks."

T. E. Lawrence enabled the British to tap into Arab tribal networks, with all their strengths and weaknesses. Numerous members of the Arab camp had intimate knowledge of the Turks. Hussein bin Ali, the Sharif Emir of Mecca,[c] himself lived in Constantinople for 18 years as a hostage of the Turks. Moreover, his sons, including the revolt's eventual Arab leader, Feisal, had been educated in Constantinople, thus giving them insight into the Turkish mentality.[26] Indeed, as Lawrence noted in his memoir, Feisal embodied the traits of Arab leaders with whom Lawrence worked:

> *We on the Arab front were very intimate with the enemy. Our Arab officers had been Turkish officers, and knew every leader on the other side personally. They had suffered the same training, thought the same, and had the same point of view. By practicing modes of approach on the Arabs we could explore the Turks, understand them, and almost get inside their minds.*[27]

The Bedouin's most famous raid took place across a seemingly unsurvivable desert, when they attacked the lightly defended rear approaches to Aqaba with horse- and camel-bound Arab warriors. Aqaba highlights Lawrence's focus on identifying the enemy's centers of gravity because it was the only significant non-Mediterranean port within 200 miles of Jerusalem. Its capture provided logistical benefits for the British, but it also gave the Arabs a secure base from which to threaten the critical Hijaz railroad station at Maan and support the Third Gaza Campaign.

In addition to ports, Lawrence also targeted telegraph lines and life-giving desert water wells. The well at Mudowwara was the major source of drinking water between Maan and Medina. Although the well was too strongly defended to be threatened by a small Arab and British raiding party, Lawrence almost instinctively sought out and destroyed an even more lucrative target—he had blown up

a. SOCONY was a predecessor of today's EXXON-Mobil Corporation. Somewhat disturbingly, SOCONY kept Yale on half pay throughout the war, and he returned to SOCONY full-time after the war. In her biography of Yale, Janice Terry notes that he dutifully had his SOCONY wartime pay sent directly to his mother. (Terry, 47.)

b. Some historians argue that the British training of Arab irregular forces established the framework for Middle East crises over the past 100 years.

c. "Sharif" denotes a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed.

a railroad bridge near Mudowwara just as a Turkish military train with two locomotives was crossing. The Bedouin were rewarded with booty. Lawrence's prize was knowing the Turk's ability to move forces south from Damascus had been severely diminished.

Railways soon became Lawrence's favorite targets. During the American Civil War, cavalry commanders such as Jeb Stuart repeatedly wrecked Union rail lines by tearing up the tracks. In contrast, Lawrence's targeting was much more surgical. Having determined that a center of gravity was the locomotive,

> *He avoided completely severing the line so as to draw Turkish concentration away from the main battlefronts. As a rule, Lawrence was so accurate at dynamiting train locomotives that the seats were sold accordingly— the safer seats in the back of the trains were said to have sold for five times more than the more risky ones in the front, near the engine.*[28]

He also determined that the railroad hub at Derra was a critical node in defending Gaza. Derra itself was too highly fortified, so the high railroad bridge across the Yarmuk Gorge became his target. Lawrence handpicked a small group of Arabs and Westerners for this dangerous mission behind enemy lines. He failed, but the bridge was later destroyed by retreating Turkish troops.

General Allenby said that after acquainting Lawrence with his strategic plan, he gave him and the Arab forces a "free hand." Allenby later said: "I never had anything but praise for his work which, indeed, was invaluable throughout the campaign."[29]

Germany's wartime alliance with the Ottoman Empire was principally based on a desire to draw Russian resources away from Germany's eastern front.

The Opposition

"Herr Prufer's Networks"—Germany

Germany's wartime alliance with the Ottoman Empire was principally based on a desire to draw Russian resources away from Germany's eastern front. The relationship had been built over the course of decades as German engineers contributed to the development of railroads in southeasten Europe, Turkey, and the Middle East. Of course, the Germans also would benefit from any difficulties the British experienced in their holdings in India, Mesopotamia, greater Syria, and Egypt.

