"To see me," Aaron Aaronsohn wrote to Victor Jacobson, head of the World Zionist Organization, "one would conclude that I am soft, indolent, and jovial. But you know me, at heart, to be spiky [angular], hard, and serious. You know also that I know how to want, to want with tenacity and perseverance, to want with all the optimism of our race, and to sometimes transform my will into power." More than anything else, Aaronsohn wanted a homeland for Jews in Palestine. On his way to the Peace Conference at Versailles in 1919 to make the case for a British Mandate, Aaronsohn perished in a plane crash. A "blood-stained hand" had silenced him, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter would claim—and changed the course of modern history.

By turns a scientist, spy, lobbyist, and diplomat, Aaronsohn was a shadowy figure, easy to lose in the fog of World War I. Or find, if you're inclined to conspiracy theories. He is remembered today, if at all, for his maps. Lost in the harbor of Boulogne, they set a "maximum boundary" for Palestine, encompassing the Litani River, the Sinai, fertile valleys in Transjordan, and the headwaters of the Jordan River, now located in Syria.

In Aaronsohn's Maps, journalist Patricia Goldstone tries—with mixed success—to "resurrect" him as a founding father of the new Palestine. She brings Aaronsohn to life as "a big man, built like a tank," with prodigious talent—and more than a few tragic flaws. Trained as a botanist in France through the largesse of Baron de Rothschild, Aaronsohn attracted the attention of prominent Jews on three continents. They funded his agricultural experiment station in Athlit, where he developed drought-resistant strains of sesame, barley, wheat, grapes, mulberries, and olives. With encyclopedic knowledge of the topography of the region, Aaronsohn gathered
intelligence for the British and tried to play one Great Power against another as he searched for a patron for a Jewish homeland. In 1917, his maps enabled British general Edmund Allenby to cross the supposedly waterless Sinai and capture Jerusalem in a "lightening strike."

But Aaronsohn had neither the temperament nor the skills for statesmanship. He was not, as Goldstone claims, a viable contender for leadership of the new nation. Thin-skinned and stubborn, Aaronsohn was ill-equipped for the "turmoil, time pressure, and intellectual dishonesty" at Versailles. Little wonder that he often disappears from Goldstone's narrative of the Middle East machinations of the Great Powers. Though Aaronsohn lobbied to become Britain's favorite Zionist, the Foreign Office tapped Chaim Weizmann. And the Political Section of the British delegation at the Paris Peace Conference rejected his northern boundary for Palestine before he boarded the two-seater DeHaviland-4 at the Royal Air Force Base at Kenley, with a bale of documents in water-proof wrapping beside him.

Acknowledging that even Solomon might not have prevented the Allies from "carving up the Ottoman carcass," Goldstone nonetheless magnifies Aaronsohn's influence by taking seriously allegations that he was murdered by opponents of a Jewish homeland. Citing Shmuel Katz, historian and former Likkud Knesset member, she speculates that an assassin in a second plane shot Aaronsohn's pilot, Elgie Jefferson, in the heart, causing the D-4 to crash, and that French authorities let Aaronsohn drown. She suggests as well that Alex Aaronsohn, eager to ingratiate himself with the British, helped "sign his brother's death warrant" and failed to rescue their sister, Sarah, from rape and murder by the Turks. Sarah, "the Jewish Joan of Ark," she guesses, was "the S.A." in T.E. Lawrence's love poems (only to add that whether Lawrence loved Sarah "in the flesh is almost beside the point").
Whether or not a "bloodstained hand" silenced him, Goldstone maintains, Aaronsohn remains relevant today. He is best understood, she argues, not as an icon for the far right in Israel, who supported resettlement of Palestinians in Iraq, but as a pragmatist and a visionary. Convinced that water, even more than oil, was the most valuable resource in the Middle East, Aaronsohn insisted, as the "centerpiece of his political philosophy," that European technology and the Jewish work ethic could bring prosperity to the region and provide a stable foundation for cooperative, egalitarian relationships between Arabs and Jews. He opposed the unlimited immigration of Jews until adequate resources were developed. If he were alive today, Goldstone writes, he would demand a region-wide water plan, ally himself with the international environmental movement, and "shout for talks with Syria to commence without preconditions and without delay."

These views may represent Aaronsohn's "deepest dreams." More likely, they are projections on to him of Goldstone’s own political agenda. But she is surely right that Aaronsohn devoted his life to "an independent Palestine, free from Halukah and from enmeshments with Great Powers." When water flowed freely throughout the Middle East, he predicted, almost a century ago, "We shall not be indebted to anyone, and we shall have the right to say that our own efforts have overcome all obstacles."

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