“This book resolves one of the great mysteries of the Six-Day War. It has all the intrigue of a detective story, and all the pace of a novel.”

SIR MARTIN GILBERT

FOXBATS OVER DIMONA

The Soviets’ Nuclear Gamble in the Six-Day War

Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez
FOXBATS OVER DIMONA
Foxbats over Dimona

THE SOVIETS’ NUCLEAR GAMBLE IN THE SIX-DAY WAR

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In loving memory of our parents, Emilia, Judith, Yakov, and Aharon
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Maps xii–xiii

1. Historiography as Investigative Journalism 1

2. Threat or Bluster 10

3. Antecedents and Motivations 15

4. The Nuclear Context 28

5. The Spymaster and the Communist: A Disclosure in December 1965 36

6. A Nuclear Umbrella for Egypt 49

7. Converging Timelines: Syrian Coup and Party Congress 58

8. The “Conqueror” and “Victor” Plans: Soviet Signatures 68

9. The Naval and Aerial Buildup 78
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mid-May: Disinformation or Directive?</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Escalation and Denial: 14–26 May</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The Badran Talks: Restraining an Ally</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Foxbats over Dimona</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Poised for a Desant: 5 June</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Un-Finnished Business: Preemptive Diplomacy</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Debates, Delays, and Ditherings: 6–8 June</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>The <em>Liberty</em> Incident: Soviet Fingerprints</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Offense Becomes Deterrence: 10 June</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Aftermath</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Historiography as Investigative Journalism

The truth of anything at all doesn’t lie in someone’s account of it. It lies in all the small facts of the time.

—JOSEPHINE TEY, THE DAUGHTER OF TIME

The research that resulted in this book has produced, against our own expectations, a challenge to the predominant views—in Israel, the United States, and the West—regarding the genesis and conduct of an event that has shaped subsequent history in the Middle East. Israel’s lightning triumph, in the Six-Day War of June 1967, against the combined forces of its Arab neighbors redrew both the map and the international lineup in a regional clash that has figured constantly and often centrally on the global scene. It led, on one hand, to a series of further wars, and on the other to a succession of more or less successful peace agreements.

It established Israel, until then a neighborhood underdog of dubious viability, as a permanent presence with the sometimes inflated reputation and self-esteem of a regional power, and saddled it with the increasingly pernicious burden of occupation just as it crowned the achievement of restoring the historical Jewish homeland. It accelerated the emergence of the Palestinians as a separate Arab national identity, and propelled them into the forefront of a new genre of warfare that was to change the character of armed conflict worldwide, while creating the basis for its religious and ideological rationale. In sum, this brief and limited war took its place among the defining watersheds of the 20th century, alongside such immensely larger and longer developments as two world wars.

And yet, although the Six-Day War’s consequences have been uni-
versally appreciated, its own character and origins—as we discovered—remained largely mysterious, and to the extent that they were explained, a major if not dominant factor was excluded or minimized. The crisis of May 1967 and the war that it sparked have been portrayed as primarily a local conflict, in which the parties were backed but also restrained, in a fairly symmetrical way, by their superpower patrons—the rival principals in the Cold War—which while jockeying for advantage in various arenas made sure not to let these frictions unleash a direct clash between them that might touch off a nuclear cataclysm. It was this basic assumption that we unexpectedly found ourselves disputing, on the basis of evidence that was hitherto unknown or disregarded.

We fell into this role of historical revisionists like Alice into her rabbit hole. In the course of our journalistic work in 1999, a routine scan of media from the former Soviet Union turned up a curious item of more than topical interest. In a Ukrainian daily, a former Soviet naval officer related how, on the first day of the Six-Day War in June 1967, on board a frigate in the eastern Mediterranean, he was ordered to prepare and lead a 30-man “volunteer” force for a landing on the Israeli coast. He went on to describe how the operation was repeatedly postponed until, on the war’s last day, it was activated—only to be aborted as the ship approached its destination.¹

We looked at each other in disbelief, which grew as we consulted the authoritative historical works on the period. Not only, as Isabella’s editors at Israel’s newspaper Haaretz told her, had “none of our experts ever heard about this”; the suggestion that Moscow intended to intervene in the war seemed patently preposterous. According to accepted wisdom, although the Soviet Union did trigger the crisis by making false accusations that Israel was massing troops to attack Syria, Moscow then acted to contain the conflict and to prevent war; when hostilities did break out, the USSR cooperated with the United States to end them. The conventional narrative held that the Soviet leadership, scarred by its setback in the Cuban missile adventure and moving toward détente, had by 1967 evolved a cautious and responsible foreign policy. Although it was still competing with Washington for influence worldwide and in the Middle East, risking a head-on clash between the nuclear superpowers was out of the question, no matter how high the regional stakes.

Our journalistic instincts—as well as our personal memories of the
Six-Day War—dictated that this clue for such a radically different interpretation of our Middle Eastern generation’s defining event had to be thoroughly investigated. Still, the first obstacle that Captain Yuri Khripunkov’s account had to overcome was our own skepticism. We fully anticipated that a brief check would discredit both the source and the story, which we could then consign to our already brimming wastebasket of false leads.

Instead, our inquiry soon established that the narrator of this extraordinary version was eminently respectable and reliable. On the other hand, there were no hard facts documented in Israel or the West that could disprove his claim. We contacted Captain Khripunkov, now an educator and public figure in Ukraine, and held several long interviews, in which he insisted on his version and confirmed extensive further details—such as the target of his putative raid, the port of Haifa. He gained our trust in his veracity, and led us to take up the challenge that his disclosure embodied to Western historiographic orthodoxy.

The ongoing research project that resulted from this initially random discovery has changed and filled our lives. Its pace and directions have almost always been determined by the unpredictable input of source material. It began in the closing phase of Russian president Boris Yeltsin’s heyday, when Soviet archives supposedly became accessible—a process that has been gradually reversed under Vladimir Putin, to the extent that it ever occurred. Despite clichés about “newly opened Soviet archives,” the most significant documentation is still under lock and key. We were told privately by a former Soviet middle-rank official that “as long as the Israeli-Arab conflict is unresolved, the relevant documents will remain in the operational file”—that is, classified.

But even when and if such papers are released, they are most likely to be inadequate and even largely unreliable. Their problematic character is illustrated by a recently published anecdote, which relates to an area that is also central to this study: nuclear weapons. In 1961, two young officials were charged by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko with drafting a memorandum to the Communist Party’s Central Committee to demonstrate the necessity of resuming nuclear tests, which—the weapons designers claimed—was essential for developing new missile warheads.

The young diplomats decided . . . to base the memorandum . . . on those submitted by two ministers. . . . They . . . stressed that
the USSR had developed new and effective types of nuclear arms, which urgently needed testing. . . .

Gromyko was really livid. . . . “What were you thinking when you wrote this?!” he shrieked. . . . “This is a his-to-ri-cal docu-
m ent! Thirty years will elapse, the archive will be opened, histo-
rians will come there, and what will they read? That it was the 
USSR which initiated the arms race? That it violated the mora-
torium and restarted nuclear tests?” . . . And he began to dictate:
“Write that . . . the American imperialists are secretly prepar-
ing a series of high-powered nuclear tests . . . and afterwards 
state that in view of these facts, the Soviet government consid-
ers that it is compelled to take the necessary measures. . . .
That’s how it should be written!”  

Gromyko’s outburst might well be kept in mind by anyone tending
to attribute exclusive or unconditional veracity to Soviet—or other—
archival material. Besides the reminder that even in-house papers must 
be discounted for propaganda, it illustrates another frequent characteris-
tic of such documents: What they impute to the adversary is often a mir-
ror image of the writers’ own intentions or deeds. While this falls short 
of constituting positive evidence, it can be a valuable clue in which di-
rection to look.

Where operational instructions are concerned, we also found that 
the accounts of numerous Soviet participants refer to orders that were 
transmitted only orally down the chain of command. It is entirely pos-
sible that few corresponding documents ever existed, as even the last So-
viet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, learned when he tried in vain to find 
the formal resolution to invade Afghanistan, which was adopted less 
than a decade before he took office.

Moreover, such documentation that does exist may have been de-
signed to conceal or distort the facts rather than to record them. The de-
cisions to make the most crucial moves may never have been recorded in 
the first place, or the documents may be suppressed indefinitely—not to 
mention the option of falsifying them at creation or upon release. This 
book offers a series of examples of such attempts, in the United States 
and Israel as well as the Soviet Union.

Therefore, the lack of official papers about the Soviet role must not
prevent a serious though cautious effort to establish the facts. One thing that we have learned in this study is that an inflexible requirement for archival documents as the sole, or even the main, fount of truth implies that entire chapters can quite easily be excised from history. Absence or paucity of archival evidence cannot be posited as eliminating any scenario; conversely, when such evidence does exist, it must be treated as critically as any other type. As a rule, for example, marginal or passing statements made in such documents are more trustworthy than the writers’ main thrust. When the subject of study has been carefully and systematically covered up, no detailed, explicit expositions are to be expected, but rather a haphazard scattering of bits and pieces, often as incidental phrases in otherwise tedious texts.

In retrospect, we really should not have been as astonished as we were to find out, as we traced the trail of footnotes from one publication to its predecessor, how limited a foundation of sources served to erect the entire edifice of conventional historiography on the Soviet role in the Six-Day War. With little factual evidence available, histories of Soviet action in the Middle East had to be largely deduced from supposed policy principles—that is, a priori, from the top down. As a leading authority in the field, James Hershberg, recently put it: “For decades during the Cold War, scholars of Soviet policy toward the 1967 war were reduced to the equivalent of reading tea leaves from propagandistic Pravda articles and turgid communiqués, and distilling more delectable but sometimes dubious press leaks and defector exposés.”

The best of the early writers on the subject, working at the height of the Cold War, honestly hedged nearly every statement with such caveats as “it appears that . . .” or “it cannot be ruled out that . . .” But when quoted and re-quoted in subsequent studies, the modalities were gradually dropped, and reasonable speculation based on available evidence became established and unassailable fact—although the evidence by this stage consisted largely, besides the aforementioned contemporary propaganda statements, of memoirs by political leaders and other obviously interested actors (such as the ubiquitously quoted Mohammed Hassanein Heikal, whom we frequently “caught” in outright falsehoods). This did not prevent our own method from being decried as unreliable when it leaned on numerous, cross-checked memoirs of the actual participants in military moves and diplomatic contacts, as well as on newly released documents.
where possible—and, sometimes, on long-known but neglected evidence that did not conform with the prevailing concept.

Given this background, we soon gave up on reconstructing the theoretical framework of genuine—as opposed to declared—Soviet policy, in the Middle East and elsewhere. This meant abandoning any new attempt to extrapolate—as previous studies did—what the USSR did from what it purportedly intended. Instead, we resorted to a “bottom-up” approach: assembling as much detail as newly emerging sources could provide about the actual Soviet operations on the ground, in order to piece together from them the full operational plan, and leaving subsequent scholarship to reconstruct the policy goals. The eye-witness accounts that we have compiled revealed an astonishing number of facts that were previously unknown—not least because the corresponding Israeli and American documents, while perhaps somewhat more trustworthy than the Soviet ones, are hardly more accessible.

The result is thus emphatically not a systematic codification of Soviet policy or strategy. Rather, we view our role as that of rank-and-file lookouts returning from a front-line patrol with their observations of enemy troop movements. It is the generals’ task to process these reports into a constantly evolving overview. Military experience can teach historians what risks they assume in rejecting factual reports that contradict their theoretical concept, as one academic colleague did when he dismissed our findings: “We know what Soviet policy was, and your allegations don’t fit in, so they can’t be true.”

Likewise, this book makes no pretense at chronicling the entire crisis and war of May–June 1967. On the contrary, it attempts to glean the numerous cases in which Soviet involvement was manifested, so that they can be assembled into a unifying framework and timeline, instead of merely being mentioned sporadically and lost in the multitude of other detail—as they were in previous histories. One result is, for instance, that the Jordanian front is dealt with only tangentially, as Soviet involvement there was minimal. This does not mean that we attach exclusive significance to the Soviet element in causing or conducting the war; it undoubtedly combined with a range of other factors. What we seek to address is the underestimation of the USSR’s role that has resulted from treating all these Soviet-related incidents as discrete and minor, rather than systematic and cumulatively decisive.
Although the events dealt with here have had lasting impact on the region and the world, we would like to stress that this study has no present-day political agenda. As a reviewer of our first paper observed, it does demonstrate that 21st-century nostalgia for the supposed stability of the Cold War is largely illusory; that the Cold War’s main actors were nowhere as knowledgeable, rational, and responsible as they seemed to be; and that the world escaped a catastrophic confrontation between them more often than the few occasions when this was widely recognized. Some American scholars tend to dismiss our findings as a Soviet-school conspiracy theory, and we know that in the States, ineptitude theories are the default option. But after many years of debate between the Soviet- and American-trained halves of our family team, it dawned on us that the Soviet role in the Six-Day War is a prime example of the two approaches’ convergence: an inept conspiracy.

In view of the threat as we have reconstructed it, not only to Israel but to American interests and influence, contemplation of Washington’s performance in 1967 was not reassuring in terms of US capabilities. In that case, the botched Soviet-Arab plan, combined with a uniquely bold and successful Israeli strike, fortunately made up for the United States’ belated and uninformed though aptly intuitive response. But the present American predicament in Iraq has again exposed the same pitfalls that US policy then narrowly escaped: faulty intelligence further slanted by political bias and weakened by bureaucratic delay and rivalry, as well as failure to allow for the adversary’s different outlook and mentality, and preoccupation with a single arena to the exclusion of other foreign concerns.

On the Middle Eastern level, our work does confirm that the Six-Day War was definitely not premeditated by Israel for expansionist purposes. Rather, it resulted from a successful Soviet-Arab attempt to provoke Israel into a preemptive strike. Whether and how this should affect a regional settlement, or Israeli policy 40 years later, is a matter of interpretation based on political outlook, and is beyond the scope of this book—although proponents of all views are invited to test them against the factual findings here presented. The issues that may call for such reevaluation include a series of questions central to Israel’s self-understanding and present posture.

One of these relates to Israel’s nuclear stance, which was fixed shortly before the 1967 crisis and created—as we conclude—a major factor for
the outbreak of the Six-Day War, and was then put to its first test. Has it since proved its efficacy as the ultimate guarantee of the state’s survival, and have its benefits justified the political and economic price? Is nuclear deterrence still viable, now that it has met with a potential counter from a fanatic regional adversary like Iran, which is ostensibly motivated by such implacable religious hostility that it might disregard the consequences to its own people of obliterating Israel? Or, conversely, has Israel’s nuclear deterrence now become essential by reducing an imminent existential threat to a manageable balance of terror with an extreme but rational enemy—in which case the alarm about the Iranian menace is being exaggerated? And would Iran—as well as other Middle Eastern actors, with which, taken together, Israel might be hard put to maintain such a balance—have sought to wield their own nuclear clout if Israel had not done so first?

The latter question connects with another issue that is brought to the fore by the character of the Six-Day War as we explored it: Assuming even the best foreseeable prospects for peace, can Israel’s security be assured without binding safeguards from a global power or powers, especially so long as some other power or powers may support a hostile challenge? If not, what concessions that may be demanded in return by the guarantor can and should Israel consider, even beyond those that may be dictated by its own enlightened self-interest?

As Israel’s “enlightened self-interest” refers to the future accommodation with the Palestinians, the latter question again leads to an entire and complex set of issues. Our study found that the Palestinians, while providing a pretext for the other parties to act against Israel, played at most an irritant role in causing the Six-Day War. The war’s results, however—the Israeli military occupation of a disenfranchised Palestinian population, in borders that Israel itself did not claim as permanent, and the Palestinians’ resort to terrorist violence—gradually put them at center stage. Do the circumstances of the war justify their paying the territorial price that historical precedent has often exacted from the initiators of aggressive wars, particularly when they were also the losers? Even if so, would insisting on this reward redound to Israel’s own long-term benefit? If the war established for most of the world (as we found it did for the USSR) the 1949 armistice lines as the benchmark for a settlement, instead of the
1947 partition lines—how permanent, justified, and worthwhile is this concept?

Finally, was the USSR’s role in 1967 determined by its ideology and the Cold War context, leaving room for expectation that the post-Soviet regime in Moscow may perform as complete a policy reversal toward Israel as Stalin did twice? Or does the geopolitical position of Russia, under any political system, dictate the same Middle Eastern preferences, allowing for at most a correct relationship with Israel?

While both of us have definite (and not necessarily identical) opinions on these questions, they are not logical consequences of our study, and this book is not intended to promote them. It is limited to the task, prodigious in itself, of setting straight the historical record on a hitherto neglected issue. We have frequently compared this project to a 10,000-piece jigsaw puzzle, of which we receive a random five pieces in the mail every week. After seven years of laborious sleuthing, we have pretty much completed the easier part—the frame and the most prominent features of the main image—so that we can state with fair certainty what the big picture shows. But there are large parts that still have to be put together, and others that will almost certainly need to be rearranged. This is very much a work in progress, and it is our sincere hope that response to our book, critical as it may be, will stimulate the exposure of further elements and contribute to our own evolving concept as well as the collective understanding of this milestone in history.
At 8:48 a.m. on 10 June 1967, the White House situation room was a scene of “great concern and utmost gravity,” according to US ambassador to the USSR Llewellyn Thompson, one of the presidential advisers present.¹ A message had just been received over the Moscow–Washington hotline from the Soviet premier, Alexei Kosygin, demanding an immediate halt to Israel’s invasion of Syria and threatening Soviet military action that might lead to nuclear confrontation with the United States.²

Although it evoked extreme consternation in Washington at the time, Kosygin’s threat was ultimately dismissed as mere bluster or, at most, an attempt at deterrence—which, by the time the threat was made openly, it indeed was. This interpretation was incorporated into the conventional assumptions of Western historiography for the following 30-odd years regarding the Soviet Union’s overall role in the outbreak and conduct of the Six-Day War between Israel and its Arab neighbors in June 1967.³

These assumptions held that:

1. The spurious Soviet warning to Egypt in mid-May 1967 that Israel was massing at least 10 brigades on its northern frontier in order to attack Syria, a warning that is universally agreed to have triggered the final escalation toward war, was a result of either a miscalculated tactical move, an unauthorized step by a mid-level official, or a mere error.⁴
2. The USSR did not desire full-scale hostilities, and once this appeared to be the probable outcome of the chain of events it had inadvertently set in motion, it attempted to prevent such a development, mainly by restraining its Arab allies.\(^5\)

3. Although Moscow backed up the Arab side with threats of military intervention, actually it neither planned nor implemented any military participation in the war itself.\(^6\)

In a series of research papers over the past decade, we have demonstrated that this approach is no longer sustainable.\(^7\) The evidence now shows that Kosygin’s threat was not an empty one: The Soviets had prepared a marine landing, with air support, on Israel’s shores, which was not only planned but actually set in motion; they had readied strategic bombers and nuclear-armed naval forces to strike; and they had even committed their most advanced, still secret experimental aircraft and top pilots for provocative reconnaissance sorties over Israel’s most sensitive installation—its nuclear complex. The Soviet military buildup was only partially known to Israel and the West at the time, and was largely disregarded in later historical descriptions—particularly its nuclear component. This buildup closely paralleled Moscow’s efforts to achieve the other necessary condition for an anti-Israeli operation—military coordination and, ultimately, alliance among Israel’s Arab neighbors, along the lines of a Soviet-originated plan.

