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SOVIET MOTIVES IN THE PARTITION OF PALESTINE, 1947-48

ARNOLD KRAMMER*

Russian involvement in the Middle East follows a national tradition that has survived all the problems of internal struggles, ideology, religious differences, and innumerable failures interrupted by occasional dazzling success which mark the course of Russian history. After the revolution in 1917, however, territorial annexation ceased to be a prime motivating factor of Russian policy, and emphasis shifted to ideological conversion as an instrument for the extension of political influence.¹ At the end of World War II, though, after exactly three decades of ambivalence and mild interest in the lower Middle East, interrupted only briefly by her transient concern with the 1929 Palestinian riots, a smaller uprising in 1933, and the great Arab revolt of 1936-1939, Soviet Russia found herself without a single ally in the potentially explosive area.

In 1946 and early 1947, Moscow supported, albeit half-heartedly, Arab independence movements and their demands for the withdrawal of Western troops from the area. In May 1947, the Soviet Union then astonished the diplomatic world by reversing her three decade support of the Arab world and placing herself on record as a supporter of Zionist aspirations for the establishment and consolidation of a Jewish state in Palestine. Equally astonishing was her ideological rationalization of this move in support of the Zionist movement, hitherto a major focal point of Soviet distrust as an ideology

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¹ For concise and detailed explanations of Russia's historical involvement in the Middle East, see Geoffrey Wheeler, "Russia and the Middle East," *Political Quarterly*, XXVIII (1957), pp. 127-136; Geoffrey Wheeler, "Colonialism and the USSR," *Political Quarterly*, XXIX (1958), pp. 215-223; and George Lenczowski, "Evolution of Soviet Policy toward the Middle East," *Journal of Politics*, XX (February 1958), pp. 162-186.

inconsistent with the Communist system. This totally unorthodox reversal in Soviet foreign policy lasted less than two years before it deteriorated into a period of "indifferent neutrality," and, following a series of anti-Semitic internal Communist Party purges, culminated in the formation of the Czech-Egyptian Arms Agreement of 1955.

Internationally, the several years following the end of the war found Russia embroiled in a variety of fruitless ventures and dangerous potential confrontations with the West, and by 1947, the Soviet Union's general aims in the Middle East can be reduced to four basic issues. Primarily, Russia was anxious about her open Middle East flank, and the fear that Iran and Turkey, dangerously close to the metallurgical industries of South Russia and the Caucasian oil fields, might serve as potential springboards against the Soviet Union. A second, though equally important, motive for Russia's interest in the area was the traditional urge to secure a warm water port. Despite all the territory which his wartime diplomacy obtained, Stalin was unable to gain access to a year-round port and a direct outlet to the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. The Soviet Union's third motive involved the future of Middle East oil. Her aims in this regard arose as early as the Teheran Conference of December 1943, when Roosevelt rejected Stalin's suggestion that Middle East oil should be administered by the Big Three. The destruction of Russia's oil industry by the German occupation, coupled with the growing fear that the Middle Eastern fields might fall under total Anglo-American control, galvanized Soviet strategists to action. In addition to these motives, which can be regarded in a sense as "positive," extensive Western interests in the Middle East made it a vulnerable area for Soviet diversionary tactics, especially against Great Britain. And while there is little question that the Palestine issue occupied but a very small portion of the Kremlin's concern in the world of Cold War politics, the eruption of the Palestine Question in 1947 clearly provided an unexpected opportunity to pursue an entirely new Soviet tactic with regard to the Middle East.

OVERTURES BY ZIONIST SOCIALISTS

In the body of historical evidence relating to this changed policy, one intriguing factor which deserves examination is the activity during the forties of left-wing Palestinian Jews whose aim was to incline the Soviet Union towards a pro-Zionist policy. Despite Russia's sudden support of the creation of Israel in the United Nations in 1947, there are a number of indications that the Soviet Union had not only been approached on several earlier occasions by Palestinian Jews anxious to find a champion for the Zionist cause, but that the Soviets themselves often appeared intriguingly interested. There is a strong indication that Jewish overtures during these early meetings between

Palestinian Zionists and Communist leaders included a variety of personal promises and prophecies regarding the future political direction of the Israeli government. The Soviet Union, in effect, entered the United Nations debates on the Palestine Question in May and November of 1947 with a number of personal assurances from relatively important, though left-wing, individuals who might have risen to prominent positions in the future government of the created state. The Soviets had certainly not received any similar assurances from members of the Arab world.

One such occasion, shrouded in mystery to this day, involved a prominent and respected figure in later Israeli politics, Dr. Moshe Sneh. A man of extraordinary intellectual alertness and journalistic and oratorical skill, and a Zionist leader since his youth in Warsaw, Sneh went to Palestine in March 1940 following a short enlistment in the Polish Army in an unsuccessful effort to prevent its fall to the Nazis. Three months after his arrival in Palestine, and at the age of thirty-one, Sneh was appointed to the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Haganah, a post he held for six years. Late in 1946, he became the Jewish Agency's Director in Paris, with the primary assignment of representing the Agency throughout Europe in the pursuit of support for the eventual partition of Palestine. According to one observer in 1957, "he held probably the third most important position in the Zionist movement.... He might have been Premier today had he played his cards wisely and imposed a rein on the pace of his ambitions."² It appears, however, that this period marked the beginning of Sneh's view of the Jewish struggle with the British in Palestine as "part of a struggle against Western imperialism."³ After revisiting his native Poland under its Communist regime a year later, in mid-1947, Sneh declared that "the young Jewish state could gain more by orienting itself toward the Soviet Union than it had achieved by attachment to London and Washington."⁴ At the same time, he broke with the Jewish Agency, helped to found the broad socialist party Mapam,⁵ and six years later led a left-wing faction from that party into the Israeli Communist Party, of which he acted as Secretary until his death in 1972.

