

OPERATION PLUMBAT

THE UNTOLD STORY OF HOW ISRAEL GOT ITS NUKES

SO WHAT MEDIA
presents

“This is the true story of an incredible and complex operation that changed the geopolitical balance of the world.”

A freighter disappears in the Mediterranean Sea. A missing cargo of death that troubled the whole world. Its cargo: enough uranium for twenty nuclear bombs!

HISTORY
Docuseries
3 x 60'

SO WHAT MEDIA

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Episode I - The Nuclear Power



The first episode portrays the birth of Israel's nuclear programme.

The man who pushed Ben Gurion to make the project a reality was Shimon Peres, future prime minister, who also forged the crucial collaborations which Israel sought. One was with France; another, improbably, was with Germany, conducted in the utmost secrecy until 1964, when Germany's cover was blown and it pulled out. Britain too played a covert part, using a Norwegian front company to ship heavy water required by Israel's secret nuclear reactor at a remote location on the road to Sodom in the Negev Desert - Dimona.

In 1965, several hundred kilos of uranium went missing from a nuclear materials company in Pittsburgh. The CIA later concluded that the company, headed by an ardent Israel supporter, had shipped the uranium to Dimona (although controversy over this finding persists to this day.)

Either way, a few hundred kilos of uranium was far from enough to supply Israel's needs. Then Israel identified a new source, at an improbable location near the tourist village of Olen, some 25 miles from Antwerp in Belgium. Israel had found its uranium, leaving two enticing questions. How did Israel identify this source? And how would it transport the uranium to Dimona, enabling it to become a true nuclear power?

Episode II - The Hijack



This episode reveals how Mossad, Israel's secret service agency, brought Israel's uranium home. The operation had to be conducted in the utmost secrecy and using Israel's resources alone, as no Western country would have risked breaking international treaties or compromising their relations with oil-producing countries, many of them Israel's sworn enemies. The episode us takes from the world of covert international alliances into one that is even murkier, involving fake documents, shell companies, undercover shipments and a range of characters who include a former Luftwaffe fighter pilot still suffering from injuries sustained when he was shot down over Denmark during WW2.

The uranium in question consisted of 200 tons of "yellowcake", so named for its colour, which would be converted into enriched uranium once it reached Dimona. The order for the yellowcake arrived at the Brussels HQ of the Olen company in March 1968.

On 17 November, 1968, the renamed Scheersberg A set sail from Antwerp loaded with 560 drums of yellowcake. All were stamped with the single word PLUMBAT - derived from the word "plumbum", the Latin for lead. Some ten days later the Scheersberg A made a night-time rendezvous with an Israeli freighter, shadowed by two fiercely armed Israeli gunboats, in waters somewhere between Cyprus and Turkey. The 560 drums were winched aboard the Israeli freighter, arriving at Dimona just one week later.

Episode III - Secrecy and Deception



Our third episode will weave the story of Dimona with that of a remarkable whistleblower who revealed the truth about Israel's nuclear weapons programme.

Soon after construction began, a US U-2 spy plane spotted the site. Israel claimed it was building a textile plant, later changing its story and describing it as a metallurgy research installation. By 1960 the US was in no doubt, as CIA director Allen Dulles informed President Eisenhower, that Israel was constructing a reactor that would enable it to make nuclear weapons.

The secrecy shrouding Dimona was finally lifted in 1986. The man who did so was Mordechai Vanunu, a Moroccan-born Israeli who started work as a technician at the facility in 1977. In 1986 he emigrated to Australia and it was from there he offered to sell the story of Dimona to the London Sunday Times.

The story said that Israel had enough uranium to have produced more than 100 nuclear warheads.

The story caused a sensation - but by then Vanunu was back in Israeli hands. In an operation reminiscent of Plumbat itself, he had been befriended by a Mossad agent who persuaded him to fly with her in Rome. There he was overpowered and injected with a paralyzing drug. He was shipped out to sea and transferred to an Israeli supply boat which delivered him to Israel two days after the Sunday Times report appeared.

