

A modern Joan of Arc

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T. E. LAWRENCE called her a modern Joan of Arc. She had all the qualities one could expect in a romantic heroine—youth, beauty, intelligence, idealism, and courage,—and she performed a remarkable rôle on behalf of Britain in the First World War. Yet it has taken more than forty years for the full story of Sarah Aaronsohn to be told in this country. *The NILI Spies*, by Anita Engle (Hogarth Press, 25s), is a thoroughly documented account of her organisation, a small underground group of young Jewish nationalists in Turkish Palestine whose intelligence work for British H.Q. in Egypt prepared the ground for Allenby's entry into Jerusalem. Partisans rate the achievements of NILI, the code name of the spy-ring, at least as high as those of Lawrence, who was spending about half a million pounds a month in bribes to the bedouin when NILI was grudgingly being remitted some £300 to £400 a month by British headquarters.

NILI was organised by Aaron Aaronsohn, a brilliant young botanist who founded the first agricultural experimental station in the Middle East and made a notable discovery of wild wheat in the mountains of Upper

Galilee. The group was almost a family affair in its early stages, but the Aaronsohns were no ordinary family. They were devoted to the idea of Jewish redemption and the soil of the ancient homeland in that strange obsessive way that obtains among young Jews in Israel. Sarah, comfortably exiled in Constantinople as the wife of a rich merchant, returned home at the outbreak of war to share her brother's clandestine activities. They believed passionately in the Allied cause and were convinced that the Turks could easily be overthrown if Britain acted on the information that they were able to pass on. Contact with British Intelligence was made in peril and with enormous difficulty, but in the event it produced much scepticism and mistrust.

With the exception of men like Arthur Wooley, British officers failed to understand that these young Jews were unlike the usual Levantine mercenaries who exacted gold for every piece of information. Nor was the Arab Bureau in Cairo kindly disposed to the national aspirations of the group. The result was that for too long Intelligence was inclined to evaluate the services of NILI at its cost in hard cash, an assessment that may have delayed the conquest of Syria by at least two years. But NILI was also mistrusted by the official Jewish leadership in Palestine, who found it more convenient to operate through the bribery of corrupt Turkish officials, and who believed that the activities of the Aaronsohns endangered the existence of the whole "Yishuv," or Jewish community.

It is a tragic story. The delay in the British attack contributed to the unmasking of the spy-ring and Sarah killed herself after four days of torture to avoid betraying her collaborators. Her brother, Aaron, died in a British Army plane which was lost in a mist over the Channel when it was flying to the Peace Conference in Paris. The legends began. One, that Miss Engle discredits, was that Sarah was the "S. A." to whom Lawrence dedicated his "Seven Pillars of Wisdom"; another, not mentioned in this book, was that Aaron was pushed out of the plane in mid-Channel because he knew too much and was pressing his national demands too insistently. The astonishing thing is the death of Aaronsohn legends in Israel itself, where the spirit that animated the NILI pioneers has become the ideal of a whole generation.