As the eight Black September gunmen climbed over the Olympic Village fence in Munich on September 5, 1972, they could hardly imagine the full consequences of their actions. All they wanted was to exchange the hostages for a couple hundred Palestinian inmates in Israeli prisons. Their intention was to attract as much notice from the press as they could. However, they hardly expected that they would enter into history and would possibly even change its course. Twenty-four hours later most of the terrorists and all of the hostages were dead, while the so-called Kitchen Cabinet of Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir made a decision to launch a campaign of retribution unprecedented in its duration and in resources spent, against the Black September organization and, essentially, against the Palestinian leadership as a whole, as well as its international representatives.

Up until this point, the famous best seller Vengeance, written by the Canadian author George Jonas and published in 1984, has been considered the main, albeit rather fragmentary, source of information on the subject. Steven Spielberg based his film Munich on that very book. The American director portrays the Mossad agents not as “knights without fear, blemish, and doubt,” but as people who, in the end, begin to question whether their mission is worth all the sacrifice. Precisely this caused the mixed, if not angry, reaction of many in Israel.

Six years prior to Steven Spielberg’s film, director Kevin MacDonald made a documentary entitled One Day in September. The detailed reconstruction of the Munich tragedy earned the film an Oscar. MacDonald presented the West German officials in an unsavory light, including Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who was West Germany’s Minister of Internal Affairs in 1972. German officials are shown as callous and incompetent. In addition, the director tracked down the only remaining terrorist still alive, Jamal al-Jashi, who told his version of the events for the first time on camera.

Aaron Klein, a war correspondent for Time magazine’s Jerusalem bureau, set himself the goal of making the first significant contribution to the debate since Jonas and MacDonald. He had good reason: Aaron Klein had previously served as a captain in Israeli military intelligence, which allowed him to rely on the singular ties that are only available within the self-enclosed intelligence community. Striking Back: The 1972 Munich Olympics Massacre and Israel’s Deadly Response presents the inside perspective on the 20-year anti-terrorist marathon, i.e. the viewpoint of those who directly participated in the assassination plots against the PLO members.

Klein’s prose does not rise to the level of the classics of documentary journalism, such as Mark Bowden’s Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War and Killing Pablo: The Hunt...
for the World’s Greatest Outlaw. His style is that of a military officer accustomed to expressing himself simply and clearly. The strengths of Striking Back are not its literary embellishments but rather heretofore unknown facts and testimonies by the Mossad operatives.

Klein begins with a detailed analysis of the events immediately preceding the hostage taking. And from the outset, he offers eye-openers: while until now the charge of incompetence has been laid at the feet of German officials and policemen, Striking Back hits at the Israeli bureaucracy who, according to Klein, carelessly brushed aside the warnings that came from head of the Munich Israeli delegation Shmuel Lalkin. Lalkin kept saying from the very beginning that the Israeli athletes’ security at the Olympic village was not being provided for in any meaningful way. The Germans’ desire to make the world forget about the 1936 Olympics, which were a highlight of the Nazi propaganda machine, played a dirty trick on them and turned into a tragedy for the Israelis. The authorities in Bavaria and West Germany were eager to reveal the new image of a pacifist, safe, and benevolent Germany. They deemed the presence of armed police at the Olympic sites undesirable. They spent only U.S. $2 million on security needs, which is not much, even when adjusted for 30 years of inflation. For comparison, Klein cites the $1 billion spent on the 2004 Olympics in Athens. However, even had the police been at the Olympic village on that fateful day in September, it is no guarantee that they would have been able to undertake anything: West Germany at the time did not possess even a single qualified anti-terrorist police specialist, not one professional negotiator, not even a single professional sniper. In addition, while the Bavarian officials were as apprehensive of the federal authorities as they had been traditionally, the federal authorities were dead set against allowing an Israeli special troops unit to launch a hostage rescue operation in Munich.

Klein’s analysis of the errors made by the German police reaches the point of highest intensity during his recounting of the massacre that took place at the Fürstenfeldbruck Air Base. The reader of this chapter comes to the realization that the fate of the nine athletes captured by the Palestinian gunmen had been effectively predetermined.

German authorities have conducted an investigation of the terrorist act. The results have been kept top-secret for almost 20 years. Many may find that Klein shows some bias, as he does not hide his sympathies for the relatives of the murdered Israelis who for 20 years sought to declassify the archived documents and for almost another decade to receive compensation from the West German government.

Klein, however, is equally critical of the Israelis. Striking Back reveals the decision-making mechanism behind the launch of the retaliatory operation—it was an insider decision based on a nebulous strategy—as well as the state of the Israeli intelligence community destined to carry it out. Here is but one example: Cesaria, the top-secret subdivision within Mossad that got the task in 1972, did not even have a television set with a satellite antenna to receive Arabic TV channels. Moreover, if we are to believe Klein, only the Munich tragedy forced the Israeli political establishment to engage seriously in developing a global intelligence network and to systematize the disparate data on Palestinian organizations.