An officially authorized Russian military history of the USSR’s involvement in local conflicts after World War II, published in 2000 by the Institute of Military History at the Russian Ministry of Defense, lists the Soviet role in the Six-Day War as one in a long series of “direct participations” that calls into question the entire concept of a cautious and prudent policy on Moscow’s part. But the “direct participation” of 1967 is also described as limited to arms supplies and military training by Soviet and other Communist-bloc military advisers.\(^8\) The Russian popular press speaks explicitly of regular Soviet troops going into combat in this as in other Arab-Israeli wars, while pointing also to the deterrent effect of the Soviet naval presence toward the USA as well as Israel in 1967.\(^9\) Former Soviet officials insist that the USSR’s military operations were meant only to deter Israel from overwhelming Egypt and, especially, Syria, as well as to discourage the United States from intervening in Israel’s favor.
In order to achieve the deterrent purpose, however, the projected action had to be made known to these adversaries, and this was carefully avoided by the Soviets until the final day of the 1967 war—when they did resort to deterrent threats. Up to that stage, details of the operation were kept in total secrecy. Thus, unless the Soviets grossly overestimated US and Israeli intelligence capabilities, the operation was intended to be implemented, not merely to be threatened. Moreover, preparations began well before the Soviets even accused Israel of offensive designs, the supposed reason for their planned intervention. It was to be unleashed once Israel was drawn into a first strike and was internationally branded as the aggressor, out of calculation that a limited though substantial direct Soviet input could tip the balance in favor of the Arab counterattack.

Israel surprised the Soviets and their clients only by the precise timing—though not the date—of its onslaught, and mainly by this attack’s character and devastating effect. The destruction of Arab air forces on 5 June, and the Arabs’—especially Egypt’s—delay in acknowledging their plight, disrupted Moscow’s calculation, as its intervention could no longer guarantee an Arab victory but might only risk a clash with the United States (a risk that the Soviets had estimated as low enough to assume, so long as the goals of their action seemed attainable). The Soviet operation was suspended, implemented only in minor part, and renewed, this time indeed for deterrent effect and with some success, on 10 June after Israel attacked Syria.

The dismal failure of the Soviets’ original plan led immediately to a cover-up—ordained by the top party leadership within days of the war’s end—of their role in instigating the crisis. Details of the operation have been denied and suppressed to this day, and the facts described in the following chapters remained generally unknown outside, and for the most part even in, the former USSR.

Quite a number of Western observers—statesmen, diplomats, and intelligence operatives—did suspect at the time that the Soviets were up to something of the sort. Numerous examples are cited in the following narrative; one of the most apt was an Israeli military intelligence estimate shortly after the war: “There was a master plan designed to let the USSR harvest the fruits of its policy and investment in the region in recent years, at Israel’s expense. This plan was based on displaying force, raising tension to unprecedented peaks, and crushing Israel without firing a
shot if possible; otherwise, crushing it by means of the combined military power of those Arab states at least which Moscow had chosen as cannon fodder for furthering its aims.”

The language, however, indicates that this assessment was composed mainly for propaganda purposes (it was provided to Israel’s UN delegation) rather than based on hard intelligence. Over time, perhaps out of reluctance in Israel to acknowledge the close call it had faced, and in the United States to admit that it had done little to thwart the Soviet plan, the official narrative and academic convention in both countries discarded any reference to the deliberate Soviet instigation of the crisis. In some instances (such as the Soviet-related aspects of the USS Liberty incident, in which Israeli forces attacked an American intelligence-gathering ship), the information blackout has been as long-lasting as in the USSR and post-Soviet Russia, and no less effective.

Indeed, if not in the general public, at least in military circles of the former USSR some features of the story were better known than in Israel or the West. Servicemen who were in Soviet uniform from the 1970s through the 1990s were surprised by our questions whether they knew about a Soviet military operation against Israel during the Six-Day War—surprised because they considered this operation to be such common knowledge as hardly to merit historical investigation. The saga of a desant—naval landing—on Israel’s shores had apparently become part of Soviet military lore, and according to several of these former service-men it was even included in their formal training curriculum.

Our inquiry relied to a large degree, but often only as a starting point, on newly published or orally related memoirs of actual participants. Much of this new evidence began to emerge in the late 1980s, when economic and social conditions in the disintegrating USSR led to a demand by Soviet veterans who were involved in the 1967 operation (and its sequels in the Middle East) for recognition as combatants in full-fledged though undeclared foreign wars. The internatsionalisty of earlier generations took their cue in this respect from the younger Afgantsy (veterans of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan). They sought not only to reclaim the honor that had been denied them and their fallen comrades; even the slightly higher emoluments that war veterans enjoyed beyond those of other discharged soldiers became worth the struggle (which they ultimately won). The veterans began organizing in clubs and associa-
tions, convening conferences, and publishing accounts of their exploits in books and pamphlets—frequently in limited editions of several hundred copies—as well as in the general media of the Soviet and post-Soviet republics.

While the extensive literature that they created must be handled with due caution to discount for self-glorification, apologetics, selective memory, and other pitfalls, it provides sufficient mutual corroboration from unrelated sources to piece together a credible and consistent picture, which meets the test of careful cross-checks against archival and other material from Israeli and Western sources, as well as some recently exposed Soviet documents. Indeed, it resolves several hitherto unanswered questions posed by this epochal turning point for the region and the world.
CHAPTER 3

Antecedents and Motivations

I begat you, and I will also kill you.

—NIKOLAI GOGOL, TARAS BULBA

FOR THE USSR, THE MIDDLE EASTERN EVENTS OF 1967 marked the confluence of several processes that had begun long before, in tsarist Russia. The following sketch points out only the highlights of this complex and uneasy relationship.

The imperial regime’s long record of anti-Semitic repression and incitement, often designed as an outlet for popular resentment, was one of the prime causes for the rise of Zionism among the Jews of Russia. The first wave of Jewish agricultural resettlement in what was then Ottomanruled Palestine was touched off by a wave of pogroms in the 1880s. Political Zionism—the doctrine aimed at establishing an internationally recognized Jewish state—was originated by a semi-assimilated Austrian Jew, Theodor Herzl, in 1897. But it was the more traditionally minded Russian Zionists who prevented Herzl from accepting any “territorial” arrangement other than in the Jews’ ancestral homeland. A Russia-based renaissance of Hebrew culture accompanied the determination of today’s Israel as the object of the Jewish national movement.

This was not entirely unrelated to the tsars’ centuries of aspiration both to warm-water access to the Mediterranean and to the status of Orthodox Christianity’s protector in the Holy Land. A series of wars with Turkey was aimed at ensuring Russian domination of, and then egress from, the Black Sea, on strategic and economic but also religious
grounds—which extended to monarchists and revolutionaries alike. “Tsarist Russia viewed Palestine as one of its prospective strongholds,” wrote the Russian historian Lev Bezymensky, noting “the thoughts on this issue of the famous Dekabrist [Pavel] Pestel . . . who explicitly suggested to make Palestine Russian”—among other purposes, in order to rid Russia of its Jews.1 As Jewish resettlement in Turkish-governed Palestine progressed, Russian imperial and ecclesiastic agencies also established a presence throughout the country, to which Jerusalem’s Russian Compound is only one lasting testimony.

Two years before Russia entered its first round of revolution in 1905, another spate of tsarist-inspired massacres among the Jews reinvigorated the Jewish movement for emigration to Palestine—now with a distinctly socialist character, and even some overlap of key personalities with the Russian revolutionary movement. Although Herzl’s plan had hitched the acquisition of the Jewish state to the final phase of European colonialism, it was now Russian-born Labor Zionists who became the leading force in the fast developing Jewish community of Palestine up to and after the declaration of Israel’s independence. The first international confirmation of Jewish entitlement to the country—Britain’s Balfour Declaration—was issued, coincidentally but symbolically, within a week of the Bolshevik revolution in November 1917.

The nascent Jewish state in Palestine, now under a British mandate from the League of Nations, was cast by the newly formed USSR as an “agent of British imperialism.” As Zionist activity also ran counter to Stalin’s minorities policy within the USSR, it was combated both with antidotes—a Jewish autonomous region in the Far East, strictly confined Yiddish cultural activity—and with direct persecution. In Palestine, Soviet influence was channeled through a Communist party, which opposed the objective of a specifically Jewish state, rather than the Socialist Zionist groups. Some of the latter maintained their principled support of the USSR while trying to explain Stalin’s “misunderstanding” of their cause; Russian revolutionary songs, slogans, and literature remained staples of Labor Zionist youth movements and paramilitary organizations in Palestine. But ambivalence toward the Soviet Union became a major issue for the movement, and tentative feelers between the mainstream Jewish leadership in Palestine and Soviet representatives went nowhere.

As Israeli officials pointed out during the 1967 crisis, Soviet-German
talks that followed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 included the Middle East in the USSR’s projected sphere of influence. Once the tide had turned against Nazi Germany’s “treacherous” attack on the USSR, Stalin replaced Germany with the United States as the Soviets’ main adversary, and sought to prevent its supplanting Britain as the dominant regional power in the Middle East. At the Big Three conferences that drew the postwar map of great-power predominance, Stalin considered some hopeless but nonetheless revealing demands: a transfer of the Palestine mandate from Britain to the USSR, a Soviet protectorate over Libya, and improvement of Soviet standing, if not actual Soviet control, in the Turkish straits. The Middle East and the Mediterranean again became focal points of Soviet strategy, with great-power rivalry now colored and determined by ideological hostility toward the West. The lack of force-projection capability in a region where Moscow traditionally asserted privileged standing—which even cost the Soviets an attempt to install a favorable government across its border in Iran, and made “containment” possible in Turkey, as well as Greece—was a deficiency that the USSR now resolved to correct.

When an opportunity to hasten the British retreat from Palestine presented itself in 1947, the Soviets’ switch from anti-Zionist repression at home to support for Jewish statehood was so swift as to surprise even the pre-state Israeli leadership. A recent Russian history of Israel describes this as “a tactical move only. . . . Indeed, establishing an independent Jewish state was delivering a strike on Great Britain’s intention to retain its hold in Palestine. . . . Remaining ideologically hostile to the Zionists, and mercilessly persecuting people in their own state who shared Zionist convictions, the [Soviet leaders] nevertheless considered, at that period, the Zionist leadership as a secondary factor in the context of their strategic choice. Zionists, unlike Arab regimes leaning on England, could be used to strengthen the USSR’s postwar international relations.”

At the time, though, Moscow appeared briefly to be genuinely supportive of Israeli statehood in its own right. At the United Nations, then Soviet ambassador Andrei Gromyko, acting on Stalin’s orders, embraced the Partition Plan for Palestine with enthusiasm that far outdid the United States’. Stalin evidently believed that the Russian-speaking, socialist-oriented Jewish leadership in Palestine, leaning largely on a collective-farm movement, would be a natural candidate for satellite-style subordi-
nation, which would offer the USSR among other Cold War benefits its long-coveted Mediterranean naval base. He may have been confirmed in this illusion by the fact that much of US officialdom, particularly in the State Department, openly feared the same.

Washington withdrew its support for partition soon after the UN General Assembly adopted the plan on 29 November 1947, and clamped an arms embargo on the region when the Arabs of Palestine and then the Arab states, having rejected the plan, launched a war to thwart it. Several Soviet and Russian sources have taken credit for assisting (and infiltrating) the pre-state Jewish underground organizations. According to Bezymbensky: “From the beginning of 1947, active cooperation was developed between Soviet special services and the future Israeli authorities. Thus, the Fourth Main Directorate of the MGB [a precursor of the KGB] reanimated old connections in Palestine with the goal of carrying out anti-British terrorist acts.” After the partition resolution, the Soviet Union was instrumental in ensuring the Jewish forces’ survival and ultimate victory by supplying them with arms via Czechoslovakia. When Israel declared independence on 14 May 1948, Moscow was the second government to recognize it, after the United States, but whereas Washington’s recognition was de facto, the USSR’s was de jure. The State of Israel responded, among other gestures, by handing over all Russian church property under its control to the “Red” Moscow-based church, thus creating a Russian intelligence platform that outlasted even the Soviet Union.

The Ukrainian representative at the UN Security Council went so far, in the autumn of 1948, as to submit to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) a proposal for the absorption of more than 500,000 Arab refugees from Palestine in Soviet Central Asia and the creation there of an Arab SSR or autonomous region, which might have reduced the perennial problem that has haunted Israel ever since. But the fact that this idea was never pursued conforms with retrospective accounts by Stalin’s contemporaries that describe him as supporting the establishment of Israel not mainly—if at all—for its own sake. Rather, he is supposed to have calculated that it would guarantee perpetual unrest in the Middle East, and thus would provide the USSR with constant openings for promoting its own interests and countering the West’s.

With this purpose achieved, Moscow would have needed few other reasons to abandon Israel after its foundation, but several such reasons
did arise—in addition to “the Israeli leadership’s unwillingness to build Socialism in the Middle East,” which “led first to the freezing of bilateral military relations, and later (from the mid-1950s) to a full change of orientation in the Soviet Union’s Middle Eastern policy.” The adverse effect created by the advent of Israel—inivgoration of Jewish and Zionist identity in the USSR—was demonstrated to the Soviet authorities when enthusiastic Jews in Moscow mobbed the inaugural appearance there of Israel’s first diplomatic representative, Golda Meir. Stalin’s openly anti-Semitic turn in his final years, and the victimizing of Jews and Israeli emissaries in show trials in Soviet satellites, further exacerbated this angle of the relationship.

The founding prime minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, steered the country’s policy along a pro-Western course. While its political links and military reliance were at first directed more toward Western Europe, even the initially limited ties with the United States led Israel to make such negative gestures toward Moscow as forgoing mutual recognition of Communist China and lending at least token support to the UN side in the Korean War. Simultaneously, new perspectives opened up in the Arab world, due to local developments like the intensification of the Algerian revolt against France and the Free Officers’ coup d’état of 1952 in Egypt. The new Egyptian leadership’s initial openness toward the United States and its indifference or worse to Communism are reflected in the official Russian account of the Soviet policy shift: “The accent was put on the Arab countries, most of which took an anti-Western position and in part shared the socialist principles in building their own social-political and economic structures.”

US vacillation on such issues as Egyptian requests for aid in building the Nile dam at Aswan, American insistence on Arab adherence to a regional equivalent of NATO (the Baghdad Pact), and the limitations on arms sales to the region imposed by the Western Tripartite Declaration soon provided the USSR with an entrée into Egypt—with the retreat of British domination again forming both the backdrop and an incentive. The charismatic nationalist Gamal Abdel Nasser, who gradually asserted himself as the leading force among the Free Officers, first approached Moscow for military hardware even before he formally took over supreme power in Cairo, and in 1955 he concluded the first major Soviet arms deal in the Middle East. Ironically, as with Israel only seven years earlier, the
intermediary was again Czechoslovakia. An emboldened Nasser went on to foment Palestinian-Arab raids into Israel and, more important, to nationalize the Suez Canal. The ensuing Sinai-Suez crisis of 1956, in which Britain, France, and Israel launched a joint campaign against Egypt, became “the first test of Soviet ‘steadfastness’ in the Arab world.”

By this time, there was a substantial contingent of Soviet military advisers in Egypt, although the Egyptian forces were only at the start of conversion to Soviet weapons and doctrine. Western historiography has hitherto held that a precedent was set in 1956 for the USSR’s cautious abstention from direct military intervention in future regional conflicts. Soviet air crews and other personnel in Egypt were supposedly ordered to refrain from any direct involvement, and were even evacuated. But recent Russian accounts state that the precedent set was actually to permit such involvement, against Israeli as well as British and French forces.

The official Russian military history mentioned in the previous chapter states that from the outset of the Suez hostilities, “together with the Egyptians, ‘wingtip to wingtip,’ Soviet pilots-instructors fought too.” The actions described are mainly against British forces, but on 31 October, it is claimed that “the Soviet pilots took part in attacking the positions of Israel’s 202nd Paratroop Brigade.” This Russian claim is partially confirmed by Israel’s chief of staff during the campaign, Moshe Dayan, who states that on the same date, six MiG-15s covered the attack sorties flown against the 202nd by four British-made Meteors. He singles out this operation as the only Egyptian aerial attack that caused serious damage and casualties to Israeli forces in the entire campaign. The Russian history then adds a yet unconfirmed claim: “On 1 November, a group of MiG-17 interceptors, which had been transferred [from the USSR] specifically for this purpose, joined the fray.” Unlike the MiG-15s, only a handful of MiG-17s had been delivered to Egypt before the conflict, and there were yet few Egyptian pilots qualified to fly them. Recently a Ukrainian publication named a Soviet MiG-17 pilot who shot down a British aircraft, adding weight to the Russian claim that Soviet pilots also participated in a MiG-17 attack on Israeli forces on 1 November. Soviet personnel thus went into combat against Israel as early as 1956.