The German Intelligence Bureau for the East (Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient) was created in the runup to the war with the aim of creating disruptions in the British Empire. Like their British opponents, the Germans understood the value academic experts brought to the intelligence game. Kurt Prufer, another archaeologist, grew up during Germany's "Golden Age of Egyptology."[30]

Berlin considered Prufer to be a master spy, but what did he actually accomplish? A gifted Arabic linguist, his many contacts throughout the former Ottoman Empire allowed him to correctly assess the flaws in German wartime propaganda. Previously, the Germans had focused on British atrocities against Muslims in India and the righteousness of the German cause.

Prufer realized the need to highlight issues of more local concern and to more subtly inject German messaging. He created seven Turkish-language newspapers and set up propaganda rooms in major cities in which the locals could view this material. His goal was to incite jihad (holy war) against the British. The Germans naively conducted negotiations with Britain's ally, the Sharif of Mecca, encouraging him to attack the British. Prufer evidently did not realize the Sharif was using their meetings in Damascus and Constantinople to cover clandestine sessions with Arab officers in the Turkish Army who might be sympathetic to the Arab Revolt.

Prufer's track record as a spy master was not good. His network of Egyptian spies was fairly easily rolled up during the Turks' first failed attempt to capture the Suez Canal. He then resorted to a Jewish spy network with dismal results. Prufer seemed blind to the possibility the Jews might also be working against him. His main Circassian spy in Damascus had incorrectly dismissed the possibility of an uprising in Palestine based on a belief in the stereotypical Jewish coward.[31]

Finally, Prufer befriended and funded an Egyptian ex-Khedive (the Viceroy of Egypt during Turkish rule), Abbas Hilmi. Prufer believed Hilmi would be a powerful asset once Germany won the war, but German intelligence had grossly overestimated the Khedive's influence in Egypt, which was almost zero. Based on the available evidence, it appears absurd that the commander of German forces

The biggest gap in our understanding of military intelligence capabilities during the Palestine Campaign concerns Turkish intelligence.

in Palestine told Berlin, "Kurt Prufer is indispensable as the leader of the intelligence service." If true, Prufer's intelligence triumphs have yet to be uncovered.[32]

German Technical Intelligence

At least initially, the Germans performed much better on technical intelligence issues. Before 1917, Germany had undisputed superiority in Levant aviation firepower and reconnaissance. Germans, and therefore the Turks, detected and readied themselves for both the first and second attacks on Gaza.[33]

Theoretically, before and during the Battle for Beersheba, German intelligence could have conducted both aerial reconnaissance and direct aerial bombardments of the British—a German combat air squadron was based at Beersheba. Had it been deployed to follow up on the Haversack Ruse, it might have spoiled the British deception plan, which was totally reliant on secrecy. In practice, the squadron did little of either. Prufer correctly assessed that by the fall of 1917 the British had finally achieved air superiority, if not dominance. The RFC's recently arrived advanced fighter planes made German reconnaissance missions almost suicidal.

German Counterintelligence

Concerning counterintelligence, the postwar Germans were painfully aware English literature widely reported they had been deceived by the Haversack Ruse. However, General Kressenstein, commander of German forces in Palestine, claimed his intelligence officers had seen through the ruse. It is true Kressenstein did not shift his reserves towards Gaza, but he did not reinforce the defenses of Beersheba. Therefore, despite Kressenstein's adamant claims of not being fooled by the ruse, perhaps the satchel created just enough doubt in his mind to keep the defenses at Beersheba relatively weak.