The Soviet Union received assurances from other quarters. One of the most unusual and persistent sources came from an Israeli representative of the left-wing Zionist Hashomer Hatzair (Young Guard) movement, Mordechai Oren. Still a controversial figure in the Israeli political spectrum, Oren had

² Judd L. Teller, *The Kremlin, the Jews and the Middle East* (New York, 1957), p. 142.

³ Winston Burdett, *Encounter with the Middle East* (New York, 1969), p. 135.

⁴ Martin Ebon, "Communist Tactics in Palestine," *Middle East Journal* (July 1948), pp. 266-267.

⁵ Mapam was formed in late 1947 from the fusion of two socialist splinter groups and stands for *Mifletet Poalim Meuchedet*, or the United Workers Party.

spent most of his adult life since his emigration to Palestine in 1929 lobbying throughout the world to enlist support for the Zionist movement. Mordechai Oren described his activities in the following way:

My activities from 1945... were of a pioneering character in the political and diplomatic field (although in a non-official capacity) and even in the field of mass-propaganda of press and radio. ... I did my job on behalf of Hashomer Hatzair... and my work may have been more effective than that of the official people, because I spoke the ideological and political language of those [East European] regimes....⁶

Oren makes the very interesting though uncorroborated claim that he “knew about the Russian attitude on Israel as early as 1944, ... from a conversation with the Soviet Ambassador to London, Fedor Gusev.”⁷ While it is unlikely that the Soviet Union had even considered the Palestine Question as early as 1944, and that any statement of support was purely Ambassador Gusev’s, there is little doubt that Mordechai Oren played a dominant role in any influence the left-wing Zionists may have exerted on the Soviet Union’s ultimate decision to back the creation of Israel in the United Nations.

Israel’s left-wing parties, particularly Oren’s Hashomer Hatzair, dispatched a number of other unofficial “roving ambassadors” to influence Communist officials throughout the Eastern bloc and in the United Nations. One such delegation, headed by the Political Secretary of Mapam, Natan Peled, was sent to influence the Soviet representatives in the United Nations at the beginning of 1947. Peled later recalled that while the Russian delegates “showed the coolest attitude toward our problem,” he arranged to be invited to an official cocktail party where he struck up a friendship with Alexander Krasilnikov, a member of the Russian delegation.

He didn’t know much about the Palestine problem so that our future meetings became briefings about Zionism and Socialist-Zionist Nationalism. ...Generally, Krasilnikov and his colleagues would write their requests very precisely, asking information about a few specific questions (the social pattern of the Jewish settlement in Palestine, parties, economic enterprises, underground organizations, and Jewish victims of the Second World War). I knew that the information was going directly to Moscow and that it would determine their future attitude about us, but I couldn’t even guess what that attitude would be. I don’t conceal the fact that Gromyko’s speech was a surprise even to me.⁸

In a meeting with Krasilnikov several weeks before Gromyko’s May 1947

⁶ Letter from Mordechai Oren to the writer, March 7, 1969.

⁷ *Ibid.* See also Mordechai Oren, *Prisonnier politique à Prague, 1951-1956* (Paris: Les Temps Modernes, René Julliard, 1960).

⁸ Habib Canaan, *Betzeit Ha’Britim* (When the British Left) (Tel Aviv, 1958), p. 44.

speech, an argument developed over the fate of the Jews if the Soviet Union chose to support the Arabs, and

Krasilnikov grinned and confided: "You'll see that our policy leads to a completely different end. We shall not only support the Jewish 'Aliyah' [immigration], but we shall support the right of the Jewish nation to self-determination."⁹

The elated left-wing delegates rushed to check with Gromyko who told them enigmatically,

The important thing now is to keep your positions. If you succeed in holding a bit more, there will soon be a change in both military and political fields.... Keep in touch and report any changes in development.

At the end of the meeting, the now self-assured Palestinian Zionists raised the further question of military supplies from Eastern Europe to defend the potential state against the imminent Arab invasion, and Gromyko's answer offers an important insight into Russia's role in the process by which Israel was supplied with weapons through Prague. He stated: "I think that some steps have already been made in that direction. In any case I shall talk to the Czech delegate."¹⁰

One final example of attempts by Palestinian Zionist representatives to influence the Soviet Union's decision occurred at about the same time as the appearance of the leftist delegation. Officials of the Jewish Agency at the United Nations, Moshe Shertok (later to become Israel's Foreign Minister Sharett), Eliahu Epstein (Elath), and David Horowitz, entered into a series of talks with the Soviet representative Semyon Tsarapkin, and his adviser, Boris Stein. After a number of meetings at the Consulate-General of the USSR in New York, which had covered a variety of subjects related to the future of Palestine, Tsarapkin suddenly

got up and went out of the room for a few minutes and returned with a bottle of wine and some glasses. It was at the outset of the UN discussions and the future was still beclouded. Consequently we were inwardly elated and delighted when Tsarapkin filled the five glasses and, raising his own, gave the toast: "To the future Jewish State!"¹¹

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48. It is interesting that despite all of the supposed advance knowledge about the future Soviet stand, the Israeli Communist Party's newspaper, *Kol Ha'am*, as well as Hashomer Hatzair's paper, *Mishmar* (later Mapai's paper), were caught completely unaware and on May 14, 1947 published a standard editorial calling for a federated Arab-Jewish state, while Gromyko had already announced the new Soviet position. For detailed information regarding Czech arms see Arnold Krammer, "Arms for Independence: When the Soviet Bloc Supported Israel," *Wiener Library Bulletin* (London) XXII, 3 (Summer 1968), pp. 19-23.