Another precedent from 1956—the Soviet use of a nuclear threat (as well as the threat of dispatching “volunteers” or other forms of intervention) to compel an Israeli retreat, and in this case British and French re-
treat as well—will be discussed at length in the next chapter. At this point, suffice it to mention that Western analysis viewed this as the first in a series of Soviet threats that consisted mainly of bluster and were intentionally made too late for the bluff to be called. But for the Soviets, it was a successful maneuver that encouraged emulation in several respects. It demonstrated the feasibility of limited but effective direct military intervention in the Middle East. It showed the international benefits of acting in response to an “aggressive” strike against a Soviet client; in 1956, this successfully ranged the United States against its European allies and in support of Egypt, which ultimately did little to further US interests but much to promote the USSR’s. It illustrated the usefulness of a coarse and bullying style, which Nikita Khrushchev then repeated on several celebrated occasions. In Soviet publications it is widely held to have helped inspire the USSR’s nuclear-missile adventure in Cuba six years after Suez. In turn, the events in 1967 that form the subject of this book are viewed as equaling the “Caribbean” crisis, a point exemplified by the Soviet-initiated first use of the Moscow–Washington hotline that was installed after the Cuban missile crisis.

One aspect in which the Suez crisis provided a lesson rather than a precedent for the Soviets was their lack of means and facilities for rapid and continuous projection of conventional force. As the USSR reaped the benefits of Suez by establishing its influence in a series of Arab states besides Egypt (most notably for the purposes of this study, in Syria), a series of visits by navy commander Sergei Gorshkov marked a consistent line of creating a significant Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean. Gorshkov and his strategy outlasted Khrushchev, whose idea of limiting the navy to nuclear-missile submarines went the way of his attempt to shift Soviet agriculture from wheat to corn. Enhancement of both the submarine and surface naval components in the Med became an instrument of the Soviet move in 1967, as well as one of its main purposes.

In addition to this complete reversal of Soviet strategy and rhetoric in Middle Eastern terms, Israel was now targeted as a theater of operations in a larger East-West conflict. A recent Russian study retains the Soviet ideological parlance:

The USSR’s posture in the Middle Eastern conflict was formed under the influence of a class approach to international rela-
tions. For the USSR, the essence of the Arab-Israeli conflict had nothing to do with the clash of two nationalist movements, an ethno-political or ethno-territorial rivalry. Under Cold War conditions, when relations with the West and primarily with the United States were typified by intense rivalry and distrust, in the context of the USSR’s official ideology, the Middle East confrontation was perceived only as the embodiment of imperialism [vying against] the Arab national liberation movement.22

In the mid-1960s, the KGB’s Foreign Intelligence (First) Directorate prepared parachute drops of *diversionnye razvedyvatelnye gruppy* (DRGs—sabotage-intelligence groups) to destroy Israeli targets, in a manner not unlike the planned landings in 1967. During 1964–66, according to documents supplied by the defecting KGB archivist Vasily Mitrokhin, Israel was one of the countries where caches of arms and radio equipment were pre-positioned for such operations. Mitrokhin claimed that some of these were booby-trapped and may be in place to this day.23 The direct involvement of Soviet personnel on Israeli soil, at least on a small scale, was thus considered and approved.

Furthering a defeat of Israel by Moscow’s Arab allies became, as was recognized at the time, a vehicle for expanding the USSR’s influence in the Arab world by weakening the “conservative” regimes, which could be cast as subservient to imperialist and Zionist forces. This would win control over vital oil resources (an objective that was achieved in Iraq and aspired to in Saudi Arabia) and obstruct US efforts to complete the encirclement of the Soviet Union with nuclear-backed military pacts. These Soviet objectives combined with regional developments—water and border disputes, Palestinian unrest, domestic and inter-Arab rivalries in which anti-Israeli zeal served political interests—to create common motivation for a joint military venture.

How far did the Soviets intend to go, and how far would they have gone along if this joint move had succeeded in 1967, and the Arabs had made good on their declared intention of obliterating Israel as a state? The answer is far more obscure than the emerging picture of actual Soviet moves up to the plan’s frustration.

The USSR’s embrace of the partition resolution and its recognition of Israel’s legitimacy created at least a formal commitment to the exis-
tence of a Jewish state within the 1947 plan’s proposed borders: three separate segments (two very small and the third largely desert), connected only at two crossing points and excluding Jerusalem, which was to be internationalized. (The same applied to the Arab state that the resolution also envisaged but which was never established due to Arab opposition to partition; instead, Jordan and Egypt occupied the parts of the proposed Arab state that adjoined their borders.) Israel’s victory in 1948 against the combined Arab armies left it in control of contiguous and considerably greater territory than it had been allotted by the Partition Plan. Although the armistice lines agreed to in 1949 were nowhere recognized as permanent boundaries, they were confirmed de facto by the UN Security Council. But as Moscow’s attitude toward Israel chilled, it began to refer to the 1947 partition lines as Israel’s legitimate borders. By the mid-1950s, Soviet reference books depicted the country accordingly, and all additional land that Israel held was designated as “occupied.”

Pavel Akopov, a Soviet Foreign Ministry official in 1967, recalls the consensus among his diplomatic colleagues in the run-up to the Six-Day War: “If we put the task of an offensive, . . . liberation of earlier occupied territories . . . we [at the Foreign Ministry] thought that the Egyptian army is not capable of such operations. . . . [O]ur military believed, thought that the Egyptian army could fulfil these tasks.” Even a recent official history of the Black Sea Fleet defines the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1967 as “a dispute over unregulated territories.” Restoring the partition borders might well be “the unavoidable weakening of Israel’s positions” that another Soviet official at the time, Yevgeny Pyrlin, mentions as the expected outcome of the war. It “could have constituted, according to this [Soviet] way of thinking a serious blow to the prestige of the USA, Israel’s main ally which was at that period getting bogged deeper and deeper in the Vietnam war.”

Reducing Israel to the 1947 boundaries was evidently stated by the Soviets as “their ultimate aim in respect of Israel” during the 1967 crisis to Israeli Communist leader Moshe Sneh, with whom their contacts played a major role that will be outlined in the following chapters. This came as no surprise to Israeli officials, one of whom recalled:
The Bulgarian chargé d’affaires, for instance, who was the mouthpiece of the Soviet ambassador, was making the rounds and telling everyone in the period between 15 May and 5 June that Israel had no chance of overcoming a united offensive by all the Arab states, and therefore the Israeli government had to address Moscow with a request to mediate between the Arabs and us, on the condition that we would be willing to discuss withdrawing our borders to those of 1947 and settling most of the [Palestinian] refugees within them. This means that the Soviet plans for Israel were not to annihilate the state, but to amputate it gradually—a salami policy.  

Pyrlin noted in retrospect that “of course there could not be any consideration of [Israel’s] absolute liquidation, as called for by some hot Arab heads.” As Stalin, and in later years Gromyko, are reported to have acknowledged, Israel’s existence was more beneficial for Soviet influence than its disappearance. However, several instances cited in the following chapters attest that Israel’s impending “liquidation” was threatened by quite a number of Soviet diplomats up to, and at the beginning of, the Six-Day War. In one such case, the Soviet ambassador in Israel told the same Dr. Sneh: “The war will last 24 hours only and no trace of the State of Israel will be left.” While these diplomats might have been carried away by the enthusiasm in their host countries, or were playing for rhetorical effect, there are indications that they also echoed a tendency shared by at least part of the Soviet leadership.

The most prominent example is Defense Minister Andrei Grechko, whose “willfulness, capriciousness, roughness, and rudeness” went as far as suggesting a conquest of Western Europe in revenge for the Cuban setback of 1962. His views were reportedly moderated somewhat by promotion to full ministerial rank just before the 1967 war, but he still “would not hesitate to demonstrate the superiority and might of the Soviet armed forces.” Considering Grechko’s defining youthful experience—his service, during the Civil War and afterward, in the notoriously and murderously anti-Semitic army corps of Semyon Budionny—it is hardly surprising that even as minister “sometimes he would wave his fists, threatening to liquidate imperialism and Zionism.” According to a former Soviet officer who in 1967 was in the graduating class of cadets:
In the second half of May 1967... the Middle Eastern situation was deteriorating; war between the Arab states and Israel was considered inevitable, indeed imminent. The war’s result was predetermined, as everyone in the USSR believed. . . . In order to prevent the West coming to Israel’s defense, combat readiness was raised . . . for this to be better understood by officers and upper-class cadets, they were read a statement by Minister of Defense Marshal Grechko . . .: “The 50th year of the Great October Socialist Revolution will be the last year of the existence of the State of Israel.”34

Numerous other instances confirm that the goal of eradicating Israel, while never formally stated as official policy, was widespread in Soviet thought and parlance, particularly among the military. In one such example, an officer who was dispatched to Egypt shortly after the war wrote, reflecting his own indoctrination: “The Arabs had decided to re-establish Palestine on the area that had already been captured by Israel. With this purpose, led by the UAR under the leadership of . . . Nasser, [they] deployed armed forces, leaning on the assistance of the Soviet Union.”35 (UAR, or United Arab Republic, was Egypt’s official name at the time, a relic of its short-lived union with Syria in 1958–61.) The question whether the USSR would indeed have acquiesced or even assisted in attaining this goal remains unanswerable—probably forever. The determining test of the Soviet leadership’s intentions must therefore remain in the facts of its preparation for military action.

Multiple references show that Grechko was not alone in seeking a dramatic deed, such as a blow on the “imperialist forces,” which would crown Soviet leaders with a historic Leninist achievement for the jubilee of the revolution. “Brezhnev,” according to his speechwriter at the time, “began by May [1967] to show his interest in the 50th anniversary. . . . [A]t the beginning of June [before the war] we . . . were improvising the approximate plan for the celebrations.”36 A meeting of KGB operatives with their East German counterparts in Moscow in mid-April specifically stressed the importance of “active measures” for commemorating the anniversary.37 At the height of the Middle Eastern crisis, an unnamed Soviet diplomat at the United Nations appeared to betray this preoccupation in an inverted form by “saying they would . . . not get involved in a war
on their 50th anniversary.”38 Ironically, when the character and success of Israel’s preemptive strike surprised the Soviets and obviated their planned intervention, it also put a damper on the festive occasion: “This interest [in these celebrations] waned with the Six-Day War.”39 Still, as Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev confided to a Polish Politburo member, the CPSU Central Committee’s urgent plenum that was convened on 20 June 1967 after “the aggression in the Near East, . . . approved the plan for the 50th anniversary” solely “in order not to create the impression that the situation is alarming.”40

Other elements that determined the timing for the joint Soviet-Arab initiative to instigate a showdown with Israel will become apparent in the following chapters, including the accession of a distinctly pro-Soviet regime in Syria. Preparation for the British retreat from “east of Suez” was another factor. As already mentioned, the United States’ perceived preoccupation with Vietnam, as domestic opinion turned against military involvement overseas, definitely was taken into account; in Israel, the consequent “lack of an articulated US stance on events in the Middle East” was seen as one of the “appropriate conditions” for implementation of the Soviet plan in the Middle East.41

Although the Soviet leadership was prepared for a calculated risk of global confrontation, it preferred to act when and where a US response seemed less probable. One way to reduce this probability, the Soviets correctly perceived, was by ensuring that Israel would strike first, thus incurring international condemnation and US disapproval. And finally, Israel was to be attacked on an issue in which it was at serious odds with the United States: its nuclear program, at a moment when Washington was almost as apprehensive as Moscow about the prospect of Israel acquiring atomic weapons.

The importance of the nuclear issue emerged gradually as we progressed in our research into the origins of the war. When we first exposed new evidence that the Soviet Union both instigated the Six-Day War and set in motion a direct military intervention against Israel, a central objection raised by critics was the supposed disproportionality of these actions.42 It was considered inconceivable that the Kremlin would risk a global confrontation with the United States by attempting so much as a limited conventional intervention, let alone that it would contemplate launching nuclear weapons at Israel—an act that might precipitate a
catastrophic superpower clash—merely for the attainment of a regional advantage, no matter how important, in the Middle Eastern battlefield of the Cold War.43

The additional input of the nuclear element, from Russian and other sources, now appears to answer this cogent objection by highlighting the strategic context of the Soviet motivation for instigating the 1967 crisis, thus accounting for both the risk assumed and the means employed. It also helps to explain the timing and development of the conflict.

The following chapters demonstrate that a central motive for the Soviet move was to halt and destroy Israel’s nuclear development before it could attain operational atomic weapons; that this Soviet effort was accelerated by a direct message from Israel whereby, despite its official ambiguity, it was bent on acquiring such weapons; that Soviet nuclear weapons were readied for use against Israel in case it already possessed, and tried to use, any nuclear device; and that the direct Soviet military intervention actually began with overflights of Israel’s main nuclear facility by Soviet aircraft and pilots, in preparation for the planned attack on this target or to create such concern in Israel that it would surely launch a first strike.
CHAPTER 4

The Nuclear Context

In the last twenty years, the most important background for every international crisis [was set by] atomic weapons. . . . [T]hey will go on doing so, although always staying in the background.


RECENTLY PUBLISHED EXCERPTS of the Israeli leadership’s deliberations during the crisis of May–June 1967, based on still-classified military and political records, confirmed that two perceived threats were consistently foremost among the Israelis’ considerations. One was an Egyptian air strike at the Negev Nuclear Research Center—the reactor complex that Israel had constructed near the town of Dimona in the Negev desert, and had initially described as a “textile plant.” The other threat dreaded by the Israeli leaders, which came to the fore somewhat later, was direct Soviet military intervention. The released excerpts do not, however, specify whether these fears stemmed from specific intelligence, theoretical analysis, or gut feelings—nor whether the Israelis made an operative connection between these two concerns.

In retrospect, however, it would have been surprising had they not made such a connection, given what they knew at the time, and what has now become a matter of record, about the USSR’s position and activity vis-à-vis Israel’s nuclear project. Fears that it would put Israel on a collision course with the Soviet Union had been voiced from the outset of the program, even at cabinet level. Up to 1958, the last year for which transcripts of its meetings have been released, Israel’s full cabinet never formally discussed the nation’s policy regarding nuclear-weapons development, much less determined it. This policy was shaped by the founding
prime minister and defense minister, David Ben-Gurion, and managed under strict secrecy by his close aides and the agency established for the purpose, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). Some ministers, however, took advantage of various opportunities to express their opinions and, mainly, objections to the program.

In early 1958, against the backdrop of US plans to deploy intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Turkey, Soviet prime minister Nikolai Bulganin included Israel among the addressees of a proposal to declare the Middle East a nuclear weapons–free zone. On 2 February, Health Minister Yisrael Barzilai of the left-wing Mapam (United Workers’ Party) moved in cabinet that Israel take the initiative by proposing a regional ban on “missile bases and atomic weapons in general.” Despite Barzilai’s protestations that such a move would be in Israel’s own interests, Ben-Gurion accused him of serving Soviet policy, out of competition with the Communist Party for Moscow’s favor (Mapam ended its support for the USSR only well after Stalin’s death).3 Before the cabinet resolved to take no position on the Soviet initiative, the respected justice minister, Pinhas Rosen (of the center-right Progressive Party), spoke up:

MINISTER P. ROSEN: This matter is giving me no peace of mind. If we ever decided, or almost decided, to take any steps here toward creating atomic energy for purposes of war, I do not know what is liable to happen . . .

PRIME MINISTER D. BEN-GURION: Atomic energy for purposes of peace. I request that you do not repeat your remark.

MINISTER P. ROSEN: I am very much afraid that we here may become such a country that Russia will have to want to eradicate us . . . Even if I accept that we are not engaged in this today, I can assume that we are potentially capable of it. But I say that this is very undesirable, because it will be very dangerous.4

Ben-Gurion rejected Rosen’s argument that the Soviets, who had not given nuclear weapons to their Eastern European satellites, would not supply them to Nasser, whose long-term loyalty they could trust much less. He did not respond to Rosen’s prediction that Israel’s potential acquisition of nuclear weapons might lead the USSR to contemplate a devastating strike at Israel. The justice minister was ultimately vindicated on both counts.
In his recent history of the 1967 war, Michael Oren cited Minister of Labor Yigal Allon, who was convinced that “Egypt would strike Dimona the moment America challenged the blockade [of Israeli shipping through the Straits of Tiran, which Nasser declared on 22 May].” But Oren concluded that Israel’s fears of an Egyptian attack on Dimona were more instrumental in precipitating its preemptive strike than was any actual Egyptian threat.

Still, it is remarkable that following the Six-Day War, both the fear of a strike at Dimona and of a Soviet intervention disappeared almost entirely from discourse on the crisis and its aftermath. The successful Soviet cover-up of Moscow’s role in instigating the war, and of its plans for actively intervening on the Arab side, was in respect of the nuclear angle complemented by a similar Israeli blackout. But even considering the overall reticence of most Israeli scholars in discussing their country’s nuclear program and its implications, which stems both from actual censorship and from patriotic convention, the almost total disregard of existing historiography for any nuclear-related aspect of the Six-Day War is striking.

Moreover, this Israeli reserve (as well as the reluctance of all US administrations to broach the Israeli nuclear issue in public) appears to have influenced Western research, which has also been virtually silent on the subject. One of the most prominent American authorities on the war, Richard B. Parker, said in 1994 that none of his Egyptian sources had ever mentioned the nuclear issue—so consequently he never entertained the idea that nuclear weapons might have played any role in starting the conflict.

But as early as 1964, the US ambassador in Egypt, John Badeau, wrote to President Lyndon Johnson that “the UAR . . . is now considered to be likely to attack Israel only if it believes Israel has begun to produce nuclear weapons.” In this, Badeau was in effect repeating the threat that Nasser himself had voiced four years earlier: “Israel’s development of nuclear weapons would prompt the Arab states to launch a preventive war.”