The Eyes and Ears of the Sick Man's Son—The Turks

The biggest gap in our understanding of military intelligence capabilities during the Palestine Campaign concerns Turkish intelligence. Very little has been written in English on this subject. Few of the relevant Turkish documents have ever been translated into English. The topic is covered in a book entitled *Yildirim*, published in 1920. Written by a former member of the Turkish General Staff, it covers the involvement of the Turkish Yildirim (Thunderbolt) Army Group in their Levant Campaign, which was also called Yildirim. The unit's headquarters was in Aleppo. The book proved to be a useful source for Yigal Sheffy's history of British intelligence in the Palestine Campaign.[a]

The scant existing evidence does indicate Turkish military intelligence was fooled by British deception at Beersheba. The Turks were almost totally dependent on German technical intelligence which, as discussed, had largely dried up. A surviving Turkish military intelligence order proves that less than 48 hours before the battle, the Turks still estimated that six British divisions were facing them at Gaza and that Beersheba was only threatened by one infantry division and one mounted division.

> *At present I am of the opinion that the enemy will make Gaza his main objective since the topography of the ground renders this part of our front the weakest part of our line.*[34]

Based on this judgment, Turkish fortification activity in the Beersheba area actually decreased. Some forces were moved closer to Gaza and others were transferred to the reserves in the rear.

In contrast to its analytical capabilities, deception and counterintelligence (CI) were Turkish strengths and an Ottoman tradition. They were particularly good at camouflaging military locations such as artillery batteries, although that edge degraded as the allies increasingly relied on aerial imagery over the visual observations of pilots. By 1915, the Ottomans had already put a clamp on outgoing communications. The orders to Ottoman commanders explicitly stated:

> *Henceforth there is a total ban on relaying news from Palestine Egypt, both by land and by sea. Without your consent, no one is to set out for the coast, and no one is to cross the border or put to sea.*[35]

a. *Yildirim* has been roughly translated into English but never published. In the preface, the author, Husayn Husnu Emir, said he was inspired to write the book because he previously could only learn about Turkish military history by reading the works of foreigners. Perhaps not too surprising in 1920, but today that remains the case.

The Turks caught and often executed Western agents inserted from the sea. This put a definite chill on British recruiting efforts. Moreover, clandestine Turkish reconnaissance forces on Cyprus were able to determine that the seaborne invasion force rumored to be supporting the third battle of Gaza was fictitious.

Finally, the Turks had a knack for intercepting the courier pigeons of Jewish agents, which had devastating consequences for the Semitic spy ring. However, their brutal handling of the ring members increased the Zionist sympathies of the heretofore largely apathetic Jewish community.

The Jews: Were They Spies? Yes—but for Whom?

The Jewish contribution to military intelligence was mainly old fashioned espionage—but for whom did they spy? The aforementioned Dr. Minna Weizmann, like many other emigre Jews, saw the Turkish-German alliance as a way to strike back against their former Czarist persecutors. As a female physician in the Middle East, she was a rarity for the time and place. Her notoriety and her family connections in London would have given her access to wounded British soldiers and the upper levels of Cairo society. What she accomplished is hard to discern, and as noted earlier, there is cause to believe she was actually spying for the British and working as a double agent against Prufer.

On the British side, Aaron Aaronsohn and his sister Sarah ran a spy network based near Athlit (100 miles north of Gaza).[36] Among other accomplishments, they were reportedly successful in surreptitiously contacting Jewish doctors and convincing them to defect from the Turkish Army. Their organization was called NILI ("Nitzach Israel lo Ishakari," meaning "The Eternity of Israel shall not lie").[37] A clever deception by this Jewish spy network paid lasting benefits. During the second battle of Gaza, the Turkish Pasha decided to evacuate all civilians from the nearby coastal town of Jaffa. Being politically astute, Aaronsohn was mindful of the recent world press condemnation of Turkish atrocities against the Armenians.

British military intelligence was initially heavily flawed, but it improved over time and eventually gave the Allies a decisive edge.

