

WHEN FRANCE WAS ISRAEL'S GREATEST FRIEND Si Frumkin

This is a tale of deception, of Great Power rivalry with the not-yet-existing Jewish state caught in the middle, of plot and counterplot, spies and secret agents and a cloak of secrecy that hid it for five decades.

My first reaction was doubt. So I checked with an expert - a retired general in the Israeli army, a veteran of the Haganah (the pre-state underground Jewish army) and the British Army's Jewish Brigade who now lives in Los Angeles. He has excellent connections and contacts in both intelligence and high level politics going back to the 1940s. He was one of the organizers of smuggling Holocaust survivors from Europe to British-blockaded Palestine – I, a 14-year old refugee, might have been a passenger on one of the ships he commanded.

I told him of my doubts. He smiled, "It is true," he said. "All of it is true and I knew all this when it was happening."

On December 15, 1947, near Haifa, a British army truck was seized by about 20 Haganah fighters. The truck carried a ton of documents in eight sealed steel containers, and 12 sacks of diplomatic mail that were to be taken by ship to Britain.

British reaction was panic. A statement was released claiming that the documents were insignificant, that they concerned only minor economic matters at the British embassy in Beirut, but at the same time, the British authorities ordered a total blackout of all information of the incident in the English and Hebrew press.

There is no doubt that Britain, France and the Yishuv (pre-state Jewish community) considered the documents to be of greatest importance. Formerly classified records show that the attack was the result of information Haganah had received from French intelligence. Immediately after Haganah acquired the documents, a French intelligence officer, impersonating a reporter, was sent to Tel Aviv to examine them. In January 1948, the Yishuv office in Paris forwarded

a request by France that the captured documents be immediately transferred to Paris rather than to the French consulate in Jerusalem.

The truck load seizure of secret documents was just one of the many examples of collaboration between France and the Yishuv. It involved not only the clandestine immigration of Jews and smuggling of weapons through France, but also an ongoing struggle against British Middle East policies and the French decision to support the Jews against the Arabs and their British patrons. .

The origins of the cooperation can be traced back to a 1945 letter to French President Charles de Gaulle by General Paul Beyner, head of the French Missions to Syria and Lebanon. It commented on Britain's secret plan to establish a Greater Syria by unifying Syria, Transjordan, Lebanon and Palestine in a single British-controlled political entity.

Beyner urged France to support the Jews in creating an independent Jewish state and oppose Britain in its pro-Arab policy calculated to minimize French influence. The French representative in Jerusalem was ordered to work for future cooperation and, as a result, Ben-Gurion and French officials met in Paris and formalized the sharing of intelligence between France and the Yishuv.

French intelligence had effective intelligence sources in Beirut's British embassy that gave France access to classified information from London and the Foreign Affairs minister in Cairo. The Embassy also housed three separate intelligence agencies that collected reports from British agents throughout the Middle East including names and code names of British agents, receipts for large bribes from Britain to Arab leaders and Arab pledges of cooperation with Britain. All of this secret British information was obtained by the French intelligence service and, according to notes in Ben-Gurion's diary, was shared with the Haganah. Thus, the Yishuv was aware that Britain intended to continue its White Paper policy that drastically limited Jewish immigration.

In August 1945, when Charles de Gaulle visited the U.S., he was warmly received by Jewish organizations. There is evidence that, during his visit, de

Gaule briefed President Truman on British anti-French and anti-Jewish policy in the Middle East. Truman was informed that Britain had pressured Saudi Arabia to cut oil supplies to America in order to reduce Jewish immigration.

After Britain had pressured Syria's president Quwatli to ask Saudi King Abdul Aziz to limit oil deliveries to the U.S. if Jewish immigration continued, the Saudi King replied: "I will not be willing to consent to Jewish immigration to Palestine... Russia has reassured me that it will support us if we persist... As for the Americans, I am willing to threaten them with withdrawing the (oil) concessions I gave them." A copy of the Saudi reply was obtained by a French spy.

Truman was furious when informed of Britain's attempt to sabotage U.S. interests. Later that month he urged that 100,000 European Jews be admitted to Palestine.

In mid-November, Ben-Gurion met with French Foreign Minister Bidault in Paris. For the next two years Paris was Ben-Gurion's headquarters in the struggle against Britain and for a Jewish state.

The cooperation between Israel and France grew with joint efforts to secure an independent Christian state in Lebanon, France's help with the development of Israeli nuclear capability and the supply of military hardware and training for the IDF.

The relationship ended abruptly after the 1967 6-Day War when Israel had ignored de Gaulle's advice not to engage Egypt.