Yet even after Nasser did precipitate a war in 1967, the possibility that Israel’s nuclear project was a prime factor “has hardly been explored.” This is despite the long-established fact, based on documents the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) captured in Sinai, that the Egyptian plan
of attack on Israel included the destruction of the Dimona plant, as well as Israel’s research reactor at Nahal Sorek.\textsuperscript{11} To the extent that a goal of preventing Israel from attaining nuclear arms was suggested, it was attributed to the Arab states, and particularly Egypt, alone; the USSR was hardly mentioned in this context at all.\textsuperscript{12}

But a former top Middle Eastern specialist in the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Oleg Grinevsky, while recently confirming Egypt’s nuclear motive for the war, added suggestively that the USSR did play a role in abetting it:

By the mid-1960s, our intelligence already had truthful enough data on Israel’s nuclear potential. . . . There is information that for Egypt, one of the triggering motives for the 1967 war indeed was the intent to defeat Israel before it acquired the capability to use nuclear weapons in the battlefield. In Egypt’s military plans Dimona was marked as one of the main targets. Only [Israel’s] sudden blow on the Egyptian airfields and Egypt’s rout in this six-day war saved Dimona from annihilation and Israel from radioactive contamination. Thus nuclear arms turned from a deterrent into the main cause of war in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{13}

The USSR had its own reasons for adamantly opposing Israel’s nuclear project. During the 1956 Sinai-Suez crisis, even a veiled nuclear threat that Nikolai Bulganin directed at Israel, as well as at Britain and France, sufficed to force these nations to halt their offensive against Egypt. This experience was an important—perhaps decisive—factor in impelling Israel, like France, to seek its own nuclear deterrent.\textsuperscript{14} Russian histories claim that “this nuclear ultimatum—the first and only ultimatum of its kind in the nuclear era—has, in effect, been hushed up in Western literature,”\textsuperscript{15} which has indeed tended to credit US pressure, more than the Soviet threat, for the Anglo-French-Israeli climbdown.\textsuperscript{16}

But this was not the perception in Moscow. The Soviet foreign minister at the time, Dmitri Shepilov, admitted years later that there had been no intention to make good on this threat, but—coupled with some psychological tactics and the Western perception of Khrushchev’s “extravagance”—the ploy worked. Its perceived success even encouraged Khrushchev to try a similar maneuver in Cuba in 1962\textsuperscript{17}—an incident
that Soviet and Russian participants and historians alike consistently compare with the Middle Eastern crisis of 1967 both in respect of their causes and of the risk they created for a global clash.\textsuperscript{18}

Despite their failure in Cuba, as far as the Middle East was concerned 1956 remained for the Soviets a successful example of how they could employ their nuclear clout in order to limit Israeli action against their Arab clients, thus reinforcing these clients’ dependence on the USSR—as long as Israel had no counter-deterrent. Preventing Israel from achieving even the semblance of nuclear superiority over its neighbors and a credible reply to any external nuclear threat thus became a central objective of Soviet Middle Eastern policy.

But the USSR also signaled its real or feigned anxiety over a direct menace from any nuclear weapons positioned within range of its southern regions. In the period in question, one of the main such threats was consistently perceived by Moscow to emanate from West Germany, and Israel’s nuclear aspirations were soon attached to this context of the Cold War’s central front. An early record of Soviet apprehension related to a nuclear angle of the rapprochement between Israel and West Germany dates from 2 January 1958, when the Soviet ambassador in Israel, A. N. Abramov, reported to his minister in Moscow: “There are reports that the Israeli government intends to organize in Israel, with the help of West Germany, production of missiles and even atomic weapons. The preliminary agreement on this is being talked about as having been reached.”\textsuperscript{19}

In 1962, the face-saving but also quite substantial trade-off that the USSR did extract for the removal of its missiles from Cuba was the withdrawal of US nuclear missiles from Turkey. By early 1966, Abramov’s successor, Dmitri Chuvakhin, warned in a dispatch to Moscow that Israel was about to plug this gap in the Western alliance: “In . . . plans for global nuclear strategy, Israel is slated to play the role of a certain missing link between NATO and CENTO [the remnant of the Baghdad Pact after Iraq’s withdrawal, which still allied Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan with Britain and, informally, the United States].”\textsuperscript{20} Anyone as familiar as Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban was with the invariably dour countenance of Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko must have taken it as a very serious warning when “grim Grom,” on 30 September 1966, “noted with a grin” to his Israeli counterpart that since “Israel does not aspire to surround and crush the USSR, the Soviet Union has no reason to fear Israel
or to harbor hostility toward it.” Eban, indeed, did not include this pleasantry among some positive “innovations and surprises” that he discerned in Gromyko’s remarks. The Israeli official who took notes at this meeting evidently attached such significance to “surround and crush” that he inserted these English words into his Hebrew transcript.21

The nuclear apprehension appears to have been mutual. In recent literature, the claim has been made mainly by Seymour Hersh that the USSR—rather than the Arab states—was the primary target of Israel’s nuclear-deterrent project from its outset, after the 1956 crisis.22 An explicit statement to this effect was made by an unnamed Israeli source to the journalist Leslie Velie several weeks after the Six-Day War. This source said that Israel was faced with the choice whether to submit to Soviet demands or “to develop nuclear weapons that will end the threat of a fourth round [against the Arabs] and with it the possibility of Soviet intervention.”23

In 1955, simultaneously with the Czechoslovak arms deal that marked Egypt’s entry into the Soviet sphere of influence, the USSR provided Egypt with a small experimental nuclear reactor. The decision to supply this facility was made a few days after the United States made a similar agreement with Israel.24 Whether a further promotion of Egypt’s nuclear capability toward the military level was ever envisaged by Moscow before it adopted a firm and consistent anti-proliferation policy merits further research; in the event, Nasser’s subsequent requests for such weapons were turned down. The evidence that the USSR provided Egypt with chemical weapons is not entirely conclusive. Egypt did use poison gas during its involvement in the Yemen civil war of 1962–70, with the best-known and documented case occurring in May 1967, but the weapons’ provenance has been attributed to German scientists as well as the Soviet Union.25

Israeli officials reacted with alarm when, as the crisis of 1967 escalated, the Cairo press reported that nonconventional weapons had been deployed in Sinai.26 If this Soviet supply of chemical gear to Egypt extended to more than defensive equipment, it points to Moscow’s preference for limiting Nasser to chemical weapons rather than nuclear arms. But Israel’s expected acquisition of nuclear weapons remained a potent argument for Egypt and other Arab allies of the USSR in demanding to be equipped with countervailing capability, and Moscow’s reluctance to
comply was one more reason why curtailing Israel’s nuclear development remained essential for Soviet policy.

When on 23 December 1960 Nasser issued his first public warning of preventive war, following a New York Times exposé on Israel’s nuclear program, the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed its ambassadors in Cairo and Tel Aviv:

“The plans for Israel’s creation of its own nuclear bomb, which, judging by the information at hand, are not far from completion, are being met by the Soviet government with a guarded attitude. . . . Israel’s attempt to produce its own nuclear weapons is dangerous, in view of the situation created in the Near and Middle East. . . . The establishment of nuclear weapons production in Israel will make the situation . . . even more unstable, and is liable to trigger a serious conflict that can spill over the borders of the region.”

The “information at hand” may well refer to the results of constant Soviet intelligence efforts in Israel. In July 1960, Kurt Sitte, a German physicist from the Sudetenland working at the Haifa Technological Institute, was exposed as an agent of the USSR’s Czechoslovak proxies. Despite Israel’s extreme reticence about any mention of its nuclear program, by 1972 it emerged that Sitte had reported to his handlers from 1955 “about nuclear research and the Atomic Energy Commission,” earning the sobriquet “the Israeli Klaus Fuchs.” A former KGB rezident in Tel Aviv, Ivan Dedyulya, wrote in his memoirs that one of his missions upon being posted to Israel in late 1962 was “to ascertain the credibility of information concerning the progress of work for creating atomic arms in Israel.”

Further proof of Soviet efforts in this area was recently provided by an 81-year old Israeli, Victor Grajewski. In 2006 he disclosed to Haaretz that he had been a double agent operated by the Israeli security services, which beginning in May 1957 used him to feed disinformation to his handlers at the Soviet embassy. Grajewski says his contacts in the Soviet military intelligence organization, the GRU, “mainly monitored the IDF’s development, with special interest in the Air Force, as well as Israel’s scientific and technological capability in general and its nuclear [capability] in particular.” He recalled a meeting with a driver from a Russian church
near Jerusalem, who pointed at some major earthmoving in progress nearby and said: “We think this is intended for storage of your atomic weapons. Check it out for me.” Grajewski did not divulge whether he complied or what response the Shin Bet (Israeli General Security Services) instructed him to make.31

In addition to the account by Oleg Grinevsky of the Foreign Ministry, other authoritative works in Russian also place the Soviet role in the 1967 crisis and war in a nuclear context. A Russian military historian specializing in the Middle East, Colonel Valery Yaremenko, recently published an article on the genesis of the Six-Day War titled “Nuclear War in the Middle East Could Have Been Beneficial for the USSR.” The wording is a prime example of the Soviet penchant for presenting real but unspeakable fact as a hypothetical proposition. The Russian military historian specified that in addition to “cosmic intelligence” (satellite imagery), the Soviets also knew from “humint” (human intelligence) sources about the actual nature of Israel’s “textile plant” at Dimona.32

These are but a few in a series of sources that show how preventing Israel’s completion and procurement of nuclear weapons was high, if not paramount, among Soviet priorities in precipitating the 1967 conflict, and especially in the choice of its timing. The moment when critical mass was reached has been pinpointed by a sensational document that recently appeared, almost unnoticed, in an official collection of Soviet diplomatic papers.
The sequence of developments in the nuclear proliferation sphere that ultimately led the USSR to instigate a Middle Eastern war in 1967 can be traced back to a remarkable incident, a year and a half earlier, that has only now come to light in an officially published document.

Though not unprecedented in the annals of intelligence, it is highly extraordinary for a nation’s foremost security figure intentionally to divulge its most guarded strategic secret to its most feared adversary, while contradicting his own nation’s public policy statements. It is even more astonishing for such a disclosure to be so misguided as to achieve the opposite of its intended effect.

We were therefore utterly surprised to find the following text in a recently published collection of Soviet Foreign Ministry papers:

Memorandum of the Department for Middle Eastern Countries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR on Israel’s Intent to Possess Atomic Weapons.

23 February 1966.

Top Secret.

On 13 December 1965, one of the leaders of the Israel Communist party, Comrade Sneh, informed the Soviet Ambassador in Tel Aviv about his conversation (9 December 1965) with the
adviser to the prime minister of Israel, Gariel, in which the latter declared Israel’s intention to produce its own atomic bomb.¹

The title of “adviser to the prime minister” definitely identifies Sneh’s interlocutor as Isser Harel, a founder, and for many years the boss, of Israel’s General Security Services (Shin Bet) and its Mossad intelligence agency, who gained worldwide renown by locating and abducting the Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann in Argentina and bringing him to trial in Israel in 1960.² Harel was appointed in September 1965 as special adviser on intelligence and special operations to Ben-Gurion’s successor as prime minister, Levi Eshkol.

The unsigned Foreign Ministry memorandum was an internal document, composed for confidential briefing of the senior CPSU and government echelon. This in itself does not guarantee that its content was unaffected by propaganda considerations, as we have seen in Gromyko’s outburst to his aides about how to compose such papers. Indeed, the 1966 memorandum—which was published under exactly the circumstances that Gromyko foresaw—does go on to blast Israel’s nefarious designs. But the actual meeting between Harel and Sneh has been confirmed by Harel himself. There is therefore no reason to suppose that Harel’s statement was falsified in Moscow, or that it was misunderstood by Sneh. The magnitude, motives, and consequences of Harel’s disclosure appear to be of historic proportions. In its immediate aftermath, the Israeli nuclear issue abruptly returned to the forefront of Soviet and Arab concerns and activity, after a six-year hiatus.³ It must be emphasized that our analysis pertains to the Soviet interest in, perception of, and response to Israel’s nuclear program, not to the latter’s actual history, of which we have no independent information.

At the time when Israel’s “Mr. Intelligence” made this statement, he was undoubtedly well aware that his country’s nuclear program was high on the Soviet priority list; it was he who exposed the nuclear spy Sitte. Another Soviet spy, Yisrael Beer, whom Harel caught in 1961, testified at his trial that his Soviet handler “demanded to be told everything he [Beer] knew about one of the State’s most secret enterprises.”⁴ Here as in other Israeli statements cited in this study, the “most secret” or “main” project is usually a euphemism for the nuclear effort.

Harel died in February 2003, shortly before the new Russian docu-
ment collection was published. But, remarkably, the fact of his having met Sneh in 1965, in the full awareness that the latter would report their conversations to the Soviets, is a matter of record—thanks to Harel himself. In a book he devoted to Soviet espionage in Israel and his struggle against it, Harel wrote in 1987 that 22 years earlier, as Eshkol’s adviser, “I met secretly quite a number of times with Moshe Sneh. . . . We devoted our long talks to exchanging opinions and impressions about ideology and politics, totalitarianism and democracy, the Soviet Union and Communism, and other matters.”

This is part of an entire chapter that, in a book otherwise focused on his exposure of Soviet spies in Israel, Harel devotes to answering—in the negative—the question “was Moshe Sneh really a Soviet agent?” He notes that Sneh was suspected as such—and denounced to Harel—by, among others, Sneh’s own comrades in Mapam, where he made a brief stopover in his dramatic migration across the Zionist and Israeli political spectrum.

Demonstrating the full implications of Harel’s disclosure now requires some digression into the intricacies of Israeli politics at the time. The Mapamniks’ main evidence was that Sneh, who had been a brilliant young centrist-Zionist leader in Poland, had succeeded, as a medical officer in the Polish army, in accomplishing the impossible by escaping from Soviet captivity in 1939 and making his way to Palestine—which aroused suspicion that he had been recruited by the Soviets. In Palestine, where he quickly rose to become chief of staff in the mainstream Jewish underground Haganah, Sneh later veered to the left, abandoned a career that had promised to bring him to the pinnacle of power, and ultimately became a political pariah as leader of the Israel Communist Party.

Harel did put Sneh under surveillance, but he says he determined that the accusations were unfounded. He reasoned that if Sneh had really been a Soviet agent, his handlers would have preferred to insinuate their man into Israel’s ruling circles (as they did with Beer). Harel’s bottom line is therefore that “Sneh . . . was never a secret agent, who was infiltrated into the Zionist movement . . . in order to undermine it from within.”

However, Harel’s conclusion is hardly supported by recent Russian accounts based on CPSU documents: “It was no coincidence that he [Sneh] was elected secretary general of the League for Friendship with the Soviet
Union, which began operation in August 1948. By means of this organization, Moscow secretly financed its friends in Israel.”

Harel’s conclusion also conflicts with his own description of Sneh’s activities in a previous chapter of his book, which retells Harel’s exposure of Beer (a former associate of Sneh in Mapam) as a full-fledged Soviet spy. Sneh is reported there to have dismissed as “infantile” a military coup that was being plotted by Beer and others in Mapam’s security department, because (as Sneh said) “when the Red Army arrives, all this will be accomplished anyway.” In any event, Sneh’s service as—at least—an informant for the USSR is explicitly confirmed by Soviet documents: “This public activist collaborated closely with the Soviet special services and supplied them with ‘valuable material on the issues of [Israel’s] foreign and domestic policy.’ . . . In early 1952, the intelligence service of Mapam, headed by Sneh, informed the Soviet rezidentura that Israeli counterintelligence had infiltrated 28 provocateurs into the leadership organs of the Israel Communist Party.”

Indeed, the new collection of Soviet Foreign Ministry documents also contains several reports delivered by Sneh, including one from 3 February 1965 on security issues. And Harel, while giving Sneh a clean bill of health, does concede sarcastically:

> What is a Communist leader outside the Soviet Union to do when he reports to one of the authorized representatives of that country of peace, and is asked an embarrassing question about the plots being hatched in his own country against the Soviet paradise? Dare he refuse to reply, on the grounds that this would be by nature of espionage?

> My answer is No.

Harel confirms, then, that he knew any statement he made to Sneh would be relayed to the Soviet embassy. What is more, the Soviets themselves took for granted that Harel had this in mind, and accepted his information as authoritative: “Apparently, Gariel was assigned to inform the Soviet leaders, by means of Sneh, about Eshkol’s point of view, or that of the Israeli government, on one of the most contentious international issues—non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.”

By 1965, the Israel Communist Party was in the throes of a rift over its policy regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict. Sneh headed the faction that
tended to legitimize Israel’s existence as a Jewish state, a direction that ultimately led him to a deathbed apology for ever having abandoned Zionism.\(^{17}\) His longstanding personal relations with Israel’s top leaders, including Eshkol, were already on the mend, as was his connection with Harel—who in 1946, as head of the Haganah intelligence arm in Tel Aviv, had personally saved Sneh from arrest by the British. But Sneh was still suspect enough in the view of the Israeli mainstream for Harel (and, as we shall see, Eshkol himself) to meet him only “in secret.” At this stage, both factions of the Communist Party were still vying for the recognition and backing of Moscow, and Sneh was therefore especially motivated to comply with Soviet expectations, while attempting to reconcile them with the interests of Eshkol and Harel.\(^{18}\)

Sneh evidently treated Harel’s information as so secret and sensitive that he did not disclose it, or even the fact of his meetings with Harel, to his own party comrades. A top-secret, unsigned paper in the Israel Prime Minister’s Office files, apparently received from the security services, reports a Politburo meeting of Sneh’s faction (Maki) in March 1966, where “comrades” opined that the Eshkol cabinet was displaying “efforts to improve relations with the USSR,” with special reference to the nuclear issue: “Several indications have been given, both by Eshkol and by [Foreign Minister] Abba Eban, of sincere intentions to seek a way for nuclear demilitarization. . . . There is a reasonable chance that Maki will occupy some position as a mediating factor. . . . This is proved by the recent meetings of Sneh with the prime minister. . . . Sneh proposed to tell the ‘comrades’ in Moscow of these assessments.”\(^{19}\)

The report lists the nuclear issue first among the topics discussed in the Maki Politburo before the faction’s delegation left for the 23rd CPSU Congress, which convened on 29 March 1966 in Moscow. But Sneh did not signify that he had been given an authoritative statement to the contrary three months earlier. Rather, he consented that the assessment he now knew was wrong should be relayed to the CPSU.

By 1967 the Israel Communist Party had formally split, and the CPSU had opted to foster the Arab-nationalist-oriented majority splinter, Rakah. Still, on the eve of the Six-Day War (in which Sneh later justified Israel’s preemptive strike, thus cementing his estrangement from Moscow), his associate Yair Tzaban contends that “Sneh was working day and night to prevent the impending war.”\(^{20}\) By January 1969, an Israeli diplomat could
describe Sneh as “an Israeli patriot.” It remains an open question whether, in December 1965, Sneh was intentionally helping Harel (and, presumably, Eshkol) to promote an Israeli initiative vis-à-vis the USSR, or was still acting only as a Soviet informant, or was promoting his own partisan agenda.