Although no atrocities actually occurred at Jaffa, Aaronsohn used the evacuation to begin a media campaign concerning the "Pogrom of Jaffa." Aaronsohn tricked the Western press into printing stories that the Syrian governor wanted to totally wipe the Jews out of Palestine. Although these accusations were quickly debunked by commissioners from neutral nations such as Sweden, the incident's international condemnation continued to complicate Turkish leaders' calculations.[38]

These local Jewish agents were highly effective until their British overlords overplayed their hand by asking them to disseminate British propaganda. The NILI network soon paid a ghastly price. Two key members were ambushed by Bedouins near El Arish in 1917. In September of that year, a carrier pigeon used by NILI was captured by the Turks. Two weeks later, a member of NILI was arrested and, after torture, disclosed some of the group's secrets. In early October, the Turks arrested Sarah Aaronsohn. After being tortured for three days, she committed suicide, apparently without betraying her colleagues. Two more members of the group were captured by the Turks and executed in December 1917. Aaronsohn survived the war, but died in 1919 in a plane crash over the English Channel while in route to the Paris Peace Talks.[39]

Major Military Intelligence Lessons Observed

British military intelligence was initially heavily flawed, but it improved over time and eventually gave the Allies a decisive edge.

With regard to human intelligence, military attachés, deserter debriefings, ground reconnaissance, and counterintelligence all appeared to be much more profitable than traditional spying. Bedouins occasionally produced excellent intelligence, but they were too easily bought and turned. Some Jewish spies were incredibly brave but did not seem to know much. True, Aaron Aaronsohn provided a wealth of knowledge on Palestinian leaders, water resources, and road networks, but most of that knowledge was acquired before he was employed by the British. Germany had even less success than the Allies at clandestine operations. Both sides in this confrontation made the mistake of thinking the quantity of their spies was more important than the quality and tradecraft of their agents.

Technical intelligence collection, both geospatial and SIGINT, had far more impact on the battlefield. The intelligence pivot point of the cam-

paign appears to have been the British acquisition of air superiority over the Germans in the summer of 1917. In the months before Beersheba, the Allies extended the scope and quality of their air reconnaissance, while effectively denying Turko-German surveillance of Allied operations. Yet, any commander's view can become muddied, or even grossly distorted, by inaccurate assessments. This vulnerability is magnified when any one intelligence discipline is overly relied upon. For example, crack British cryptographers decoded a Turkish order to withdraw 10,000 troops from Medina. Unfortunately, they were not able to decrypt the garrison's subsequent message, in which they refused to leave.[40]

Regarding all-source analysis, the Arab Bureau's reporting was sometimes brilliant and prescient. Yet, the bureau had a fundamental flaw. It had no qualms about tailoring its reporting to support its own, as opposed to London's, policy objectives. Similarly, Lawrence disclosed in his book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* that he also frequently lied in his reporting. For example, he once assured London that the Bedouin Chieftain Auda abu Tayi was still totally loyal when he knew this to be false. The lie resulted partly from ego and a conviction that as the "man on the scene," Lawrence and bureau members believed they always had the most accurate view of events.

Victory at Beersheba and then Gaza opened the way to Jerusalem, which the Brits captured before Christmas 1917, as ordered by Prime Minister George. Here Allenby's troops prepare to march in victory through the Jaffa Gate. Photo © Lebrecht Music and Arts Photo Library/Alamy Stock Photo

Similar failures occurred in Tehran in 1979 and this problem persists. Modern field operatives are sometimes encouraged to believe in their own sagacity. Although their insights can be extremely valuable, operatives can be deceived, accidentally misinformed, or simply unaware of events (such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement) beyond their personal network of informants. Therefore, there are benefits to integrating all sources of tactical, operational, and strategic intelligence.

Finally, we've seen that deception operations may provide strategic advantages from meager investments of resources. Their highly touted use in the Battle for Beersheba is an historical fact, but their impact and authorship are still disputed. What cannot be disputed is that deception operations are extremely dependent on excellent intelligence and counterintelligence. We must remain cognizant that these activities can also stray into very murky territory. The Kirke Papers in the British Intelligence Corps Museum concluded that the British had no qualms about "false reports being given to the press or drafted into prepared political speeches." Both are illegal in the United States today.

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Endnotes

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