Klein interviewed dozens of participants in the retaliatory operation. Some later retired and built political careers, as did Ehud Barak, who subsequently became chief of the general staff and later prime minister. Others conceal their identities even today, since they are still on active duty in Mossad. From the time of the assassination of the first suspected co-conspirator in the Munich affair, the murder of the PLO representative Wael Zuaiter in Rome in 1972, until the execution of the Palestinian Security Service representative Atef Bseiso in Paris in 1992, two decades have elapsed, while significant staff rotations have occurred within Mossad. What remained unchanged, according to the author, were lists of the Palestinian officials targeted for assassination. The majority of the retaliatory operations was authorized by Israeli prime ministers. Some of them did it unwillingly, some did it enthusiastically, but Klein leaves no doubt about the fact that these convictions in absentia often led to murdering innocents. For instance, it is doubtful that the poet and translator Zuaiter, while he was sympathetic toward the terrorists, took part in planning the terrorist acts. The
same may be said about Mahmud Hamshari, a PLO representative in Paris who was assassinated by a bomb planted in his home telephone set.

Among the victims of assassinations were also those who had spilled the innocent blood of Israelis, Europeans, and Americans. One such man was Wadie Haddad, one of the kings of Palestinian terror, a leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a radical wing of the Arab Nationalist Movement. He died in 1978 as the result of a sudden and agonizing illness. Klein discloses for the first time the mystery of Haddad’s death, which resulted from a cunningly planned and effectively carried out lethal poisoning.

The drive to avenge Munich was so powerful that the degree of participation in the Munich terrorist act by any given Palestinian was of little importance to Mossad and the Israeli cabinet. That Aaron Klein comes to this conclusion is surprisingly candid for a former intelligence agent. In fact, even Black September—the hunt for whose leaders launched the whole operation—was a semi-mythical organization. Behind this name, Klein reminds the reader, stood the leaders of the PLO. The Mossad operation with time turned from a retaliatory act avenging the athletes’ death into a total war against all Palestinian organizations of any kind, from Arafat’s Fatah to small terrorist cells.

Two suspenseful chapters in the book deserve particular attention. One provides a classic example of a successful special operation, the other a classic example of failure. On April 9, 1973, a group of Israeli commandoes landed on a beach in Beirut and attacked a building that housed prominent Palestinian leaders, including Fatah field commanders Kamal Adwan and Abu Yussef el-Najar, as well as the chief of PLO propaganda Kamal Nasser. All three were assassinated within minutes. The operation, codenamed Spring of Youth, entered special forces training manuals around the globe. During the same year, 1973, a Mossad combat team shot an Algerian waiter with a Moroccan passport, Ahmad Boushiki, in Lillehammer, Norway, mistaking him for Ali Hassan Salameh, commander of Force 17, a special troops unit that served as Yassir Arafat’s personal guards. Many years later, Israel paid compensation to the waiter’s family. The colossal failure of the Israelis was exacerbated by the fact that some members of the combat team were arrested and convicted in Norway. This blunder seriously damaged Israel’s image in Europe and tarnished the notion that Israeli Special Forces are 100 percent effective. However, six years later in Beirut, Mossad did find and assassinate Salameh.

To some extent, Striking Back does not simply tell a story of a particular operation but traces the history of Mossad’s inception and development. Israeli intelligence agencies learned from their mistakes and, in the end, won the war against PLO terrorists. Today, the veterans of the Palestinian resistance movement of the 1970-80s are among those who support head of the Palestinian Authority Mahmud Abbas and are ready to compromise with Israel.

To use boxing terminology, however, Mossad’s victory was by points, rather than by a knockout. It would have hardly been possible without the destruction of the PLO infrastructure in Lebanon, carried out by the Israeli army in 1982; without the collapse of the socialist bloc and the Soviet Union, which had been an important international ally to the Palestinians; or, finally, without the catastrophic financial shortages and isolation within the Arabic world that resulted from Yassir Arafat’s support of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The combination of these and other factors forced Arafat and the PLO to seek, albeit unwillingly and without full sincerity, compromise with Israel.

Striking Back gives its due to the self-sacrifice and professionalism of Mossad agents. At the same time, Klein admits that the price of the Israeli victory over PLO terror is high both in a monetary sense and, more importantly, in a moral sense. For that, the book by a former captain of military intelligence earns the reader’s trust.

As an aside, the three chief plotters of the Munich raid escaped Israeli retribution. Two of them, Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad) and Fakhri Al-Umri were assassinated in 1991 by a Palestinian member of the renegade Abu Nidal group. The third, Muhammad Aude (Abu Daoud) is still alive and
lives in Damascus. In a December 2005 interview with the London *Times*, Daoud refused to apologize for the kidnapping that led to the athletes’ deaths.¹

Notes