

## The Woman Who Fought an Empire: Sarah Aaronsohn and Her Nili Spy Ring

**Gregory J. Wallance**

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Within the Ottoman Empire during World War I, Sarah Aaronsohn, her siblings, and their friends formed a Jewish spy ring—Nili—that collected information for the United Kingdom. Spurred into action after she personally witnessed Ottoman crimes during the government's genocide against the Armenians, Aaronsohn's efforts helped pave the way for the future state of Israel, and her story offers plenty of historical intrigue.

Despite its title, the book focuses equally on Sarah's counterparts within Nili. Her brother Aaron, for example, was a top agronomist, and his skill at combating outbreaks of locusts helped him earn his way into Turkish government circles. Her sister's fiancé, Avshalom Feinberg, traveled from then-Palestine to Egypt on foot to pass information to the British. Over time, though, Sarah rose to become the head of the spy ring, tasked with juggling many difficult factions, from a local Jewish community that feared that Nili's British ties would bring reprisals from the Ottoman government to skeptical or dubious allies.

Wallance vividly conveys the logistical challenges and daily intrigue of operating a spy ring in that time and place: coordinating the arrival of boats and swimmers to transport letters; sending messages by carrier pigeon; trying to determine what information was real and how much to reveal at any point. The story gets more compelling as it goes along. Nili's efforts draw Ottoman attention, and evading capture becomes increasingly difficult. The last few chapters are particularly gripping, as daily survival grows as significant as the greater war effort.

Nili didn't last long enough to see the Allied victory in World War I, much less to see the creation of a Jewish state in a former Ottoman-occupied territory. Still, its efforts were an important part of both outcomes, and Wallance's work thoroughly demonstrates how.

JEFF FLEISCHER (March/April 2018)

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