

UITERS GEHEIM
TOP SECRET



THE UNSP[★]POKEN ALLIANCE

ISRAEL'S SECRET
RELATIONSHIP WITH
APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

"...a rollicking tale of spies, hunting trips and two-faced politicians,
and a head-on challenge to anyone concerned with the place
of morality in international politics."

– Anton Harber



SASHA POLAKOW-SURANSKY

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

AAI	Afro-Asian Institute (Israel)
ADL	Anti-Defamation League
AEB	Atomic Energy Board (South Africa)
AIPAC	American Israel Public Affairs Committee
ANC	African National Congress
BOSS	Bureau of State Security (South Africa)
CSIR	Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (South Africa)
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency (United States)
FNLA	National Front for the Liberation of Angola
GRU	Soviet Military Intelligence
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IAF	Israeli Air Force
IAI	Israel Aircraft Industries
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMI	Israel Military Industries
ISSACOM	Israel-South Africa Interministerial Security Affairs Committee
MPLA	Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola
MTCR	Missile Technology Control Regime
NP	National Party (South Africa)
NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
NRL	U.S. Naval Research Laboratory
NSC	National Security Council (United States)
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OB	Ossewa Brandwag (Afrikaner nationalist group)
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
RSA	Republic of South Africa

SAAF	South African Air Force
SADF	South African Defence Force
SWAPO	South-West Africa People's Organization
UNITA	National Union for the Total Independence of Angola
WZO	World Zionist Organization

FREQUENTLY USED HEBREW TERMS AND ACRONYMS

Herut	Menachem Begin's right-wing political party, precursor to Likud
Histadrut	Israeli public sector trade union
Irgun	Pre-1948 armed movement (Irgun Tzvai Leumi, National Military Organization)
Lakam	Council for Scientific Liaison (Israel)
Lehi	Pre-1948 armed movement (Lohamei Herut Yisrael, Fighters for the Freedom of Israel)
Malmab	Directorate of Security of the Defense Establishment
Mapai	Israel Workers Party, precursor to Labor Party
Mapam	United Workers Party
Mossad	Israeli Intelligence Service

THE UNSPOKEN ALLIANCE

PROLOGUE

ON APRIL 9, 1976, South African prime minister Balthazar Johannes Vorster arrived at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem with full diplomatic entourage in tow. After passing solemnly through the corridors commemorating those gassed in Auschwitz and Dachau, he entered the dimly lit Hall of Remembrance, where a memorial flame burned alongside a crypt filled with the ashes of Holocaust victims. Vorster bowed his head as a South African minister read a psalm in Afrikaans, the haunting melody of the Jewish prayer for the dead filling the room. He then knelt and laid a wreath, containing the colors of the South African flag, in memory of Hitler's victims. Cameras snapped, dignitaries applauded, and Israeli officials quickly ferried the prime minister away to his next destination.¹ Back in Johannesburg, the opposition journalist Benjamin Pogrund was sickened as he watched the spectacle on television. Thousands of South African Jews shared Pogrund's disgust; they knew all too well that Vorster had another, darker past.

In addition to being the architect of South Africa's brutal crackdown on the black democratic opposition and the hand behind many a tortured activist and imprisoned leader, Vorster and his intelligence chief, Hendrik van den Bergh, had served as generals in the Ossewa Brandwag, a militant Afrikaner nationalist organization that had openly supported the Nazis during World War II.*

The group's leader, Hans van Rensburg, was an enthusiastic admirer of Adolf Hitler. In conversations with Nazi leaders in 1940, van Rensburg formally offered to provide the Third Reich with hundreds of

* Afrikaners are white, Afrikaans-speaking South Africans descended from seventeenth-century Dutch, German, and Huguenot settlers. They account for approximately 60 percent of South Africa's white population.

thousands of men in order to stage a coup and bring an Axis-friendly government to power at the strategically vital southern tip of Africa. Lacking adequate arms supplies, van Rensburg's men eventually abandoned their plans for regime change and settled for industrial sabotage, bombings, and bank robberies. South Africa's British-aligned government considered the organization so dangerous that it imprisoned many of its members.

But Vorster was unapologetic and proudly compared his nation to Nazi Germany: "We stand for Christian Nationalism which is an ally of National Socialism . . . you can call such an anti-democratic system a dictatorship if you like," he declared in 1942. "In Italy it is called Fascism, in Germany National Socialism and in South Africa Christian Nationalism."² As a result of their pro-Nazi activities, Vorster and van den Bergh were declared enemies of the state and detained in a government camp.

Three decades later, as Vorster toured Yad Vashem, the Israeli government was still scouring the globe for former Nazis—extraditing or even kidnapping them in order to try them in Israeli courts. Yet Vorster, a man who was once a self-proclaimed Nazi supporter and who remained wedded to a policy of racial superiority, found himself in Jerusalem receiving full red-carpet treatment at the invitation of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin.



PRIOR TO 1967, Israel was a celebrated cause of the left. The nascent Jewish state, since its creation amid the ashes of Auschwitz, was widely recognized as a triumph for justice and human rights. Leftists across the world, with the notable exception of those in Muslim nations, identified with the socialist pioneering spirit of the new nation. Africans welcomed Israeli development aid and voted in Israel's favor at the United Nations. Europeans for the most part supported the Jewish state, often out of socialist idealism or sheer guilt. Even Britain, which fought Jewish guerilla organizations until the eve of Israel's independence in 1948, recognized the state of Israel in January 1949. Although the South African Jewish community became the largest per capita financial contributor to Israel after 1948, relations between the two countries' governments were cordial but chilly for much of the 1950s.