¹¹ David Horowitz, *State in the Making* (New York, 1953), pp. 271-272.

There is evidence to indicate, therefore, that representatives of the Soviet Union had been influenced to take a closer look at the Palestine Question by a variety of Palestinian Zionists, official and unofficial delegates of the Jewish Agency, whose portrayal of the future Jewish government was made most favourable to Soviet interests. The possibility that the Soviet Union would regard a Jewish state as a potential supporter was, in fact, widely voiced by other sources as well as these left-wing Zionists. The contemporary Western and Arab press, for example, emphasized the fear that the Jewish Agency, desperately seeking support from any source, would be demonstratively grateful to the Soviet Union for its stalwart and unexpected stand on the Partition Resolution.

In examining the influence of left-wing Zionists on Russian policy, however, it must be noted that if Soviet strategists had indeed looked to potential gratitude as adequate profit on a diplomatic investment, the Soviet Union was soon to realize that it had overestimated the degree to which Israel was willing to be influenced by Russia's support. For one thing, there can be little doubt that the Soviet Union was fully aware that the governing Jewish Agency had long been an exponent of "political non-identification." Ben-Gurion's speeches had always been based upon the single premise that while world Jewry was concentrated in both Eastern and Western Europe, a homeland created by the Jewish Agency would not endanger either group with policies of partisan politics. The Soviet Union must also have been aware that America's large Jewish vote would have influenced the United States to join in the creation of a Jewish state, and that such a partnership of East and West, regardless of Russia's motives, would have strengthened Israel's neutrality. Israel would not have abandoned either camp, and its Jews, over a show of gratitude. In discussing this issue with American Ambassador James McDonald, Ben-Gurion declared that:

Israel welcomes Russian support in the UN but will not tolerate Russian domination. Not only is Israel Western in its orientation, but our people are democratic and realize that only through the co-operation and support of the US can they become strong and remain free. Only the West, by humiliating and deserting Israel in the UN and elsewhere, can alienate our people.¹²

Events were to show that while Israel was enormously grateful for Russia's support, and more especially for Czechoslovakia's military aid,¹³ the purity

¹² James G. McDonald, *My Mission to Israel, 1948-1951* (New York, 1951) p. 257.

¹³ For an example of Israel's continued gratitude for Czechoslovakia's help, see President Chaim Weizmann's welcoming speech to the new Czech Ambassador to Israel, Dr. Edouard Goldstucker, on January 18, 1950. Full text quoted in *The Jewish Agency's Digest*, II, 18 (288), February 27, 1950, pp. 782-783.

of the Soviet Union's intentions was never taken for granted. Israel's gratitude to the Eastern bloc in no way prevented her from allying with the West in the United Nations on issues such as the Korean War, while at the same time trying to maintain friendly relations with the Soviet Union for the sake of its Jewry. It is doubtful, therefore, that Soviet strategists could have considered the Jewish Agency's potential gratitude a deciding factor in casting their lot with the partition plan.

A more convincing argument for Russia's support may lie in the Soviet Union's basic concept of the Jewish leaders and the socialist structure of Zionism's pioneer movement in Palestine. While Communism has always regarded the Jewish movement as a typical development of the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois mentality, the Zionist movement's links with revolutionary militant socialism were undeniable. The militant socialist branch of the Zionist movement, represented by Ben-Gurion's *Poale Zion* organization and Joseph Sprinzak's *Hapoel Hatzair* (which united to form the Mapai Party in 1930), became strong enough to capture the leadership of the world Zionist movement at the Congress of 1933 and in 1935 gained control of the unofficial government of Israel, the Jewish Agency. The close ties between socialism and Zionism¹⁴ might well have attracted Moscow's closer attention in 1947. In addition, the East European origin of a large number of Palestinian Zionists (estimated as high as 85 per cent) and the *fin de siècle* Marxist idealism of many of their political leaders no doubt helped to foster the hope in Moscow that Israel might eventually join the orbit of satellite nations.¹⁵ The Zionist leaders of distinction, almost without exception, were born in the Russian Empire (including most of Poland before 1914): Vladimir Jabotinsky, Nahum Sokolow, Menahem Ussishkin, Chaim Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion, and most of the other past and contemporary Palestinian Zionists. In addition, Jewish colonization in Palestine was predominantly socialist in character, built along communal or cooperative lines. An idealistic campaign of agricultural development and swamp reclamation in the outlying areas of Palestine began as early as 1909 with the initiation of the *kibbutz* (collective settlement) movement. The *kibbutz* was generally built on land owned by the Jewish community and rented to members on the basis of communal ownership of property,

¹⁴ Norman Bentwich, "The Soviet-Jewish Conflict," *The Commentary Review* (London), May, 1953, pp. 261-66; see especially Ferdinand Zweig, *Israel: The Sword and the Harp* (London, 1969), pp. 279-290; and David Ben-Gurion, "Socialist Zionism," *Furrows* (New York), V, 9 (October, 1947), pp. 19-22.

¹⁵ The Zionist movement was vocal in its rejection of any argument implying a link between Israel's Russian-born population and any possible aggressive Soviet moves in the Middle East. "If Russian soldiers roll through Iran and Syria they will meet at the borders of Israel the sons and daughters of Russian Jews... defending a society which is a personification of the by-products of both Eastern and Western man...." Thomas Sugrue, "The Jewish Return to Israel," *The American Zionist*, XLIII, 1 (November, 1952), p. 9.

rotating leadership, self-sufficiency as a unit, disregard for money and the equal distribution of the fruits of communal labour — “a society in which each gave according to his ability and in which each received according to his needs.”¹⁶ By 1944, the Editor-in-Chief of the Palestine News Service, Eliahu Ben-Horin, could state that: “In fact, Palestine can boast of better achievements in the field of economic communism than the Soviet Union.”¹⁷

It was, therefore, quite a significant occasion when in October 1943, Ivan Maisky, former Soviet Ambassador to London and now Vice-Commissar for Foreign Affairs, made the first official visit of a Soviet dignitary to Palestine. Maisky made a specific point of touring Palestine’s industries and inspected a number of Jewish colonies and collective settlements, returning to Moscow impressed with their achievements and potentialities to present a comprehensive report.¹⁸ During the same year, 1943, a leading Soviet diplomat made the following remarks to a Jewish delegation, quoted by Ben-Horin, which would appear to shed light on the Soviet Union’s motives for supporting the creation of Israel. The diplomat is reported to have stated:

Back in the twenties, we could not but consider Zionism as an agency of British imperialism. And we were bound to treat you accordingly. Now, however, the whole situation has changed. Not only do Britain and Zionism seem to be at a constant variance, but our outlook, too, has undergone a serious evolution. Should Soviet Russia be interested in the future in the Middle East, it would be obvious that the advanced and progressive Jews of Palestine hold out much more promise for us than the backward Arabs controlled by feudal cliques of kings and effendis.¹⁹

Nevertheless, while Zionism’s deep socialist commitments could logically have been an attractive, but secondary, motive for Russian support, the Soviet Union’s long and irritating experiences with the Zionist movement in Eastern Europe and vice versa — Marxism had always been heatedly opposed to Zionism — must certainly have made it sceptical of any possible transformation of a Zionist-dominated state into one oriented towards Soviet Communism.

¹⁶ A. Mansbach, *An Introduction to the Kibbutz and Other Forms of Collective Settlement* (Melbourne, 1957), p. 5, quoted in Alan D. Crown, “The Changing World of the Kibbutz,” *Middle East Journal*, (Autumn 1965), p. 424.

¹⁷ Eliahu Ben-Horin, “The Soviet Wooing of Palestine,” *Harper’s Magazine*, 188 (April 1944), p. 418.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 415; also discussed in the *Bulletin of the Institute of Arab-American Affairs* (New York), III, 11 (May 15, 1948), p. 3.

¹⁹ Ben-Horin, “The Soviet Wooing of Palestine,” *Harper’s Magazine*, p. 415. Neither the “leading Soviet diplomat” nor the “Jewish delegation” are further identified.

THE MIDDLE EAST IN RUSSIAN STRATEGY, 1947

The direct contacts of the Soviet Union with the Middle East were by no means limited to left-wing Zionist Jews. Soviet policy may, for example, have been influenced by information obtained from several secret communist operatives. A well-worn source of information might have been Harold (Kim) Philby, then the First Secretary of the British Embassy in Istanbul, whose double life as a member of Britain's secret Intelligence Service and Foreign Office, while at the same time a successful Soviet agent, would have provided easy access to Britain's Middle Eastern plans. A second, though far less reliable, source of information might have been Donald Maclean, soon to become head of the Chancery in Britain's Embassy in Cairo. A third, and seldom considered, source of information was a high-ranking member of Ben-Gurion's Ministry of Defence, Lt. Colonel Israel Beer. Arrested by the Israeli Secret Service (Shin Bet) on March 31, 1961, in the midst of the tension of the sensational Eichmann trial, Beer was charged with passing Israeli secrets to East Germany's Wilhelm Zaisser and to "a contact... who enjoys diplomatic immunity in Israel."²⁰ Beer appears to have been a classic Soviet "sleeper," an agent who remains dormant for years before his activation. He emigrated to Palestine in 1938, offering a long, but unsubstantiated, history of military experience to the Jewish Agency.²¹ He rapidly became the chief of training and operations of the Haganah, the Jewish underground, and by 1948 had become the Deputy Chief of Operations of the Israeli Army. Prevented from further advancement by a suspicious Moshe Dayan, Israel's Chief of Staff, Beer nonetheless remained Ben-Gurion's military adviser and confidant, was permitted to attend high-level military meetings and continued to have complete access to archival material and confidential files.²² Colonel Beer was reported to have made a full confession following his arrest and explained "that he had come to the conclusion that the system of the Communist power he worked for would in the end conquer the world and that Israel should try to adjust herself to the plans of that country."²³ He did not take up

²⁰ *New York Times*, April 16, 1961.