Even more enigmatic is Harel’s rationale for making his disclosure to Sneh, if indeed it was an instrument of policy. Little has ever been published about the substance of Harel’s activity as Eshkol’s adviser. It is unlikely ever to be proved whether Harel inserted the curious chapter on Sneh into his book by way of apologetics for his meetings with the Communist leader, which (according to Harel) developed into a close friendship after their retirement; Sneh’s own published works make no mention of this.

The time of the chapter’s writing may indicate that it was intended specifically to forestall any future exposure of Harel’s nuclear message to Sneh. Harel’s book appeared in 1987, the year after the former Dimona technician Mordechai Vanunu revealed inside information about the facility that dispelled any uncertainty overseas as to Israel’s nuclear-weapons capability. Vanunu was abducted by the Mossad, tried, and imprisoned for 18 years on treason charges.

The newly published Soviet document establishes that Harel made a disclosure of similar import to Vanunu’s (with one major difference, which will be discussed presently)—but some 20 years earlier. Against this backdrop, Harel’s surprisingly favorable characterization of Sneh seems to declare: My meetings with him, and any statement I made to him, were ex officio and deliberate; I was not duped by a Soviet agent—not to mention anything worse.

There could be several worse scenarios. One might be that Harel’s motivation in making his statement, as in other aspects of his activity at the time, was mainly personal, combined with the political interests of the “clique” he was allied with in the government, led by Golda Meir and Yigal Allon. Harel, whose power as head of the Mossad and security services had been legendary and unchallenged, was forced out by Ben-Gurion in March 1963. The immediate and ostensible reason was Harel’s uncompromising campaign against German scientists working on weapons-development projects in Egypt, which the Mossad chief attributed to neglect, if not collusion, by what he considered an inade-
quately de-Nazified West Germany. His campaign therefore threatened to turn into an open confrontation with Bonn.

In addition to missiles, the first of which were tested in 1963, the Germans in Egypt were suspected of developing unconventional weapons. Most published references in this context are to chemical, biological, and perhaps radiological weapons. However, according to a counter-estimate produced by military intelligence head (and Harel’s rival) Meir Amit, Harel raised the specter of nuclear weapons too. Ben-Gurion considered Israel’s relations with Germany in particular, and with Europe in general, too vital to the country’s arms supply and international standing to jeopardize over this issue. He dismissed Harel, who began a campaign to regain his position and clear his name.

Shortly after deposing Harel in 1963, Ben-Gurion himself resigned and broke with his former party, together with his “boys” Moshe Dayan and Shimon Peres (who is credited for the establishment of the Dimona complex). The new prime minister, Eshkol, felt that Ben-Gurion was undermining his leadership—although he did continue his predecessor’s nuclear program. The ensuing developments afforded Harel the opportunity he awaited. At the Meir-Allon “clique’s” behest and under pressure from Harel, on 1 September 1965 the Ministerial Committee on Defense reopened the German question and issued what amounted to an apology to Harel. Two weeks later, Eshkol appointed him as adviser with special responsibility for intelligence. Harel considered this as rehabilitation, and intensified his single-minded struggle to regain formal control of the Mossad from his successor there, Amit.

This put Eshkol in both a confluence and a conflict of interests with the “clique,” which had supported Harel on the German issue. The nuclear program—which was not unrelated to the German experts problem—was reportedly a central issue among their differences. The “clique,” and its ally Harel, reportedly opposed the nuclear project in its entirety—though they objected in particular to the program’s potential effect on relations with the United States and to its dependence on France, another aspect of Ben-Gurion’s European orientation. They had “proposed to Ben-Gurion certain measures, the practical meaning of which would have been the liquidation of Israel’s nuclear program.”

Peres has claimed that as early as 1960, Harel actually cited Soviet knowledge of, and possible response to, Israel’s nuclear program in an
attempt to curb the project. After having Peres summoned urgently from a trip in Africa for a meeting with Ben-Gurion, “Harel began by reporting that he had . . . reliable information that a Soviet satellite had recently overflown and photographed Dimona. . . . Israel therefore, said Harel, faced a most grave situation.”

Harel said he suspected that a sudden visit by Gromyko to Washington was intended to demand joint US-USSR action to restrain Israel’s nuclear ambitions. Harel’s disclosure to Sneh five years later might thus be seen as a maverick, deliberate attempt to sabotage the nuclear program itself by inviting Soviet pressure, whether out of principled opposition to, or spite for, the Ben-Gurion–Peres axis. If so, he undertook it despite his apparent reconciliation with the former prime minister himself a few weeks earlier.

Ironically, it has recently emerged that on the substance of the nuclear issue, Harel’s archrival Amit may not have differed with him so radically. A year after Harel’s meeting with Sneh, on 27 November 1966, Amit—who evidently felt that the nuclear program might provoke a preventive attack on Israel—suggested floating a peace initiative toward Nasser that was to include an offer to deactivate the Dimona facility. The idea got no farther than a presentation by Amit, at his home, to a select group of personalities; Harel, who had by then resigned as Eshkol’s adviser, was not included. While still in government, he had shot down a previous initiative by Amit to visit Cairo in an attempt to create a secret channel for talks with Nasser.

The worst scenario regarding Harel’s motivation might be that he was not acting in the Israeli national interest at all—not even out of a personally biased view of this interest. Several Soviet sources speak of the USSR having recruited a very senior source in the Eshkol administration, whom they do not name. Former KGB rezident Dedyulya claims that exactly such a source, whom he calls “N,” had been recruited. A similar claim was recently made to Michael Oren by another former senior KGB Middle East operative, Vadim A. Kirpichenko.

Some of the accounts by ex-Soviets concerning this highly placed Israeli source conform astonishingly with Harel’s figure (among others) at this time. Mikhail and Yelizaveta Mukasei spent a total of 22 years in Western Europe as Soviet agents. Colonel Mikhail Isakovich Mukasei, who was of Jewish origin, related in 2001 that immediately after the 1967
war he and his wife arrived in Israel for three months. They were sent there “while the bombs were still exploding,” as a stopgap following the loss of the main Soviet intelligence infrastructure in the Tel Aviv embassy with the rupture of diplomatic relations on 10 June 1967. “We had to find competent people, who were well informed as to what future action the Israeli government might take,” Mukasei reported. “We managed to contact one person, who was not only in the know but found out some things for us himself, in matters that were then unclear and complex. He had previously been in government; later he was dismissed, and this angered him very much. He did not understand whom he was working for—we conducted all the debriefings very cautiously. But he really did know a very great deal.”

Did Israel’s former spymaster, who combated Soviet agents and detested them as fiercely as he did German scientists, become a major KGB source—unwittingly or otherwise? This seemingly preposterous notion cannot be entirely ruled out, though it cannot be suggested as probable without further evidence.

At any rate, the Soviet Foreign Ministry memorandum of 23 February 1966 treats Harel’s remark to Sneh as a bona fide message from the highest Israeli authority—and points out that it conflicted with Israel's officially declared policy, which also had been communicated to Soviet diplomats when they inquired about it on several occasions: “If Gariel’s remarks on ‘the direction taken by Israel to create its own atomic bomb’ do reflect the real intentions of the government of Israel, then question arises as to the honesty of Israel's foreign policy.”

At the time of his meeting with Sneh, Harel still had the ear and the backing of Eshkol (which he was to lose within a few months). He took part in the weekly supreme security consultations that Eshkol held in his capacity as defense minister, where, according to Eshkol’s military secretary at the time, “the most important subjects were decided . . . and—one can definitely say—the most fateful matters were discussed, including matters of life and death.”

Harel’s disclosure to the Soviets can therefore most charitably be interpreted as a strategic move coordinated with the prime minister. Given Harel’s role in the developments surrounding Ben-Gurion’s resignation and its aftermath, his message through Sneh might be seen as aimed to confirm, on Eshkol’s behalf, that despite the ascendance of Ben-Gurion’s
critics on the nuclear issue, the exclusion of the former prime minister’s leading supporters from government, and US pressure, the nuclear project was not being halted nor its objective altered.\textsuperscript{40}

Israel’s declared policy down to the present, of “not being the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the region,” was formulated in 1964 in the context of its negotiations with the United States for the supply of tanks and aircraft, a deal Washington sought to predicate—among other conditions—on Israel’s compliance with nuclear nonproliferation. However, this “non-introduction” line threatened to reduce the deterrent effect of Israel’s reputed nuclear capability.

Israel’s awareness of this continuing dilemma is illustrated by one of the recently declassified papers of the Nixon administration. It contains minutes of a talk in July 1969 between a group of US officials, led by acting secretary of state Elliot Richardson, and Israel’s ambassador in Washington, Yitzhak Rabin. The US side brought up once again the question of Israel’s accession to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—a matter that had been bogged down for months due to “differing US and Israeli interpretations of what was meant by ‘introduce’ nuclear weapons” into the Middle East, which Israel insisted it hadn’t and wouldn’t. The Americans—who were still referring to such “introduction” in the future tense, as a “subject of deep concern”—demanded “Israel’s assurance that when it says it will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the area, it means that it will not possess nuclear weapons.”

Rabin “was not accepting the US assumption that Israel has the capability to build nuclear weapons. . . . [He] could say neither that Israel was capable nor that it was not, . . . emphasizing that he personally had no knowledge of nuclear weapons.”\textsuperscript{41} This last contention, coming more than three years after Harel’s statement, appears rather brazen; Rabin was the IDF chief of staff in 1965 and during the Six-Day War.

Rabin asked: Would the United States “consider a weapon, which had not been advertised and tested, to be a weapon that could be used”?\textsuperscript{42} Israel thus considered, or at least professed, that “advertisement” was an essential component of nuclear deterrence: in order for a weapon to have this effect, the adversary must be convinced that it is available and that the readiness exists to use it.

Given the United States’ position (not to mention the Soviet Union’s) and Israel’s own previous commitments, publishing such an advertise-
ment officially was clearly out of the question. The only alternative would be to transmit the message through various deniable but credible back channels. Might Harel’s declaration, which both Sneh and the Soviets could be trusted not to attribute publicly, have been a deliberate attempt at deterrent “advertising,” presumably endorsed if not initiated by Eshkol? Dayan has already been reported as proposing such a course of action vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, in his capacity as defense minister after the Six-Day War. Seymour Hersh has summarized this approach: “A credible Israeli bomb also would deter the Soviets from taking any steps in the Middle East that would jeopardize Israel’s survival. . . . In Dayan’s scenario, Israeli intelligence agents would secretly inform their Soviet counterparts as soon as Dimona’s assembly line went into full production.”

Moreover, according to Hersh, this idea that the Soviets should be discreetly informed of Israel’s nuclear capability was “understood” by the Israeli leadership from the outset of its nuclear program, and was actually implemented “by 1973,” when Israel completed the development of miniature atomic devices: “Word of the bomb in a suitcase was relayed to the Soviet Union, according to a former Israeli intelligence official, during what apparently was a regular series of meetings in Europe between representatives of the Mossad and the KGB.”

The crucial difference, however, between Dayan’s proposal and Harel’s earlier move was that Dayan suggested that the Soviets be informed only after Israel’s nuclear weapons reportedly became operational. This is also true of the seemingly similar Vanunu case, 20 years after Harel’s: Could allowing a disgruntled, imbalanced former Dimona technician out of Israel with conclusive photos of the inner sanctum have been another such exercise? Without positive evidence, the seductive idea that Vanunu was an intentional plant, with or (more probably) without his own collusion, still appears less plausible than a field-security failure. But his defection does appear to have been exploited after the fact for the same deterrent purpose, by persecuting Vanunu with such ferocity that his credibility was ensured. As Dayan suggested, this “advertisement” may have been aimed at the USSR no less than at the Arab states. Before approaching the London Sunday Times with his material, Vanunu reportedly tried to offer it to the Soviet embassy in Kathmandu, Nepal, but was rebuffed—as the result of a “colossal error” on the part of the local KGB rezidentura.

If deterrence was Harel’s real purpose, his message was grossly pre-
mature. Whatever doubts there may be about Harel’s warning to Peres five years earlier, by 1965 there was little question that the Soviets were well aware of Israel’s efforts to attain nuclear-deterrent status. It is far less certain whether they had precise information as to the stage that Israel’s development had reached. Therefore, when in December 1965 the Soviets received an unambiguous message from an authoritative Israeli source that Israel was *developing* an atomic bomb and *intended* to arm itself with such a weapon, the main news for Moscow must have been not the Israeli intent but the fact that it had *not yet been realized*, and that a window of opportunity still existed to prevent its fruition. According to foreign reports cited in the following chapters, by May 1967 Israel indeed crossed the threshold of attaining at least a rudimentary atomic device.

A similar assessment of Israel’s technical capability had been made by the United States’ intelligence community in December 1964; however, its prediction that Israel could explode its first nuclear device within two or three years was qualified by “after it decides to develop nuclear capability.” Assuming the USSR’s technical information was equal to that of the Americans, Harel provided the crucial component: that the political decision had indeed been made, and remained in force after the change of leadership in Israel.

Harel’s disclosure thus presented the USSR with the decision whether to act—or to prompt Egypt to act—in a way similar to Israel’s later strike at Iraq’s nuclear potential, in 1981. The dilemma was analogous to the one that Iran’s nuclear program posed for the United States in 2006. In other words, it could have precipitated an attack on Israel rather than deterred it. In this respect, Harel’s case differed essentially from Vanunu’s, which occurred when little doubt remained worldwide that Israel already possessed nuclear arms, and his “contribution” was in the detail and conclusive proof.

It seems bizarre that an intelligence operative of Harel’s experience and stature could have been unaware of this distinction. Harel’s deputy and successor at the security services, Amos Manor, has recently indicated that Harel’s confrontation with Ben-Gurion affected his rationality. “From 1960, I began to notice changes in his behavior. Slowly, I understood that he was offended by Ben Gurion’s promotion of the young men Shimon Peres, Moshe Dayan, and Abba Eban to ministers, passing over him. . . . He began to oppose Ben-Gurion’s policy because ‘the old man’
rejected his crazy theories... I saw that Harel had lost any sense of proportion.” But, as already mentioned, the Soviets appear to have taken his disclosure at face value, and to have drawn operational conclusions. The next chapter demonstrates how, following Harel’s statement to Sneh, the USSR escalated its campaign to halt Israel’s nuclear armament, which climaxed in targeting the Dimona reactor as a central aim of the war that Moscow instigated in June 1967.
The hardest task for historians is to find out how decisions are taken.

—ROY MEDVEDEV, RUSSIAN HISTORIAN AND FORMER SOVIET DISSIDENT

AFTER REPORTING HAREL’S DISCLOSURE, the Soviet Foreign Ministry memorandum of 23 February 1966 continues in precisely the style that Gromyko prescribed. Even though the document was intended for internal use only, it continues with a typical propaganda blast:

In Moscow, there is total agreement with Comrade Sneh’s opinion in respect of the threat posed to Israel itself by this potentially disastrous policy of nuclear weapons proliferation and procurement. . . . Only madmen might address such a serious issue . . . from narrow local and nationalist positions. . . . If Israel really sets out on the road of creating its own atomic bomb, as stated by Gariel, this would mean that . . . in the name of the chauvinistic interests of a small group within Israel’s ruling circles, [it] would set out on the road of adventurism and international provocation. The very consideration of such a course would play into the hand of aggressive circles in the Federal Republic of Germany, who actively aspire to attain access to nuclear arms. . . . It cannot be ruled out that Israel is being impelled onto such a course by ultra-extremist circles within the country, and also by external imperialist forces. These forces are apparently indifferent to the fate of the Israeli people, which . . . would not only have to bear the excessive
financial burden, but would also suffer the graver consequences of such a course.¹

Even discounting for the long-term propaganda effect, the enormous significance ascribed to Israel’s perceived nuclear plans seems out of all proportion to the memorandum’s proposal for Soviet response. Indeed, the only practical measure outlined in the memorandum is a directive to Ambassador Dmitri Chuvakhin in Israel: “Tell Comrade Sneh that in Moscow there is full confidence that Israel’s Communists and other progressive forces, who correctly assess the gravity of certain Israeli circles’ extremist policy, will in case of need be capable of recruiting broad masses in the country against such a policy.”² Chuvakhin had in fact carried out this task even before the memorandum was composed.

In 1966, the group of intellectuals that had already opposed Israel’s nuclear project did organize into a Committee for Nuclear Demilitarization of the Middle East. Whether this formal move was covertly inspired or supported by the Soviets merits further research. But at any rate, the committee’s impact was negligible—due, among other reasons, to the almost total gag that was imposed on any news or public debate about the nuclear project. The committee’s members were of divergent political persuasions, and it disbanded after the Six-Day War.³

The magnitude of the problem perceived by the Soviets in Israel’s nuclear preparations, as depicted in the memorandum, appears to call for much more significant counteraction. According to insiders’ descriptions of the Soviet decision-making process and its documentation, it would be precisely the most important, forceful, and potentially fateful operational decisions that would not be recorded. Thus, a member of Khrushchev’s staff describes the decision to build the Berlin Wall, which was made at a Warsaw Pact summit in Moscow: “Judging by the conference’s minutes, the issue of the Berlin Wall was not discussed there except for a few oblique references. But that is understandable: The decision to build the wall had to be kept top-secret until the very last moment. Any mention on paper of the decision adopted could have transformed a secret into open information. One way or the other, the secret was kept under seven seals.”⁴

Or, as Khrushchev’s speechwriter describes the deliberations in the “walnut room” outside the Politburo’s official meeting hall: “This was the
apex of the unseen Soviet power structure. Only members of the Presidium [Politburo] were present. What they discussed and what they decided was not recorded anywhere, in any way. In vain would historians later search for documents and minutes from the so-called Politburo files, as keys to turning points in Soviet policy. To no avail. There are none such.”