In the 1960s, Israeli leaders' ideological hostility toward apartheid kept the two nations apart. During these years, Israel took a strong and unequivocal stance against South Africa. In 1963, Foreign Minister Golda Meir told the United Nations General Assembly that Israelis "naturally oppose policies of apartheid, colonialism and racial or religious discrimination wherever they exist" due to Jews' historical experience as victims of oppression.³ Israel even offered asylum to South Africa's most wanted man.

In addition to condemning apartheid, Meir forged close ties with the newly independent states of Africa, offering them everything from agricultural assistance to military training. Many African leaders accepted invitations to Israel and some, impressed with the Israeli army, decided to hire Israeli bodyguards. African states returned the favor by voting with Israel at the U.N. in an era when the Jewish state had few diplomatic allies. At the time, black American leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. were also outspoken in their support of Israel, likening criticism of Zionism to anti-Semitism.⁴

Things began to change with Israel's stunning victory over its Arab neighbors in the Six-Day War of 1967, which tripled the size of the Jewish state in less than a week. The post-1967 military occupation of Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian territory and the settlement project that soon followed planted hundreds of thousands of Jews on hilltops and in urban centers throughout the newly conquered West Bank and Gaza Strip, saddling Israel with the stigma of occupation and forever tarring it with the colonialist brush.

Israelis did not take kindly to the colonial label. After all, Zionism had in many ways been an anti-imperial movement. The World Zionist Organization may have mimicked European colonial settlement tactics in the early 1900s, but by the 1940s Zionism's more extreme proponents were fighting to oust the British Mandate government in Palestine.⁵ Consequently, many Israelis saw their independence as a postcolonial triumph akin to the successful liberation struggles of newly independent African and Asian countries and they bristled at any attempt to equate Zionism with European colonialism.

Conquest and expansion had not been part of the IDF's (the Israel Defense Forces) strategic planning for a war that it perceived as a defensive struggle for survival. Even Israel's leaders were shocked by the extent of their territorial gains in the Six-Day War. Indeed, before the shooting

stopped, the first internal military memos proposed withdrawing almost completely from the newly acquired territories in exchange for peace with the Arab states.⁶ Yet, as Arab negotiating positions hardened and religious Zionists and socialist idealists alike sought to redeem and settle the land, the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and the Sinai Peninsula slowly transformed Israel into an unwitting outpost of colonialism.

Aided by a healthy dose of Arab and Soviet propaganda, Israel's image as a state of Holocaust survivors in need of protection gradually deteriorated into that of an imperialist stooge of the West. As criticism of Israel mounted and Arab states dangled dollars and oil in the faces of poor African nations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Third World countries increasingly switched allegiance. After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, all but a few African countries severed diplomatic ties with the Jewish state, and the Israeli government abandoned the last vestiges of moral foreign policy in favor of hard-nosed realpolitik.

It wasn't long before Israel initiated defense cooperation with some of the world's most notoriously brutal regimes, including Argentina's military dictatorship, Pinochet's Chile, and apartheid South Africa.

At its core, the Israeli-South African relationship was a marriage of interests and ideologies. Israel profited handsomely from arms exports and South Africa gained access to cutting-edge weaponry at a time when the rest of the world was turning against the apartheid state. For the next twenty years, a Janus-faced Israel denied its ties with South Africa, claiming that it opposed apartheid on moral and religious grounds even as it secretly strengthened the arsenal of a white supremacist government.

Israel and South Africa joined forces at a precarious and auspicious time. The alliance began in earnest after the October 1973 Yom Kippur War, and shared military and economic interests drove the relationship for the next three years. Though both countries were receiving varying degrees of support from the United States, neither enjoyed a defense pact with Washington and both were wary of relying too heavily on the Americans for their survival—especially in the early 1970s, when unconditional U.S. support for Israel was by no means assured. This alliance exposed Israel to great risks in the realm of public relations, especially when the Jewish state's legitimacy was already under attack at the U.N.

from pro-Palestinian groups and aligning itself with the hated apartheid regime threatened to tarnish its reputation further.

Rabin's Labor Party government, which ruled the country from 1974 to 1977, did not share the ethnic nationalist ideology of South Africa's rulers, but Israel's war-battered industries desperately needed export markets and the possibility of lucrative trade with South Africa was hard for Defense Minister Shimon Peres to resist. As Rabin, Peres, and a new generation of leaders inherited the party from David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir, the conviction that compromising certain values was necessary for survival gained sway and socialist idealism gave way to realpolitik. During the Rabin years, South African arms purchases breathed life into the Israeli economy and Israeli weapons helped to reinforce the beleaguered and isolated apartheid regime in Pretoria.

The impact of their tryst was felt across the globe. As the Cold War spread south in the 1970s, Africa became an ideological battleground, pitting Angolan government troops and their Cuban allies against South Africa's formidable military machine, which owed its prowess in no small measure to Israel. The U.S. government feared that South Africa's white minority regime, driven by a siege mentality and militant anticommunism, might resort to the nuclear option when faced with Soviet proxies on its borders. The U.S. government had by 1970 accepted that Israel was a member of the nuclear club, but Washington worked tirelessly in the late 1970s to prevent South Africa from joining it. As hard as officials in Jimmy Carter's administration tried, their nonproliferation policy failed to prevent South Africa from acquiring the bomb soon after Carter left office, and subsequent U.S. administrations couldn't stop Israel from helping the apartheid state develop more advanced components of its nuclear arsenal.

These two isolated states formed an alliance that allowed South Africa to develop advanced nuclear missile technology and provided Israel with the raw material and testing space it needed to expand its existing arsenal of missiles and nuclear weapons. All of this occurred in the face of intense international criticism, surveillance by U.S. and Soviet intelligence agencies, and constant condemnation by the United Nations General Assembly.

This mutually beneficial relationship was forged outside the jurisdiction of international conventions such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation