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Mossad By Way Of Deception

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Mossad By Way Of Deception: The Book That Exposed Israel's Secret Intelligence

Few books in the history of intelligence literature have stirred as much controversy and public fascination as **"By Way of Deception: The Making and Unmaking of a Mossad Officer"**. Written by former Mossad operative Victor Ostrovsky and co-authored by Claire Hoy, this explosive exposé landed on bookshelves in 1990 and immediately ignited firestorms on three continents. The phrase **Mossad By Way Of Deception** does not merely refer to a title—it has become a shorthand for the shadowy, intricate, and often morally ambiguous world of Israeli intelligence tradecraft. Understanding the origins, content, and legacy of this book is essential for anyone interested in espionage, the ethics of state secrecy, or the delicate balance between national security and public accountability.

The Genesis of a Whistleblower

Victor Ostrovsky was born in Canada but immigrated to Israel in the 1970s. He joined the Israeli Defense Forces and later applied to become a Mossad officer. In his training and subsequent service, Ostrovsky claimed he was exposed to the inner workings of an organization that prided itself on **deception as a primary operational tool**. His tenure was short—he served as a case officer for less than a year before being dismissed. Ostrovsky's dismissal, he argued, came after he raised ethical objections to certain Mossad operations. But the real story began after he left Israel and returned to Canada.

In 1990, St. Martin's Press published *By Way of Deception*. The book was an immediate bestseller, but it was also met with fierce resistance from Israeli authorities. The Israeli government launched an aggressive legal campaign to block its publication, arguing that the book violated Ostrovsky's signed confidentiality agreements and endangered ongoing operations and agents. A Canadian court initially granted an injunction against the book's distribution, but after legal appeals and intense media scrutiny, the injunction was lifted. The phrase **Mossad By Way Of Deception** quickly became a rallying cry for journalists and scholars who argued that the public had a right to know about the methods of a powerful intelligence agency.

Key Revelations from the Book

Ostrovsky's account is dense with operational details, many of which were later corroborated—or hotly disputed—by other sources. Among the most notable revelations were:

- False Flag Operations: The book describes how Mossad would sometimes pose as other intelligence agencies, including the CIA or KGB, to recruit foreign agents without exposing its own hand.
- Agent Handling and "Sayanim": Ostrovsky detailed the use of sayanim—Jewish volunteers around the world who are not officially part of Mossad but assist with logistics, safe houses, and other support tasks under the radar.
- Targeted Killings and Assassinations: The book provided a remarkably detailed account of the

assassination of PLO deputy Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) in 1988, claiming that Mossad used female agents as prostitutes to insert tracking devices into the target's home.

- Infiltration of Embassies and Governments: Ostrovsky alleged that Mossad had successfully penetrated the U.S. government by recruiting an American Jewish journalist as a source without the journalist's knowledge—a claim that sparked intense debate about loyalty and patriotism.
- The Death of a U.S. Marine in Lebanon: The book famously asserted that Mossad knew about the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing in advance but did not share it with the U.S. Marines, a charge the Mossad vehemently denied.

Whether every claim in the book is true remains an open question. But the cumulative weight of the revelations—and the legal battles that followed—cemented the book's status as a landmark text in the literature of whistleblowing.

Legal and Political Fallout

The Israeli government's reaction to **Mossad By Way Of Deception** was swift and severe. Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's office declared the book a "work of fiction" and a "major security breach." Israel tried to block its distribution in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The U.S. government, then under President George H. W. Bush, was also reportedly concerned—not just about potential damage to relations with Israel, but about the possibility that the book could compromise assets or operations shared under intelligence agreements.

Ostrovsky himself became a fugitive of sorts, living under a cloud of threats. He received death threats, his family was harassed, and Canadian authorities were pressured to extradite him to Israel. Extradition never happened, but the chilling effect on whistleblowers was palpable. The case also raised fundamental questions: How far should a state go to protect its secrets? And when does the public's right to know outweigh the state's need for operational secrecy?

In a curious twist, the book's notoriety may have actually **strengthened Mossad's global reputation**—even as it damaged trust. The image of an intelligence agency so skilled in deception that it could supposedly penetrate any government, turn any citizen into an unwitting asset, and outmaneuver even its closest allies, contributed to the organization's mystique. As one former CIA officer quipped, "You can't buy that kind of PR."

Deception as a Core Operational Tactic

The central theme of *By Way of Deception* is that **deception is not an occasional tool for Mossad; it is the very fabric of its operations**. From recruitment to asset handling, from surveillance to outright subversion, the agency's methods rely on creating layers of false reality. Ostrovsky described how new recruits are trained in "tradecraft of the highest level" that includes disguises, forged documents, cover identities, and psychological manipulation.

One of the most striking sections of the book discusses the concept of "the legend"—a complete, coherent false biography that an agent lives as his or her cover. Mossad's legends were often so detailed that the agents themselves sometimes struggled to remember their true identities. The book also described "Mossad's own version of the Cold War," where the agency deliberately fed misinformation to other intelligence services to create confusion and undermine their operations.

In the post-9/11 world, the debate over deception in intelligence has only intensified. The use of false flag operations, targeted killings, and information warfare by many nations has blurred the lines between aggressive intelligence and state-sanctioned crime. Ostrovsky's book, though written decades ago, continues to be cited as a cautionary tale about the moral compromises inherent in the intelligence profession.

Fact, Fiction, and the Fog of Intelligence

Critics have long attacked Ostrovsky's credibility. Former Mossad chiefs, including Shabtai Shavit and Danny Yatom, have categorically denied his claims. They argue that Ostrovsky was a junior officer who never had access to the kind of high-level secrets he described. Some have suggested that the book is partly fiction, woven from bits of genuine tradecraft that Ostrovsky learned in training and exaggerated for dramatic effect.

Yet independent investigations have found that many of Ostrovsky's claims align with known facts. For example, the details of the Abu Jihad assassination were later confirmed by Israeli sources after the book's publication. Similarly, the existence of *sayanim*is no longer seriously contested—it is widely acknowledged that Mossad uses Jewish volunteers worldwide, though the agency insists that these volunteers are never asked to commit illegal acts.

The fog of intelligence means that we may never know the full truth of what Ostrovsky wrote. But the very fact that the book remains in print, that it continues to be assigned in university courses on intelligence studies, and that it is cited by both supporters and detractors of Israel, speaks to its enduring influence. The phrase **Mossad By Way Of Deception**has taken on a life of its own, representing the tension between transparency and secrecy that defines modern democracy.

Cultural and Historiographical Impact

Beyond the immediate legal and political battles, *By Way of Deception*altered the way the public understands espionage. Before the book, Mossad was often portrayed in popular culture as an almost superhuman agency—slick, invincible, and morally clean. Ostrovsky's account introduced a darker, more complex character: an organization capable of ruthlessness, manipulation, and even betrayal of allies.

The book also contributed to a broader wave of whistleblowing literature in the 1990s and afterward. Works like *No Other Option* by Naphtali Lau-Lavie and *The Mossad: The Greatest Missions of the Israeli Secret Service* by Michael Bar-Zohar and Nissim Mishal offered institutional counter-narratives. Yet **Mossad By Way Of Deception** remains the most notorious—and the most widely read—of the whistleblower accounts.

Today, the book's legacy can be seen in the ongoing debates about Edward Snowden, Julian Assange, and WikiLeaks. The same questions that Ostrovsky's case raised—What is the cost of state secrecy? How do we balance security with accountability? Who gets to decide what the public should not know?—are at the heart of modern whistleblowing controversies.

Conclusion

Mossad By Way Of Deception is far more than a controversial memoir. It is a document that confronted one of the world's most secretive intelligence agencies with uncomfortable truths—some verified, some disputed, but all provocative. The book forced a public reckoning with the reality that intelligence work, especially for a small nation surrounded by enemies, often relies on deception as a first and last resort. Whether you view Ostrovsky as a courageous truth-teller or a disgruntled ex-agent who broke his oath, his book remains an essential reference point for anyone trying to understand the shadow side of international relations. In a world where disinformation and covert action are increasingly common, the lessons from *By Way of Deception*are more relevant than ever.

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