Deputy Foreign Minister and longtime Central Committee member Vladimir Semyonov, who was to play a key role in the 1967 crisis (and to be posthumously scapegoated for causing it by gratuitous talk), put it this way:

I belong to the kind of people who know the history of our party not only according to documents, because according to documents, no history ever takes place. . . . I know this history according to talks, telephone calls, passing remarks; this history, like any other history . . . was never recorded on tape. It was a history of passing encounters, passing exchanges of opinions. If the annals of the Party were to be written [it would have to be] according to these encounters and passing phenomena. . . . The revolution is conducted not on paper but rather in conversation, in things that are said on the telephone but will never be reproduced in any document. A few words, a single word could determine the outcome—one way or the other.6

So, whether and how the USSR’s leadership decided to respond, politically or militarily, to Harel’s disclosure cannot be expected to appear in any document—certainly none that is likely to be released anytime soon. Rather, this must be deduced from a careful review of Soviet actions following the receipt of Harel’s information. There was indeed a sudden flurry of such activity.

It is generally accepted—though usually downplayed in the historiography of the Six-Day War—that, as the historian of Israel’s nuclear policy Avner Cohen phrased it, “Dimona became a hot topic in Cairo in the first half of 1966” after “lying dormant” since the previous round of agitation in 1960–61.7 On 18 January, even before the memorandum was finalized in Moscow, Chuvakhin transmitted to Sneh Moscow’s aforementioned instructions.8 The next day, in his introductory meeting with Abba Eban after Eban took over from Golda Meir as foreign minister, Chuvakhin brought up the nuclear issue as the only substantive order
of business except for rebutting a speech by Eshkol on the plight of Soviet Jewry.

According to the Israeli Foreign Ministry’s record of the meeting, “The Ambassador stated that his government was concerned about the rumors regarding the development of the atomic bomb by Israel,” and he then noted that the IDF’s monthly journal had reprinted, with no comment, a report by a British institute predicting that Israel would have an atomic bomb “by 1965.” Chuvakhin declared ominously: “If the report is true, then this is very dangerous to the existence of Israel itself. The USSR opposes the use of the atomic bomb for nationalist purposes.” He called on Israel to commit itself to nonproliferation. The Israeli Foreign Ministry’s minutes go on to say that Eban “denied this fabrication vehemently,” and asserted that “neither the Arab countries nor Israel had nuclear weapons.” In this, he was emulating his predecessor’s long-established response to such inquiries. On 30 March 1963, Soviet chargé d’affaires A. S. Likhachev reported a similar exchange with Meir, in which she responded to a renewed Soviet initiative for a nuclear-free zone in the Mediterranean by stating that “at the moment, Israel is more concerned not by atomic weapons, which no Mediterranean nation (except France) possesses at present nor is likely to possess in the near future, but rather by the issue of conventional weapons, with which—she said—the Arab states are capable of eradicating Israel.”

As the source for Chuvakhin’s conversation with Eban is Israeli, it does not record the ambassador’s interpretation of Eban’s response, one month after Harel’s statement to the contrary. But the minister’s denial might have strengthened the sense, in Moscow, of what a month later it termed the “question of the honesty of Israel’s foreign policy.” In any event, in January a member of the US embassy staff in Israel reported to Washington a statement by an unidentified Soviet counterpart: “He believes that Israel is producing nuclear weapons.” For the Americans, the key word here must have been “producing,” since Eshkol had reportedly given the United States, in return for a pledge of arms supplies, a vague commitment to restrict nuclear activity to research and development alone, at least for the time being. If the Soviets were aware of this commitment, it could only have increased the significance they ascribed to Harel’s disclosure.

The implementation by the Soviet embassy staff of further measures
in addition to the instructions for Sneh is also suggested by a passage that was deleted by Israeli military censorship from the daily *Yediot Ahronot* on 4 February 1966. The paper’s political correspondent Aryeh Zimuki, one of Israel’s best-connected journalists, had filed a story stating: “It seems that the Soviets are lately displaying great interest in the development of Israeli nuclear science. Israeli politicians emphasized to them Israel’s wish for general disarmament of the region and for nuclear arms [to be put] under mutual inspection.” Soviet circles, according to Zimuki’s suppressed report, “are recently voicing fears about cooperation between Egypt and China in the area of developing nuclear science. These fears were expressed in talks held by Soviet diplomats with Israeli officials.”

This oblique threat as to the result of Israel’s program was buttressed by ascribing to China “attempts to penetrate the Middle East by encouraging irresponsible elements in the Arab world to fan aggressive political flames. . . . The PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] has recently been gaining China’s enthusiastic support, while the Soviets have their reservations about this body.”

Zimuki’s report went on to mention Chuvakhin’s visit to the Foreign Ministry, where “Israeli representatives stressed the need for the region to be declared as demilitarized of nuclear arms.” The nuclear issue was so sensitive in the view of Israeli censorship that it excised from Zimuki’s report even a statement that was already on public record: “In his latest speech in the Knesset, the prime minister declared Israel’s readiness for a comprehensive arms solution, including nuclear arms, but not [the latter] separately.”

Eshkol must have acted on the concern Zimuki’s sources reflected when, on 28 January, he included the same proposal in a “personal message” to Kosygin, which was ostensibly intended to congratulate the Soviet premier for staging the Tashkent meeting between the leaders of India and Pakistan.

At this point (on 20 February 1966), Nasser weighed in with his second warning of preemptive war if Israel approached acquisition of nuclear weapons. Current scholarship tends to connect the Egyptian president’s 1966 statement with a *New York Times* report on 7 January: “The US believes that Israel ordered from France 30 ballistic missiles of intermediate range. . . . [This] move raises in the minds of American analysts disturbing questions about Israeli nuclear ambitions. . . . [It is] indicative of an Israeli intention to develop nuclear warheads.” This connection is
apparently made by way of analogy with Nasser’s previous such warning in December 1960, which also followed an exposé in the Times.

In the 1960 case, however, Nasser issued his threat three days after the Times reported that Israel was “secretly attempting to develop a capability to produce atomic weapons.” In 1966, he did so six weeks after the publication in the Times, which is supposed to have evoked his threat. In this interval, there were a number of other developments on the Israeli nuclear issue that might have been just as instrumental as the Times story in eliciting Nasser’s response. These included some extraordinary Soviet moves, including a visit to Egypt by first deputy defense minister and Warsaw Pact forces commander Andrei Grechko, in which the nuclear matter figured centrally. The visit took place in early December 1965, but its main outcome was reported only in February.

This points to an additional difference between the circumstances of Nasser’s warning in 1960 and the one he made in 1966: In the first instance, he proclaimed it before appealing to the USSR for countervailing nuclear weapons. It was only on 10 January 1961—two weeks after Nasser’s public warning—that a Soviet embassy staffer in Washington reported to Moscow that in a meeting with two officials of the UAR embassy in Washington on the same day, they expressed concern at the American press reports and “persistently demanded from me an answer . . . what position the USSR would take if the UAR turned to us with a request to provide it with nuclear arms.” In contrast, on 4 February 1966, almost three weeks before Nasser’s second warning, the New York Times reported from Cairo that Grechko had, during his visit to Egypt, rejected Nasser’s request to supply Egypt with Soviet nuclear weapons, and instead had pledged “the use of Soviet nuclear forces to safeguard Egypt should Israel develop an atom bomb.”

There is yet no directly documented confirmation that this far-reaching pledge was made by Grechko. At the time (on 9 February 1966), a French official, speaking with an Israeli diplomat, dismissed the possibility that the USSR could have promised Egypt “a nuclear umbrella”; the precedent created by Khrushchev’s public promise of a “Soviet nuclear umbrella” for Cuba in 1961 was apparently forgotten. But events in 1967, which have recently come to light, confirm that the USSR did indeed provide Egypt with such a guarantee.

In our view, the issue of the Soviet nuclear commitment was dis-
cussed as part of the groundwork for the visit to Egypt by Soviet prime minister Kosygin, which took place in May 1966; by February, prepara-
tions for this visit were in full swing and preliminary agreement had al-
ready been reached. On the eve of Kosygin’s arrival, “diplomatic ob-
servers” in Cairo told the London Daily Telegraph that “Israel’s capacity
for producing atomic weapons is expected to be high on the agenda,” and
that “Nasser will ask Mr. Kosygin for assistance in ‘holding the ring’ in-
ternationally if Egypt acts” to make good on Nasser’s threat of preventive
war. The report predicted that “Kosygin is expected to give such assur-
ances,” and stated that Israeli references to the Aswan Dam as the “num-
ber one target” were the primary motivation for the Soviets’ expected com-
pliance. A British Foreign Ministry official told an Israeli diplomat in
response that he doubted “the Soviet Union would give Egypt its backing
if and when the latter decided to launch a preemptive war . . . [but] Egypt
will press the USSR for a guarantee against nuclear attack. I fear that dur-
ing this visit of Kosygin’s, the Russians—unenthusiastically and maybe
even against their will—are liable to give something in that direction.”

Neither Grechko nor Kosygin could have made such a momentous
move without prior authorization at the Politburo level. At any rate, de-
tails now emerging about the Soviet deployment ahead of the Six-Day War
confirm that such a measure was not only pledged but implemented—
which also required specific Politburo approval. Well before the overt
outbreak of the crisis in mid-May 1967, the USSR began to position
nuclear-armed naval forces in the Mediterranean (and later in the Red
Sea as well), with instructions to use these weapons against Israel if it
should cross certain thresholds in anti-Arab operations, including most
notably an atomic strike at Egypt or Syria. Remarkably, this deployment
was entirely unknown to the United States. As the crisis unfolded, on 24
May 1967, “[CIA director Richard] Helms was quite positive in stating
there were no nuclear weapons in the area.” Unless the Soviets over-
estimated American and Israeli intelligence capabilities, their deployment
therefore appears to have been intended for operational use rather than deterrence.

In 1966, then, Nasser made his threat after the USSR took the extra-
ordinary step of providing a guarantee of nuclear protection for a country
that was not formally its military ally. Was this Soviet move, and particu-
larly its timing, connected with the heightened Soviet concern following
Harel’s disclosure? Did the Soviets also relay Harel’s statement itself to Egypt? Colonel Yaremenco, who asserts that by this time the USSR had accurate information about “Israel’s top-secret object” (Dimona) from human sources as well as satellite imagery, goes on to state: “It cannot be ruled out that the KGB shared this information with Egypt, especially as the cooperation between the Soviet and Egyptian secret services in this period was sufficiently close.”

The USSR’s sharing of general intelligence on Israeli weaponry with Egypt is confirmed by other documents in the Russian Foreign Ministry anthology: On 23 February 1965, the Soviet ambassador in Cairo at that time, Vladimir Yerofeyev, reported informing Egyptian vice president Abdel Hakim Amer “confidentially about military cooperation between the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel, according to data in Moscow,” referring to German arms sales to Israel.

Could it be that Harel’s disclosure was also transmitted to Nasser and prompted him to sound his warning, after making sure of the Soviet nuclear guarantee? A heavily sanitized cable from the US ambassador in Egypt to Washington on 16 March 1966 reports Nasser expressing his concern that Israel now had “eight kilos plutonium” (the threshold for constructing atomic weapons). But other references suggest that, like the USSR, Egypt inferred (possibly from Harel’s message) that Israel had not yet attained operational nuclear weapons. Two days after Nasser’s threats of preemptive war were published in the New York Times, Egyptian parliamentary speaker Anwar el-Sadat visited the White House. According to the American record, “it was [President Lyndon B.] Johnson . . . who referred to the Israeli nuclear weapons program. . . . Sadat did not follow up on Johnson’s comment, allowing the conversation to move to other subjects.” However, Sadat himself was cited in an Arab paper as having told Johnson that Israel was still working on development of a nuclear weapon “according to reports received by Egypt.”

The same contention was directly voiced by the Egyptian ambassador in Washington to the secretary of state on 22 March: “UAR much concerned by intelligence reports that Israel working toward production nuclear weapons.”

The New York Times report of 7 January mentioned that the French missiles being sought by Israel had a range of 500 miles, enough to reach “Egyptian targets”; the Israeli scholar Shlomo Aronson notes that their
range was also perceived at the time as covering the southern USSR. However, the report also confirmed Harel’s indication that this nuclear capability was still some time off: The missiles would be supplied only by 1967, and “the appraisal of American officials is that Israel would probably produce an atomic device within two years.” The resulting window of opportunity lasting into 1967 was made all the more attractive by the Egyptian and Soviet perception that the IDF would then be at its weakest point in conventional firepower, due to the planned replacement of old European weaponry with new, modern American arms. Indeed, in January 1966 Eshkol is reported to have been extremely concerned about an Egyptian preemptive strike; this has hitherto been connected to the New York Times report, but if Eshkol was aware of, or responsible for, Harel’s disclosure, that would provide an even stronger basis for his fears.

Two days after Nasser’s public warning, on 23 February 1966, the Soviet memorandum on Harel’s disclosure was promulgated. It might have been prepared mainly for a Soviet leadership meeting in connection with Nasser’s statement and Kosygin’s forthcoming visit to Egypt, or for the 23rd CPSU Congress that was to begin a month later. It may also have been used as a background brief for talks on “a sensitive issue” pertaining to Soviet naval action in the Mediterranean with a high-ranking Egyptian military delegation, headed by its navy commander, Admiral Suleiman Azzat, that had just arrived in Moscow. It would be the Soviet navy that would soon provide the main nuclear “umbrella” for Egypt.
CHAPTER 7

Converging Timelines

SYRIAN COUP AND PARTY CONGRESS

Why has the USSR chosen to attack Israel on the matter of Syria rather than on the nuclear arms menace? What do you think?

— SHMUEL BENDOR, ISRAEL ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION, TO YOSEF TEKOA, FOREIGN MINISTRY, 6 JUNE 1966

On 23 February 1966, the very day that the Soviet Foreign Ministry memorandum about the Sneh-Harel meeting was promulgated, a coup d’état in Syria brought the military wing of the Baath Party to power. Ever since the crisis of mid-May 1967, its genesis has been dated over a year earlier, and specifically traced to the Syrian coup.1 The inception of this coup and its consequences, as aspects of Soviet Cold War policy planning, stand out in even starker contrast in view of the facts that are known today.

The Soviet fingerprints on this development were observed even at the time.2 Within 20 minutes of its commencement, the coup installed a graduate of the Soviet Air Academy, General Hafez al-Assad, as acting defense minister;3 other coup leaders had long been associated with Soviet military intelligence.4 Soviet media coverage was shown, in a contemporary study by Solomon Schwarz, to reflect the Kremlin’s prior knowledge of this takeover, and probably its complicity in the planning: “A careful examination of reports in Pravda and Izvestiya at the time of the coup leaves no doubt that for Moscow—both for the Central Committee of the CPSU and for the Foreign Ministry—the coup came as no surprise.”5 The Israeli orientalist Avraham Ben-Tzur, who analyzed Syrian sources as well as Soviet publications, arrived at the same conclusion.

At the height of the 1967 crisis, on 26 May, speaking before the Is-
raeli cabinet, military intelligence chief Aharon Yariv stated that “the roots of the current situation are connected to the active Soviet regional initiative” that began “over a year ago.” So far, such retrospective comments have been understood as referring to the coup in Syria, but the Soviet effort to counter Israel’s nuclear aspirations could just as correctly be termed “an active regional initiative.” There is yet no direct evidence of an operational connection between these two features of Soviet policy. But the parallel timing indicates that Moscow’s intensified activity on the Israeli nuclear issue, and its move to cement its influence over the country that later was instrumental in triggering the war against Israel, were at least simultaneously undertaken as facets of the USSR’s same overall strategy.

The coup planted Damascus firmly in the Soviet camp and provided a test case for the activist foreign policy doctrine that was adopted at the CPSU congress a few weeks later, asserting—in the usual code words—“unity of the three revolutionary trends in modern times: global Socialism, national-liberation struggle of enslaved peoples, and the international workers’ movement.” As recalled by Aleksandr Bovin, a member of KGB chief Yuri Andropov’s think tank from the latter’s pre-KGB days (and later Brezhnev’s speechwriter), “about the middle of 1966 there began to ripen within the Soviet leadership an intent to stamp its foot, to scare the Americans, to put them in their proper place.” The Soviet ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, wrote that this tendency “was reflected during the 23rd Party congress . . . which devoted much attention to Soviet-American relations and to criticism of the United States’ policy in Vietnam.” Planning for the Middle Eastern front, which was to include sparking an Arab-Israeli clash, must be seen in this global context of the Cold War as waged by Brezhnev at the height of his power and capability. A related aspect was his demand for the removal of the US Sixth Fleet from the Mediterranean, which will be discussed in detail below. It is precisely this larger perspective that most previous studies of the Six-Day War have overlooked, even though they listed many of the specific Soviet inputs separately.

Syria’s designated role in the implementation of this policy, that is, in the Soviet instigation of the 1967 crisis, has not been as dramatically exposed in post-Soviet years as Egypt’s. Russian sources—not to mention Syrian ones—are still virtually silent on it. Both in the official collections
of Soviet documents and in the extensive literature of veterans’ memoirs, the quantity of material related to Syria is infinitesimal compared with Egypt—despite, or perhaps because, the Soviet military presence continued in Syria long after it ended in Egypt. But the main milestones have long been on record.