²¹ Beer claimed that he was a graduate of the officers' school in Vienna, a Schutzbunder in 1934, a member of the Thaelmann Battalion of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War, and held a Ph.D. in military strategy from the University of Vienna. He was consequently sought after by the Jewish Agency as one of the relatively few men in Palestine with vast military experience. See Arnold Krammer, "Espionage: The Strange Case of Colonel Beer," *Wiener Library Bulletin* (London), Spring 1973.

²² When Beer's arrest began to become a political football, Ben-Gurion was reported to have denied that he "had ever been his military adviser or enjoyed his confidence." *New York Times*, April 18, 1961.

²³ *New York Times*, April 17, 1961. A former Soviet agent, writing under the pseudonym of J. Bernard Hutton, claims to have known "Comrade Israel Baer" (sic) in Moscow prior to

the public suggestion of one minister that he "should be given a pistol and permitted to end his life as a means of minimizing the damage the country would suffer through publicizing of his espionage activities,"²⁴ and on June 2, 1961 he was tried and convicted of espionage at a closed trial.²⁵ Beer was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment in El Shatah, Israel's maximum security prison, where he died in 1966. Although Israelis today view him as a pitiful and misguided individual, whose activities, judging by the success of Israel's Sinai campaign of 1956, did not seriously endanger the security of the country, it is more than reasonable to assume that his position in 1947 and 1948 made him a desirable source of information to Moscow, and that the suspicions which soon after prevented his continued advancement were well founded.

The investigation of Russia's motives in casting its lot with the creation of Israel,²⁶ a tiny strip of land on the Mediterranean whose Jewish population only slightly exceeded half a million people, in the face of a potential ally numbering millions of Arabs, must be pursued with a basic axiom in mind: "As far as the Soviet Union is concerned," Russia's Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko, once said, "there is only one kind of logic in foreign affairs: the logic of what is best for the Soviet Union."²⁷ What was "best for the Soviet Union" with regard to her support of the Jewish Agency's claims in Palestine was a single, limited objective: to terminate British rule in Palestine, eject the ruling British forces and neutralize the territory by the creation of a small and independent state. The eventual conversion of that state into a pro-Soviet entity, as prophesied by a variety of left-wing Palestinian Zionists, would involve a number of additional tactics and objectives.

Britain emerged from the Second World War as the sole power in the Middle East. Strengthened by the prestige of victory, armed with treaties with Egypt, Trans-Jordan and Iraq, and a Mandate over Palestine, and in control of the Arab Legion, Britain's position in the area appeared unassailable. Yet the Soviet Union was also aware of Britain's underlying weaknesses: the war had left her drained financially and psychologically, the great empire was beginning to pull apart with recent independence having been granted to Ceylon, Pakistan, India and Burma, and her military position in Greece

his "assignment" as an immigrant to Palestine. *School for Spies* (New York, 1963), pp. 144-49.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, June 2, 1961. See also Israel Beer's memoirs, *Bitahon Yisrael: Etmol-Hayom-Mahar* (Israel's Security: Yesterday-Today-Tomorrow) (Tel-Aviv, 1966).

²⁶ For an excellent in-depth treatment, see Mary Newcomb Allen, *The Policy of the USSR Towards the State of Israel, 1948-1958*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, London School of Economics, 1961.

²⁷ Quoted in Lester Velie, *Countdown in the Holy Land* (New York, 1969), p. 19.

and Turkey was proving untenable. In addition, Foreign Secretary Bevin was coming under increasing public pressure to cut colonial costs and to reduce the size of the British forces in the Middle East, especially in view of the heavy casualties resulting from terrorist activity against them in Palestine. None of these problems were unknown to the Soviet Union, who could only view the dissipation of British strength in the Middle East with hidden satisfaction. Russia's only fear involved Britain's potential appeal for American partnership in an area she was becoming less able to maintain, an appeal which was made by Attlee in the fall of 1946. Britain decided, as it would again with regard to Greece, that the United States had to be persuaded to share the responsibility for continued defence of the Middle East. An astute analyst of the period has declared that: "It was probably this decision of Attlee's, more than any other, that persuaded Stalin into the surprise decision to support the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine."²⁸ In an effort to prevent the United States from actively entering the area at Britain's request, Stalin utilized the earliest opportunity, a Foreign Ministers' Conference in Moscow in March 1947, to neutralize British fears. At the end of the Conference on March 24, Stalin engaged Bevin in a series of informal but secret conversations during which the Russian leader intimated that the Soviet Union would make no difficulties for the British nor aid those who sought to do so; "... the USSR, in conformity with its invariable policy of non-interference, did not intend to interfere...."²⁹ Bevin was not only pacified, but according to his colleague in the Foreign Office, Lord William Strang, he "continued to cherish the hope that what he interpreted as Stalin's appreciation and even recognition of the British position in the Middle East ... would be reflected in Soviet policy."³⁰ Having thus isolated British policy in the Middle East from any potential American involvement, the Soviet Union was able to chart its course in the Middle East with the knowledge that its single opponent, Britain, would soon be forced to face the realities of its tenuous position and place the Palestine Question before the United Nations for a solution.

The strong, albeit vacillating, support given the partition plan by the United States provided another reason for the Soviet Union to cast its lot with the Jews rather than with the Arabs. There was a good chance that, in addition to breaking the Anglo-American front and weakening Western unity, the United States might be made to become the chief target of Arab

²⁸ Jon and David Kimche, *A Clash of Destinies: The Arab-Jewish War and the Founding of the State of Israel* (New York, 1960), p. 275.

²⁹ *New York Times*, May 8, 1947; George Kirk, "The Middle East, 1945-1950," *Survey of International Affairs*, Arnold Toynbee, ed. (London, 1954), pp. 130-131.

³⁰ Lord Strang [William Strang], *Home and Abroad* (London, 1956), p. 260.

national resentment. This is exactly what happened, for despite a number of hostile demonstrations against the Soviet Union in Arab capitals following Gromyko's November 1947 speech, the Soviet partition stand, obscured by skilful propaganda from Radio Moscow, was quickly forgotten. As early as December 1, 1947, less than a week following the passage of the Partition Resolution in the United Nations, an official spokesman of the Arab Information Office in Washington informed a press conference that Russia's stand on Palestine was in no way as serious as American support for the same issue. He declared that:

... The attitude of Russia is more comprehensible than that of the United States, because the Russians have nothing to lose in the Middle East.... Obviously they are interested in a solution that is no solution... so it seems to us either extremely naive or extremely wicked of the United States to have come to an agreement with Russia on this one issue.³¹

American observers were quick to analyse what appeared to be Russia's motive, and in the Washington *Evening Star* on December 3, columnist Constantine Brown stated that:

... Moscow's eagerness to join the United States in the plan for a Jewish State is considered by many military observers as a skilful operation to bring about a permanent break between the United States and the Arab states bordering on Palestine. Russia needs neither strategic air bases nor oil from the Arab countries. If she has alienated the Arabs from the United States, she can rejoice in a permanent strategic victory.

Arab resentment did in fact turn toward the United States, and since the Jewish State would continue to remain an obstacle to any reconciliation of Arab-American relations, Soviet Russia had only to begin exploiting the resentment of Arab nationalists to play both sides of the Palestine issue until events dictated the necessity for a commitment.

American opponents to US support of Israel in the United Nations at the time were quick to envision another prospective motive in the Soviet Union's Middle East position: the possible influx of Russian troops as a result of the deteriorating situation in Palestine. It was unlikely that the outraged Arab states would simply stand aside to watch the Partition Resolution implemented as passed, and in the event of an Arab invasion to reclaim Palestine, military estimates did not hold much hope for a Jewish victory. Such an immediate and flagrant violation of a United Nations decision would, it was assumed, force Israel's supporters to demand the dispatch of a United Nations Peace-keeping Force to aid the Jewish State. A number of State Department officials, congressmen, and newspaper editorials began to see in the situation Russia's

³¹ Quoted in the *Arab News Bulletin* (Washington), no. 18 (December 6, 1947), p. 2.

original motive for supporting the partition plan, and speculation ran high concerning the participation of Red Army forces in the defence of the Jewish State. The leading editorial of the *Christian Century* of December 17, 1947, which was introduced into the *Congressional Record* during a debate on the subject, ended with the following foreboding words:

Will an American army be sent to enforce a United Nations Security Council directive? Will we allow a Russian army to be sent for the same purpose? It is too late to turn back now. The die has been cast. But the future is dark, very dark. And there is the smell of blood in the air.³²

The Washington *Evening Star* of December 2 stated that: "The possibility that Russia will offer to intervene is being freely discussed in Washington today. A highly placed officer, who could not be quoted, said, 'It can be expected within 90 days....'" The *New York Times* on the following day also quoted an anonymous Army officer who said "the General Staff was gravely concerned about a possibility that Soviet troops would move into the Holy Land...." Columnist Stewart Alsop, writing in the *Washington Post* of December 4, declared that if the Russians did dispatch a military force to Palestine, "there is little doubt that the Soviet contingent would consist of a very special type of soldier."³³ Within several weeks, however, tensions began to subside as the Arab world's inability to mount a decisive offensive in the face of unexpected Palestinian Zionist resistance became clear. As early as December 12, the *Washington Daily News* carried an editorial by Peter Edson, entitled "Disposed of, Not Settled," in which he cautiously stated that: "The United States Joint Chiefs of Staff's fear that Russia, which backed partition, will take the initiative and move troops into Palestine in case disorders get worse, has been discounted. It is said to have caused guffaws in the State Department." While there is no way of knowing whether the Soviet Union, in fact, was motivated in its support for the Jewish State by visions of dispatching troops to enforce a United Nations decision and protect the joint Soviet-American creation, the possibility must be considered. The situation would not have been difficult for Moscow to project: Russia's knowledge of the strong Jewish vote in the United States may well have assured the Kremlin of a joint American-Soviet venture in the creation of Israel, a partnership which would have legitimized her efforts to send units of the Red Army to protect the embryonic

³² US House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, December 18, 1947, p. 11653.