Ben-Tzur points to the meetings held by the Soviet military with Arab and selected other delegations to the 23rd Congress. In all the countries involved, violence erupted in short order—including a rash of attacks in Israel by Syrian-supported Palestinian groups.\(^{10}\) Soon after the congress adjourned, on 18 April, the new top Syrian leadership, led by the prime minister and acting defense minister, was flown to Moscow on a Soviet military plane, accompanied by the Soviet ambassador in Damascus. The joint communiqué issued after their talks listed Zionism among the common enemies. On 2 May, following talks in which Brezhnev was personally involved, a formal agreement was signed for Soviet aid to Syria.\(^{11}\)

Another result of the CPSU’s new policy, as adopted by its congress, was to doom the attempt of the delegation from Sneh’s faction of the Israel Communist Party to convince the Soviets that an agreement with the Eshkol government on the nuclear issue was possible. Up to February and early March 1966, the USSR still tried, at least in its overt diplomacy, to nudge Israel toward a commitment to nonproliferation by means of relatively conciliatory proposals. Reports in the Arab press about such public statements by Soviet diplomats in Israel caused some alarm in Arab capitals. These governments were then engaged in preparations for a prime ministers’ conference that Nasser called in Cairo for 14–17 March, with “the issue of the nuclear danger that Israel poses” high on the order of business, as was already stated at the preparatory meeting of foreign ministers.\(^{12}\) Reporting to Washington after the summit, the US ambassador in Cairo noted that it “uncovered concern and deep Arab suspicion [that] Israel [was] developing nuclear armaments.” He quoted the Iraqi premier as stressing that a “report Israel on way to producing atomic weapons” was the “most serious item confronting the conference.”\(^{13}\)

On 7 March, while the Arab summit was still in preparation, the first secretary of the Egyptian embassy in Moscow was received, “at his request,” at the Soviet Foreign Ministry. A counselor at the Near and Middle
East Department, F. N. Fedorov, reported that the Egyptian’s main thrust was to request clarification of the Soviet position:

[H]e said that according to Cairo’s information, the Israeli newspaper *Jewish Chronicle*, published in Jerusalem [sic], reported its correspondent’s interview with Ivan Dedyulya, a counselor of the Soviet Embassy in Israel. I. Dedyulya reportedly declared that he would be glad if the “spirit of Tashkent” were to prevail . . . between Arabs and Jews, and that “the Soviet Union might be prepared to mediate between Arab countries and Israel if both sides were to request it.” Such a report in the Israeli newspaper caused surprise in Cairo. . . .

. . . [I] said that the . . . Arab people know that in the struggle against imperialist intrigues in the Middle East, the Soviet Union has acted and still acts on the Arabs’ side. Nothing has happened that might give a reason to perceive any change in the clear and firm position of the USSR. . . . Kosygin’s forthcoming visit to the UAR is a testimony to that.14

The Soviet ambassador in Baghdad reported that the Iraqi press had published a series of articles headlining a “strange” or “provocative” declaration by the Soviet ambassador in Israel, including one titled “Dangerous Changes in Moscow Policy on the Palestinian Problem”: “These articles related that the Soviet ambassador, in a dinner speech . . . in Tel-Aviv, supposedly declared that ‘his country wishes to end the arms race in the Middle East and to achieve an agreement between the Arabs and Israel.’ . . . On 12 March, the Iraqi newspaper *Al-Manar* asked: ‘Does this mean that the Soviet Union has changed its position . . . and begun to esteem the Israeli gangs highly—to be fascinated by Israeli crimes against the Palestinian nation?’”15

As mentioned above, a Soviet document composed on 7 March had already described Kosygin’s visit to Egypt as firmly set for 10–18 May.16 Preparations for the visit, including the agenda and joint communiqués, were thus under way when the Arabs remonstrated about the perceived mellowing of the Soviet position. Both this protest and the emergence of the global policy that was to be enshrined at the CPSU congress appear to account for the significant shift that occurred in Soviet behavior at this
point. Moscow’s stress on diplomatic action and agreement as the way to halt Israel’s nuclear development, which figured prominently in Soviet activity after Harel’s disclosure, was dropped—so abruptly that the embassy in Israel itself was left out of step.

On 15 March, in a discussion with the director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Ambassador Chuvakhin still suggested that Israel’s “joining a declaration on disarmament of the region from nuclear weapons would be a first step toward defusing the tension.” Chuvakhin himself reported to Gromyko how he kept on pressing the argument that nuclear disarmament would “enhance . . . the prospects for resolving many contentious issues between the states of this region by means of peaceful talks.”

But even before Chuvakhin highlighted this line in his routine dispatch, media stories about his public statements had touched off the Arab protests to Moscow, and his superiors demanded that the ambassador explain “what could serve as a basis for such publications in the Iraqi press.” On 19 March, the head of the Near and Middle East Department, Alexei Shchiborin, rejected clarifications that Chuvakhin had submitted, and blamed him for the Iraqi press accusations that “Moscow seeks an agreement between the Arabs and Israel”:

The impression is created, that Comrade Chuvakhin . . . does not always take into consideration . . . the specifics of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and also the character of relations between the Soviet Union and the Arab states.

We think it is advisable to draw Com. Chuvakhin’s attention to the necessity of displaying special caution and greater flexibility in his appearances on . . . our policy in this region.

Apparently, this reprimand had not yet reached Chuvakhin when he sat down on 21 March to complete his routine report to Gromyko, and he compounded the error:

At the moment, Israel is subordinating all questions connected to nuclear arms nonproliferation to the issue of conventional arms in this region, giving to understand that if the superpowers were to reach an agreement on halting the supply of conventional arms to Middle Eastern states, then Israel might
support the proposal to declare the Middle East a non-nuclear zone. . . . The embassy does not rule out that the government of Israel might support this proposal. . . . Such formulation of the issue possibly might not fully correspond to the Soviet Union’s interests, but . . . if Israel should support the idea . . . and declare that it was giving up production and acquisition of nuclear arms, it might assist to some degree in rectifying the situation in this region, and . . . resolving the issue of nuclear arms nonproliferation.20

But in Moscow, the option of promoting Israel’s accession to the nascent NPT or a regional denuclearization agreement had apparently lost its relevancy. As Kosygin’s trip to Cairo approached, there was a parallel escalation of Soviet and Arab rhetoric, both on the nuclear issue and along a new line, which was to become a regular feature in Soviet disinformation and propaganda until it served as the overt trigger for the crisis and war in 1967: allegations of Israeli troop concentrations on the Syrian frontier.

On the same day (18 April 1966) that the Syrian leaders arrived in Moscow, the New York Times again reported: “Nasser Threatens War on a Nuclear Armed Israel.” On 9 May, the Times continued the drumbeat: “Nasser Cites Need for Nuclear Arms.” Nasser’s reminder may also have been aimed at protesting the Soviets’ perceived appeasement of Israel, and was timed to precede talks in Cairo by first deputy foreign minister Vasily Kuznetsov, who came to prepare for Kosygin’s visit there. US assessments held that the purpose of his visit was to promote regional disarmament as a Soviet initiative; like Chuvakhin, the Americans may have lagged one step behind the evolution of Soviet policy.21

According to a former senior official of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Victor Israelyan: “In Soviet diplomatic practice, every important foreign policy step . . . was accompanied by a number of propaganda actions—including publication of articles, statements by ‘independent’ organizations and public figures supporting the Soviet position, invitations . . . to participate in a Soviet VIP’s visit, praises for the latter and his posture, and so on. . . . These expensive operations were called ‘propaganda insurance’ or ‘propaganda backing.’”22 Such a barrage was loosed shortly before Kosygin’s arrival in Cairo, when on 8 May 1966 an international
affairs commentary in *Izvestiya* claimed for the first time that Syria had become “a central object of military blackmail and provocation by Israel.”

On the same day a news item from Damascus made the first mention of “a suspicious concentration and movement of Israeli troops sighted lately on the border with Syria.” Although this was a dispatch from TASS, the official Soviet news agency, and thus legitimate fare for the Soviet national press, it was approved for publication at this stage only in the provincial newspaper *Sovietskaya Kyrgyziya*.

When the Soviet premier finally arrived in Cairo on 10 May, “Kosygin persuaded Nasser that a mutual defense pact between Cairo and Damascus (guaranteed by Moscow) would be in the best interests of all concerned.” Kosygin’s mission and his speech to the Egyptian National Assembly on 17 May, in which he stressed “the important role of your country also in the Arab peoples’ struggle for the solution of the Palestinian question,” must have been cleared by the Politburo in accordance with the party’s newly activist line and with a clear view to the consequences. Ben-Tzur attributes the Soviet Middle Eastern initiative entirely to an internal power struggle in the Kremlin, and mainly to Grechko and Andropov’s efforts to ensure their respective promotions to defense minister and KGB chief. Although this is probably overstated, these two figures do seem to have been among Brezhnev’s main allies in shaping the aggressive line, but both in May 1966 and in the actual crisis a year later it fell to Kosygin to serve as its overt face.

Kosygin’s reference to Israel in his address to the Egyptian parliament sounded like a thinly veiled threat, which was noted verbatim and studied in Jerusalem: “The question of nuclear arms non-proliferation directly pertains to the question of ensuring the security of Egypt and of all the Arab countries, as forces may possibly appear in the Middle East that will dream of obtaining such weapons.” Kosygin’s further comment that “the UAR . . . is contributing to halting the atomic arms race” appeared in Jerusalem to suggest that an agreement for cooperation on the nuclear issue had been reached between the USSR and Egypt.

Eshkol deemed it necessary to reply, in a Knesset speech on 18 May, at least to the nuclear aspect of Kosygin’s address, as well as to Nasser’s previous threats. “Israel has no atomic arms,” he said, “and will not be the first to introduce such weapons into our area.” The official “non-introduction” stance, which was formulated for US consumption, was
thus first enunciated publicly in the Soviet context—even though the USSR had already been informed by Israel that its actual plans were quite different.

But to the Israelis’ surprise, the nuclear issue was omitted entirely from the joint communiqué issued at the conclusion of Kosygin’s visit, and indeed from subsequent Soviet public diplomacy. Overall, the research department at Israel’s Foreign Ministry noted, “from Israel’s point of view, the declarations were typified by the scarcity of references to us. Those that did appear were as a rule generalized and even cautious, in comparison with declarations during previous visits.” This view led to an optimistic conclusion by the department: “It can be hoped that there will be no change in the process discerned recently of an improvement in style in the USSR’s attitude toward us.”

As a result, as Avner Cohen points out, Dimona “disappeared from public discussion in the following months.” But this was not because Israel’s response had assuaged Moscow on the nuclear issue. In October 1968 the Soviet ambassador in London still listed, in a talk with the British businessman and Jewish leader Lord Sieff, two “Israeli sins”—both of them connected to the nuclear issue. One was “the Israeli refusal to join the NPT.” The other was a perceived Israeli threat to destroy the Aswan High Dam, obviously with a nuclear weapon. But the Kosygin visit appears to mark a Soviet decision to muffle public discussion of this issue, and to pursue other avenues—namely, accusations of aggressive designs on Syria—for precipitating a conflict that might be used to end Israel’s nuclear development.

On 21 May, upon Kosygin’s return, the national newspaper Soviet-skaya Rossiya went beyond the original TASS report, charging that “about a third of the Israeli army, after marching to music through the streets of Haifa, was immediately after the parade transferred to the Syrian border.” Against this backdrop, the first official Soviet protest about these troop concentrations was delivered on 25 May 1966 to Israeli ambassa- dor Katriel Katz by Deputy Foreign Minister Semyonov, who accused Israel of implementing expansionist designs that it had harbored since 1956, and warned of “explosive” consequences. Semyonov’s démarche was followed by another TASS broadside, which appeared in Pravda on 27 May and in the rest of the national press the following day. It claimed that “the Israel army declared an alert, leaves were cancelled for officers
and men, and troops are being concentrated on the border with Syria. . . . The Soviet Union cannot and will not remain indifferent to the violations of the peace in a region that is directly adjacent to its own borders.”

This set the tone for a long series of similar blasts.

“The Soviets appear to have had an obsession about such troop concentrations,” writes Richard Parker. Israel counted at least eight such warnings before the last one actually touched off the war. As aptly summarized by Schwarz, one of the first researchers on the subject: “The legend about energetic preparation by Israel for attacking Syria became from the summer of 1966 an integral part of Soviet propaganda.” In the summer of ‘66, this was indeed a legend. Despite recurring firefightson the frontier, Israel’s entire front line from Lake Kinneret northward was held by a single company of paratroopers—dressed in police uniforms, to meet the demilitarization provisions of the 1949 armistice.

While highlighting Israel’s supposed designs on Syria, the Soviets actually began to play down the Israeli nuclear menace. Meeting Secretary of State Dean Rusk on 26 May, Dobrynin said that “to his knowledge” there had not “been any discussion of this [nuclear] subject with Cairo . . . but it was possible that this had come up during the recent visit of Mr. Kosygin.” Dobrynin “expressed skepticism as to whether Israel or the UAR would be interested in such an arrangement [a nuclear-free zone]. . . . The Secretary said he could tell the ambassador quite privately that [the United States was] convinced that the Israelis were not planning to make nuclear weapons. Ambassador Dobrynin expressed some skepticism.”

By 18 June, the US ambassador in Israel reported that his Soviet counterpart had told him, contrary to the latter’s previous reports: “The USSR believes Israel is not at work on developing nuclear capability.”

In contrast, the French ambassador in Damascus reported at the end of May that his veteran Soviet counterpart, Anatoly Barkovsky, “in recent weeks seemed to be trying to intensify the Syrians’ fears of an Israeli attack, and several times informed them about Israeli concentrations near the border.” In Israel, this shift was received with some surprise, as it had been understood that the nuclear matter was a prime Soviet as well as Egyptian concern, and that during Kosygin’s visit to Egypt “presumably, they talked about ways to deny Israel nuclear weapons, including Nasser’s threat of a pre-emptive war. . . . Why [then],” an Israeli AEC official wrote on 6 June 1966 to a Foreign Ministry colleague, “has the USSR chosen
to attack Israel on the matter of Syria rather than on the nuclear arms
danger? What do you think?”

Israel’s foreign policy and intelligence communities had no ready
answer. On 1 June, Eshkol’s leading adviser on Soviet affairs, Shaul Avigur,
forwarded to the prime minister’s attention a top-secret memo he re-
ceived the same day from New York: “The sharp Soviet offensive on Israel
in the press, with the TASS report and the statement made to [our] am-
bassador in Moscow, has caught us amazed and perplexed . . . we are still
asking: What happened to the improvement in relations, to ‘Kosygin’s re-
strained policy in Cairo?’ The situation requires us to make a clear analy-
sis and to shake free of the illusions and the overoptimistic, unfounded
assessments.”

By 24 October, Ambassador Katz concluded in Moscow: “Beginning
in March 1966, a change for the worse occurred in the USSR’s attitude
to Israel—a deliberate political change for the worse. The gravity of the
problem demands . . . a kind of ‘Searching Reappraisal’ [in English].”

It was to turn out over the following year that the first allegation of
Israeli troop concentrations against Syria was not a one-time exception,
in a period that was indeed characterized by border clashes. It began a
crescendo of accusations, which was accompanied by extensive Soviet
preparations for a Middle Eastern conflict. Diplomatic blandishments
toward Israel were abandoned in favor of military planning.
The “Conqueror” and “Victor” Plans

Soviet Signatures

All Politburo members knew perfectly well that since Stalin’s time it was forbidden to record anything.

— Former Soviet Presidential Aide
Anatoly Chernyayev

Some of the first measures that were taken to implement the new Soviet policy in the Middle Eastern arena were organizational, and were hardly noticed at the time. In May 1966, the Soviet navy ships that had reestablished a permanent presence in the Mediterranean only two years earlier were for the first time grouped under the command of a separate, “semi-independent” formation, which only after the war, on 14 July 1967, was formally designated as the Fifth Eskadra. For the time being, it was referred to less ostentatiously as the “combined eskadra,” as it included ships from the Northern and Baltic Fleets as well as the Black Sea Fleet.

This was followed, in July 1966, by the formation of a first “brigade” (the 197th) of amphibious landing ships within the Black Sea Fleet, where the first naval infantry battalions were also formed in that year.¹ The USSR had recommissioned its naval infantry, which was disbanded after World War II, only in 1964.² Both of these developments were typical of the power-projection policies represented by Brezhnev, Grechko, and naval commander Gorshkov—all of whom also had a record of marine landing operations in “the Great Patriotic War” against the Nazi invasion.

Operational planning soon followed. Ben-Tzur’s pioneering study in 1975 demonstrated that the Egyptian measures that provoked a war with Israel in May 1967, including the eviction of the United Nations Emer-
gency Force (UNEF) from the Sinai Peninsula and the closure of the Tiran Straits, were “inspired” by the Soviet military. These features were incorporated into the political framework of what he termed the “Grechko-Amer plan,” which was jointly shaped by the two marshals between 22 and 25 November 1966, when Amer (and the rest of the top Egyptian military brass) visited Moscow. By no coincidence, this transpired shortly after Egypt finally signed a defense treaty with Syria on 4 November. This pact was to be invoked by the warning of May 1967 in order to activate the plan.

Oren cites numerous sources to establish that even though Egypt was prohibited by the post-1956 arrangements from deploying substantial forces in Sinai, the Soviet-devised military master plan envisaged such a deployment as the opening gambit. It was code-named “Conqueror,” and modeled on a strategy called “shield and sword”—the motto and emblem of the KGB.

Documentation of the Egyptian operational blueprint (as of its Syrian counterpart, Operation Victor, or in Arabic Amaliyat Nasser) was captured by Israeli forces and partially published after the war. The role of Soviet advisers in this planning was evident not only from the doctrine that the plans embodied but even from Russian-language documents. Indeed it would have been highly improbable, given the level of these advisers’ involvement in both armies, for the plans to have been elaborated without their participation and approval. According to a Soviet journalist posted in Cairo at the time, they numbered “thousands”; a former military attaché relates how, under the command of a Soviet lieutenant general, they oversaw a complete reorganization of the Egyptian armed forces according to Soviet doctrine.

One of the Egyptian plan’s basic features, a weakly defended frontline, was specifically designed “to serve as bait for luring the Israelis into a frontal assault.” Egyptian battle orders captured in Sinai were explicitly based on an assumption that if the Israelis mounted “a land attack on Egypt, the tanks in Sinai could withstand the first wave before mounting a counteroffensive.”

Israel’s military intelligence provided its UN delegation with a map of Israel “marked in Russian and Arabic, which served the Soviet instructors of the Syrian Army. The map shows an offensive plan against Israel.” The operational documents captured on the Golan Heights called for two divisions to advance into Israel in a three-pronged armored in-
cursion, with the main thrust planned to cross the Jordan River north of Lake Kinneret. One of the tactical diagrams, which is inscribed entirely in Russian, refers mainly to intelligence activity during the “initial period of war (before the start of combat operations.)” The Soviet doctrine thus considered the preliminary stage of mobilization designed to draw the enemy into attack as an integral part of the battle plan.