³³ The anxiety over a Russian potential military invasion of Palestine was only part of an overall Western anti-Communist concern which exaggerated the dangers of Soviet military aggression (at least in the short run). The fear of a general Soviet military offensive against the West increased sharply following the Czechoslovak *coup* in February and reached its peak the next month with a top-secret cable from General Lucius Clay in Berlin to General Stephen Chamberlin on the Army General Staff, in which Clay predicted an imminent war with the Russians. Walter Millis, ed., *The Forrestal Diaries* (New York, 1951), p. 387.

state from the Arab offensive which could only have been normally expected. "Once Russia sends its military men to Palestine no force on this earth, short of war, can expel them from it. Thus, Russia, as a participant with the United States in insisting upon partition, will demand a dominant part in military occupation."³⁴

When it became evident that neither American nor Russian troops would be dispatched to defend Palestine against an Arab invasion, opponents of America's pro-partition stand began to see in Russia's support still another motive: Communist infiltration. The Soviet Union was, of course, fully aware that the Jewish Agency's very existence was based upon the unlimited immigration of world Jewry to a Jewish national homeland in Palestine. Since more than 3,000,000 Jews lived within the Soviet bloc, Russia might well have planned to influence the neutrality of the new state by using this mass as a political lever and, perhaps as a last resort, to utilize those refugees allowed to leave for Israel as a Trojan horse in which to smuggle Communist agents into the Middle East. As early as March 1947, reports to the State Department from the US military authorities in charge of Displaced Persons camps in Germany began to describe the spectre of Communist agents infiltrating the swelling numbers of refugees from Eastern Europe. An example of such information is the "priority" report, dated March 19, 1947, from an undisclosed Allied Occupation official in Bremen, marked "confidential":

Every Zionist-indoctrinated Jew who arrives in the American zone is an unconscious asset to Moscow. . . . We are serving as cover of Russian secret agents. Some agents are destined to remain hidden within pockets of Jews until they reach the promised land of Palestine and there to work for Soviet objectives in Near East while others are to remain in Germany at different assignments.... Any Russian agent who reaches Palestine as 'persecutee' would possibly enjoy open sesame to anti-British underground.... [But the] great bulk of Russian or Polish Jews [should not] be identified as anything but unwitting pawns in this affair.³⁵

The argument that Jewish infiltrators were masking a silent offensive of Soviet influence into Palestine became more vocal as the partition issue gained prominence in the United Nations throughout the year. Just as tensions over a possible Soviet military involvement began to decrease at the start of 1948, a series of news stories about Soviet agents among a large group of Palestine-bound refugees brought speculations about Russia's motives for her UN position into sharp focus. Two vessels, the *Pan York* and the *Pan Crescent*,

³⁴ The Hon. Lawrence Smith, Wisconsin, US House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, December 18, 1947, p. 11653.

³⁵ Quoted in Joseph B. Schechtman, *The United States and the Jewish State Movement, The Crucial Decade: 1939-1949* (New York, 1966), pp. 341-342.

carrying a total of more than 15,000 Rumanian refugees to Palestine, were first spotted on the high seas by the British on January 1, 1948. The sensation arose, however, from a series of dubious and contradictory British intelligence reports, which were reprinted by the *New York Times* as early as December 31, 1947 — the day before the ships were even sighted — that the refugee ships contained a large number of hand-picked Communist agents and potential fifth-columnists. By February 1, 1948, the *New York Times* reported the British intelligence figures of 1,000 active agents, and further indicated that “One thousand of the 15,000 immigrants aboard spoke Russian, many belonged to militant Communist organizations, some may have been non-Jews and some had documents showing that they had served in Soviet forces during World War II. . . .” The issues of February 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 carried further British reports, unsubstantiated and denied even by the British Commissioner of Cyprus where the ships were interned, that hundreds of abandoned Rumanian Communist Party cards had been found among the hastily discarded items of evidence aboard the two ships. On February 20, excitement was heightened by the publication of information submitted to the House Subcommittee on Un-American Activities by a Bulgarian refugee to the United States, one Georgi M. Dimitrov.³⁶ Beginning his testimony with the declaration that “Communists everywhere are now one vast force bent upon a universal plot for violent seizure of power in all countries,” he strongly supported the British intelligence accusations that Communist agents had been among the Jewish immigrants aboard the *Pan York* and the *Pan Crescent*. “Speaking of my Jewish friends,” he added, “I think they must not deny that Communist agents are among the Jews being sent into Palestine from various countries under Communist control. My friends, the Jews, will suffer later by trying to cover the Communists among them.”³⁷

One of the most radical exponents of the argument of infiltration as Russia’s motive for aiding in the creation of Israel was the noted reporter and foreign correspondent, Ray Brock, whose book entitled *Blood, Oil and Sand* wholly reflects the fears of the McCarthy era. While Brock did not mean “to imply that the Israeli state is a growing, ticking time bomb in the Middle East epicenter,” he did state that:

Despite the most rigorous screening, the waves of immigrants into Israel contain men and women dedicated to the eventual anarchical overthrow of the Israeli government and the establishment of a desperate Communist

³⁶ The witness, described as an “exiled Bulgarian peasant leader” (*New York Times*, February 20, 1948), was in no way related to the veteran Bulgarian Communist, former General Secretary of the Communist International and Premier of Bulgaria since 1946, of the same name.

³⁷ *New York Times*, February 20, 1948.

state in the heartland of the Middle East. Israel's swelling population is drawn from Central and Eastern European areas where Communism alone afforded the organization and arms enabling limited resistance to the former enemy.³⁸

Events, however, soon disproved any danger of Communist infiltration into Israel, a fact which was reflected by the Communist Party's abject failure in Israel's first national election in January 1949. The Israeli Communist Party, campaigning in large part on the record of past Soviet support, received the rather dismal vote of confidence of 15,148, or only 3.44 per cent of the electorate.³⁹ In an interview with C. L. Sulzberger of the *New York Times*, Ben-Gurion stated, in fact, that not only was the fear of Communist infiltration totally groundless, but that "in the regions where there were so many recent immigrants from East Europe, the Communist vote had dropped . . ."⁴⁰ This statement was further substantiated by the American Ambassador to Israel, James McDonald, who had reported shortly after his arrival that "the Communist bogey in Israel. . . was without substance." He continued by stating that:

The alarmist rumors of Communist strength in the new State were shown. . . to be gross exaggeration. But so fixed in many minds at home was the specter of a Communist menace in Israel that I constantly had to repeat the obvious fact that Communism, though perceptible, was unimportant.⁴¹

If fears of Communist infiltration proved groundless, one final consideration that does seem to have played a part in the Soviet Union's partition objectives was a fairly realistic appraisal of Anglo-American rivalry. In the Western press, Russia's entry into the Palestine Question was frequently considered to be an attempt to inflame the issues which might bring Britain and the United States to a confrontation. Stalin's March 1947 pledge to Bevin regarding Russia's recognition of Britain's position in the Middle East only as long as the United States remained out of the area, illustrates Russia's motive. Not only did the Russian strategy serve to isolate Britain's deteriorating Middle East position from outside aid, but to set the two Western powers at loggerheads on a variety of issues. Britain's uncooperative attitude in the

³⁸ Ray Brock, *Blood, Oil and Sand* (Cleveland, 1952), p. 69.

³⁹ Moshe M. Czudnowski and Jacob M. Landau, *The Israeli Communist Party and the Elections for the Fifth Knesset, 1961* (Hoover Institute on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford University, 1965).

⁴⁰ *New York Times*, March 20, 1950. Immigrants from the Soviet bloc did pose a problem later, not by carrying Communism from Eastern Europe, but rather as a result of the exploitation by the native left-wing of their difficulties following their arrival.

⁴¹ James G. McDonald, *My Mission to Israel, 1948-1951* (New York, 1951), pp. 105, 134.

United Nations, following her referral of the Palestine Problem to that body in February 1947, clashed with the joint American-Russian effort to find a reasonable solution in the Partition Resolution of November. Moreover, Britain backed the Arab states which invaded Palestine, hoping for Arab victory and reinstatement of British rule to protect the doomed Jews under her own terms. The Jordanian Arab Legion was, in fact, trained, financed, and officered by the British and commanded by Glubb Pasha, the British Brigadier John Glubb. This military aid to the Arab forces, in the face of a United Nations arms embargo imposed on the Middle East, not only worked at odds with America's efforts to create a Jewish state in Palestine, but vastly increased Western fears that a British led Arab victory in Palestine would cause the involvement of Soviet forces. The Palestine issue might well have been Moscow's opportunity to split the post-war Western alliance. It is also reasonable to assume that the obverse of this objective might also have been seriously considered by Soviet strategists. By increasing the chaos in the Middle East, and perhaps frustrating both Britain and the United States, the Soviet Union might be able to step into the temporary vacuum or at the least to exploit the fertile political conditions which chaos generally creates. The main underlying issue affecting the Soviet attitude toward the Middle East during the several postwar years leading to the creation of Israel was the search for anti-Western support. Moscow would probably have been willing to support any state or movement, regardless of its ideological persuasion, in order to break the Anglo-American front and to weaken Western unity.

CONCLUSION

The Soviet Union's original decision to sanction the creation of Israel at the cost of alienating the more than 35,000,000 Arabs is still not fully comprehensible. Soviet strategists, or Stalin alone, may have underestimated the degree of Arab resentment for the West and the amount of national unrest in the Moslem World; perhaps, too, the policy decision was guided by the then standard Marxist-Leninist view of the Arab states as being "reactionary" and "colonial oriented." Despite Lenin's subsequent admonition that the Arab world might well offer a variety of advantages as allies in a struggle against the West, Stalin decided that the limited objectives offered by supporting the Jews still outweighed those offered by the Arabs.

The initial decision to support the Jews over the Arabs in 1947 is unlikely to have been seriously based on the gamble that either party in the conflict would have been better candidates for Communism, especially in light of the absence of any Soviet force in the area to act as a political lever in a bid for governmental control. It can only be deduced, therefore, that the Kremlin

was guided in its initial decision by a dogmatic underestimation of the Arab world's potential strength and anti-Western sentiment, in contrast to an overestimation of the limited advantages which support of the Jewish state seemed to offer.

One thing is perfectly clear: whatever the Kremlin's motives and considerations in throwing its weight behind the Partition Plan, and thus wittingly denying itself the possibility of winning the gratitude which the Arabs were willing to bestow on any supporter, Soviet Russia's basic impulse was opportunism. The Middle Eastern expert, Walter Laqueur, has best summarized Russia's intentions in the Arab-Israeli issue by stating that "Soviet leadership thinks in terms of power politics, not in those of lofty idealism. At the bottom of its Middle Eastern policy, it is neither pro-Arab, nor pro-Israel; it is pro-Soviet.... This is the long and the short of it."⁴²

⁴² W. Laqueur, "Soviet Policy and Jewish Fate: In Russia and In Israel," *Commentary*, October 1956, p. 309.