The Israeli offensive, once provoked, would be contained and reversed by a counterstrike, culminating in a “comprehensive attack . . . that will shift the battle onto enemy territory, hitting its vital areas.” This agreed strategy did, however, conceal an inherent conflict: The plan specifically barred the Arab side from initiating offensive action. But such restraint would frustrate the aspirations of the Egyptian military, from Amer on down, to “erase the 1956 disgrace.” The Soviets stressed the importance of international legitimacy; the Arabs preferred to minimize the risk and price by striking first. This immanent problem surfaced when the plan was played out in May–June 1967.

Still, since this strategy has been documented for some time and attributed to Soviet advice, it is remarkable that the Soviet move that triggered its implementation has heretofore been dismissed as inadvertent—a misinterpretation that must now be laid to rest. Our research and others’ has also shed light on some hitherto inexplicable features of the Arab plans, by revealing the factual element that was previously unknown: the direct military role that the USSR was to play in these operations.

In one such example, the Syrian plan ostensibly called for coordination only with the Egyptian operation; an Israeli Foreign Ministry official showed Iran’s envoy in Israel “a map found at the Syrian front headquarters in Quneitra, which indicates that as part of the training of senior [Syrian] officers, Soviet experts rehearsed comprehensive operational plans for the conquest of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem”—the former, at least, being an objective of the Egyptian plan, so that the two were clearly integrated. However, one of the “Victor” plan’s especially significant features was the provision for Syrian forces, after breaking through northern Israel, to link up with an “Egyptian” naval landing force near Haifa. So far no evidence has emerged that Egypt was capable of such a landing, or prepared one. There was an Egyptian plan, “Leopard,” to advance on land along the Israeli coast; the Soviet desant (landing) operations recently revealed to have targeted several points on the Israeli coast, including
“Haifa or slightly northwards,” may have been intended to support “Leopard” by striking behind the Israeli lines.

In any case, this is a clear indication not only of the Soviet link between the Egyptian and Syrian plans, but also of their reliance on a direct Soviet intervention. This, in turn, highlights the literal significance of the toasts that were exchanged by the Soviet and Egyptian military leaders during their Moscow talks in November 1966. Grechko declared: “Together, we can face any challenge or danger in the region that you inhabit. . . . We, the Soviet military, out of dedication to the instructions of the Party and government, are totally prepared to extend every possible aid to the UAR . . . if imperialism should raise an arm against it.” The reported excerpts from Amer’s response quote him as referring to an even more explicit promise: “If indeed, as Marshal Grechko just said, the Soviet forces are prepared to fight alongside us, shoulder to shoulder, then we undoubtedly will be victorious.”

Grechko’s reference to the Soviet military’s subservience to party instructions stresses the rigid hierarchy of the Soviet chain of command, which no one could overstep.

As this narrative continues, we will encounter attempts to dismiss remarks by Grechko and other Soviet figures as rhetorical hyperbole, the effect of too many drinks, soldiers’ camaraderie, hospitable courtesy, or mere loquaciousness. These interpretations either ignore standard Soviet codes of behavior, or reflect the continuing Russian efforts to cover up the party’s leading role in the instigation of the crisis.

Nikita Khrushchev, who cannot be suspected of naiveté in party matters, confirms in his memoirs that the USSR deliberately colluded in sparking the conflict. He asserts, however, that first the Soviet military command, in a series of “hush-hush” mutual visits, encouraged high-ranking Egyptian and Syrian delegations to go to war, and only then persuaded the Soviet political leadership to support these steps, in the full knowledge that they were aimed at starting a war to destroy Israel.

While this account is more plausible than Western theories based on individual misbehavior, it is ultimately irrelevant. Once the Politburo had adopted policy and action plans, both officials and officers, regardless of their personal leanings, were obliged to carry out its instructions, in word as well as deed—especially in contacts with foreign elements. At this stage, Grechko was a member of the Central Committee but had not yet been promoted even to candidate membership in the Politburo. While he may
have militated for an approach that was held by a group including Brezhnev and himself, his continued rise attests that he made no unauthorized commitment. “Violation of party discipline,” even at ministerial rank, could be punished by dismissal and humiliation—as Foreign Minister Shepilov had learned in 1956, also in the Middle Eastern context.18

Indeed, Grechko’s meetings with Amer may well have been aimed at creating the tools for implementation of the party’s resolutions at its 23rd Congress, ahead of a Central Committee plenary session on 12 December 1966. Like the Central Committee’s extraordinary postwar session on 20 June 1967, much of this two-day meeting was devoted to a detailed presentation by Brezhnev, laying down the line for the delegates to follow in their various agencies, and in this case too the speech was never published. While the 20 June speech has come to light and provided several important insights, Brezhnev’s remarks on 12 December remain unknown, except for the title: “On the Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union and the Struggle for Consolidation of the Communist Movement.” Remarkably, the published version of this conclave’s resolutions made no explicit reference at all to the Middle East—an omission that more probably reflects secret decisions than an actual disregard of this high-priority issue in the deliberations.19

The Central Committee Plenum was followed by several practical measures. On 22 December 1966, the Soviet General Staff issued a directive, which navy headquarters followed up on by 26 January 1967. This was to unite the Black Sea Fleet’s submarines, which had been divided into four separate detachments, into a “division” (the 14th) based in three Crimean ports and under a single commanding officer directly subordinate to the fleet commander. This ostensibly organizational reshuffle was described as necessary for improving the subs’ “combat readiness and service” in order to counter the US Navy, which “in the early 1960s reinforced the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean Sea and intensified its activity, especially with nuclear submarines armed with ballistic missiles.”20 Brezhnev took the corresponding political action in April by openly demanding the Sixth Fleet’s withdrawal.

Another delegation of the Syrian Baath Party visited Moscow on 20–26 January 1967, at the invitation of the CPSU Central Committee. By then, Soviet military personnel in Syria were already occupied with preparations for the future war with Israel, including fortification of the Golan Heights.
“As of early October,” the US embassy in Damascus estimated, there was "a total of approximately 160 Soviet military and civilian experts . . . assigned to the Syrian Ministry of Defense," including advisers “with each brigade and service school, with all Air Force and Navy elements.”

An official of the US embassy in Tel Aviv estimated to an Israeli colleague that “on the Israel-Syria border, there are about 12 Soviet military advisers.” Although he reckoned that “some of them may even be in command positions,” he still reported that the US embassy in Damascus “did not consider Soviet influence in Syria as severe. They estimate that the Syrians are ‘masters in their own home.’”

But when Israel invaded Syria on 9 June, the Soviets themselves acknowledged 400 military advisers on the Golan front alone. Walworth Barbour, the US ambassador to Israel, was evidently right when, in a talk with Eshkol a few days before the optimistic report from his colleague in Syria, he “reiterated the United States’ present shaky standing and negligible influence in Damascus. Worse yet was [his] open and obvious admission of ignorance about goings-on in Syria, including the Soviets’ tendencies and the measure of their penetration so far.” Although Barbour, contrary to previous US pronouncements, almost seemed to flash a “green light” for Israeli action against Syria, Israeli diplomat Shlomo Argov recommended urging more US interest and action instead.

Argov suggested pointing out to the Americans that a number of strategic considerations might lead the USSR toward “more extreme boldness and risk-taking than we were so far willing to imagine. . . . There is room to ask whether the assumption is justified that the Soviet Union would hesitate to let matters deteriorate into a serious flare-up on the Syrian-Israeli border. Moreover, it can be assumed that a military crisis between Syria and Israel might serve the USSR by increasing the Syrian regime’s dependence,” and would be especially useful if Nasser should balk at entering such a confrontation. In retrospect, his analysis was nearly prophetic, but the assumption that the Soviets would shrink from confrontation remained prevalent.

By April, a Soviet military commission led by General Sergei Sokolov inspected the Golan Heights and declared them to be “an impregnable fortress.” A curious exception seems to appear in a report that among Soviet advisers was a Colonel (ret.) Mikhail Filonov, a specialist from the Corps of Engineers, who “from January 1967 trained the Syrians on the
Golan Heights in removing Soviet PT-54 [anti-tank] mines.\(^{27}\) The purpose of this training is clarified by a Syrian directive issued two days before the war: to clear the “obstacles that we placed on the Jordan River banks” northeast of Lake Kinneret, evidently in order to open the way for Syrian forces to advance into Israel.\(^{28}\)

In addition to intensified attacks by Palestinian organizations, on 7 April 1967 a major dogfight took place between Syrian and Israeli fighters, which Ben-Tzur suggests was initiated by the Soviets; Pravda bannered the news on its front page, headlined “Conflict Heating Up to Point of Conflagration”\(^{29}\)—all enhancing the credibility of Moscow’s recurring charges about Israeli troop concentrations.

These claims about Israel’s designs on Syria, which Moscow egregiously made no effort to prove or even to adapt to Israel’s actual military strength, were brought to a climax by the Soviets when the two timelines converged: Arab military and political unity, as well as operational preparations, had progressed to the perceived minimum level required for action; and Israel’s nuclear progress was perceived to reach a point that permitted no further delay. This moment may have been less than ideal, but it was the most propitious juncture that the Soviets could realistically expect.

This occurred around February 1967. The Lebanese newspaper Al-Hayat published, and the Associated Press spread worldwide, a report that Israel had tested a nuclear device.\(^{30}\) An authoritative Israeli source, the director of the RAFAEL weapons development agency, has since obliquely confirmed that something of this sort may actually have taken place, giving the exact date: “On 2 November 1966, an especially significant test took place. It constituted a kind of summing up for a period of development, as well as a step that brought one of the main weapons systems closer to the final stages of its development and manufacture. . . . The success of this test was complete, as it gave us unambiguous experimental proof that the system . . . was in working order. We had awaited this result for many years.”\(^{31}\)

Cohen estimates that the reported event “was a test of those aspects that were under the responsibility of RAFAEL (perhaps a test of an entire implosion device, or a zero or near-zero yield test.)”\(^{32}\)

The change that this reported event made in Israel’s nuclear status created some problems as to its public stance. In December 1966, external affairs manager Shmuel Bendor of the AEC complained to Foreign
Ministry director general Aryeh Levavi that Minister Eban had replied in
the negative to an interviewer’s question, “Are you working on the pro-
duction of an atomic bomb?” This, Bendor pointed out, was substantially
different from Eshkol’s statement of 18 May that “Israel has no nuclear
weapons.” Bendor wrote: “I hope that Israel’s representatives everywhere
keep on avoiding statements on this subject. If they are obliged to answer
a question, it seems to me that they had better reply according to the
prime minister’s formulation.” But in what looks like a consequence of
the reported test, Bendor went on to suggest: “Even from this forma-
tion, they had better cite only the sequel: Israel will not be the first to intro-
duce nuclear weapons,” adding in handwriting “into the region.” That
is, there was to be no more explicit denial that Israel possessed such
weapons, as Eshkol had made in May. Levavi replied tersely: “I am not of
the opinion that politically, there is a substantial difference [or] that the
prime minister’s remarks should be corrected by omitting part of them.
I am ready to give the reasons for my opinion orally.”

But both for Washington and for Moscow, there was an essential dif-
cence. The United States evidently had independent information about
the alleged test before the press report was published, as on 17 February
1967, the CIA estimated that “regardless of what was actually tested . . .
Israel continued to produce bomb components,” and that “assembly of a
nuclear weapon could be completed in 6–8 weeks.” In view of Russian
claims that the Soviets had excellent intelligence on Israel’s nuclear
progress, they could well have obtained similar data. A recent paper by a
Russian writer confirms that the Soviets knew that Israel’s plutonium
production was approaching the critical mass for a bomb, and that “work
began in the spring of 1967” toward assembling a deliverable weapon.

This puts into a more precise context the conclusion reached by the
Israeli researchers Ariel Levite and Emily Landau that “the Egyptians,
along with other Arab elements, estimated on the eve of the Six-Day War
that Israel was close to obtaining nuclear weapons . . . but that Israel still
did not have operational nuclear capability, which would require at least
one more year of Israeli activity.” Information received from the Soviet
Union may have prompted Nasser to reiterate, on 5 February 1967, to the
London Observer: “If the Israelis proceed with the production of an
atomic bomb, the final solution would be a preventive war to avert and
eliminate this danger.”
Jordan also fell into line. The Egyptian-Syrian pact, signed two days after Israel’s alleged test, hemmed Jordan in and threatened its pro-Western monarchy with Soviet-inspired subversion. The IDF’s retaliatory operation at Samu in the West Bank, on 13 November 1966, appeared to prove that Israel, no longer able to penalize Syria for its support of Palestinian raids, was now turning on its weakest and secretly friendly neighbor. King Hussein of Jordan was constrained to go along with the Egyptian-Syrian line, ultimately leading him to join their united military command on 30 May 1967.

A preliminary indication of this shift came when Jordan chimed in with Nasser on Israel’s nuclear program: simultaneously with the Egyptian president’s restated threat, Jordan called for a new Arab summit conference, citing the vital necessity “to confront Israel before she should possess atomic weapons.” This, however, was the final round of such public blasts; as in the previous round, media silence was now imposed on the nuclear issue and practical measures took over. The USSR almost immediately accelerated its military preparations and its moves to provide the promised nuclear “umbrella” for its Arab allies.

The Grechko-Amer plan may, then, either have been originated or have been activated in response to the breakthrough represented by Israel’s alleged test, depending on how early Soviet intelligence got wind of this event. The former possibility—an intelligence report just received about such a pivotal development—may explain why Amer cut short his visit in Moscow and returned to Cairo on 25 November. Ben-Tzur hypothesizes that Nasser, at this stage, rejected “the new line of thinking” pursued by the Soviet and Egyptian military leaders. It has now emerged that, precisely at this point, Meir Amit of the Mossad broached the idea of offering Nasser a deactivation of Dimona. But Amit’s initiative never materialized, and Eshkol ultimately denied that the test had ever taken place.

Amer chose to inform his president of the plan that he had actually drawn up in Moscow only by telegram from his next foreign visit, in Pakistan. By the time the Al-Hayat report made the Israeli test a matter of record, Nasser had accepted the Grechko-Amer plan. Shortly after the Six-Day War, the former US embassy counselor in Cairo, David Nes, told interviewers he “was convinced that as early as January, Nasser was planning a showdown with Israel and the West.” By 18 April 1967, accord-
According to a CIA report, Nasser was speaking of his own desire to get UNEF out of Sinai and Gaza, and to close the Straits of Tiran.\textsuperscript{45}

This followed an unannounced visit to Cairo by the Soviet foreign minister in the last week of March, from which “the only concrete detail leaked out in the Cairo press was that Gromyko would also discuss the problems of the UN peace-keeping force in Gaza.”\textsuperscript{46} However, at the height of the subsequent crisis an official of the Egyptian embassy in Moscow confided to an American counterpart that “the purpose [of] Gromyko’s visit to Cairo” was to give Nasser a “larger commitment than anyone (presumably including source) had realized.”\textsuperscript{47} After Soviet warnings gave Egypt the pretext to move forces into Sinai, Israeli military intelligence estimated that this was coordinated during Gromyko’s “sudden” visit.\textsuperscript{48}

It appears therefore that the plan, of which the eviction of UNEF and the blockade of Eilat were central features, was formally adopted by the Politburo no later than the eve of this visit. According to one of his subordinates at the time, “Gromyko did not resolve a single tiny question: He would not fulfill a decision or make up his mind without getting the approval of the Politburo first.”\textsuperscript{49} Gromyko indeed told the Egyptians “that he came, not in his capacity as minister of foreign affairs, but as a candidate member of the Politburo. . . . Soviet relations with Egypt were regarded as so important that they remained the concern of the Politburo.”\textsuperscript{50}

The next-ranking Soviet dignitary to visit Egypt (on 11–26 April) was Nikolai Yegorychev. As party boss in the city of Moscow, he was formally the guest of his counterpart, the Cairo branch head of the Arab Socialist Union, Nasser’s political vehicle, who was also the president’s chief of staff. In an interview, Yegorychev declined to discuss with us the content of a confidential paper that he later submitted to the Central Committee, and which reportedly argued that both Egypt and Syria needed much greater Soviet military support to confront Israel successfully.\textsuperscript{51} He denied subsequent reports that he favored direct military support for Egypt and Syria during the war, including a naval landing in Sinai.\textsuperscript{52} But it is noteworthy that Nasser cited party authority when he stated on 26 May 1967: “I was authorized by the Arab Socialist Union’s Higher Executive to implement this plan [moving forces into Sinai, removing UNEF, and closing the Straits] at the right time. The right time came when Syria was threatened with aggression.”\textsuperscript{53}
The first significant appearance of Soviet sea power in the Mediterranean came in 1967. The Soviets increased their force in a show of support for the Arab states. That was the first opportunity taken by the Soviets to demonstrate their willingness to influence major events in the area by the use of military power.

— Federation of American Scientists Paper, 2000

On 19 May 1966, the day after Kosygin left Egypt, the Soviet ambassador Dmitri Pozhidayev was instructed to inform Amer “confidentially about the Soviet government’s intention to carry out, in May–July, certain measures pertaining to the Soviet Navy in the Eastern Mediterranean”—probably referring to the establishment and activity of the “combined eskadra.” He was also “to obtain Amer’s opinion as to the advisability of Soviet warships paying friendly calls at an Egyptian port (Port Said or Alexandria) in July of this year.” Western observers soon noticed that the “Soviets had obtained concessions for improved facilities” in Egypt’s Mediterranean and Red Sea ports.

Admiral Gorshkov returned to Egypt in January 1967—that is, in the interim between the alleged Israeli test itself and its media exposure. The Soviet navy commander had also been a key member of Kosygin’s delegation in Egypt a year before, when Nasser was promised a nuclear “umbrella.” Fulfillment of this pledge now became a major component of an accelerated Soviet naval buildup in the Mediterranean. The political background imparted to the commanders and crews connected this reinforcement with an exacerbation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, into which “the international community was sucked” with the United States taking Israel’s side. The conflict was defined as over “the disputed territories,” one of many examples from Soviet parlance before June 1967 that re-
flected a political position whereby land held by Israel beyond the UN partition lines of 1947 was “occupied” or “disputed.”

As the naval reinforcement gained momentum, Brezhnev fired the first public shot of the campaign, by demanding the removal of the US Sixth Fleet from the Mediterranean. This took place in Karlovy Vary, Czechoslovakia, at a gathering of Communist bloc leaders on 24 April 1967. On the 22nd, in Berlin on his way to this conference, Brezhnev met his counterparts, East Germany’s Walter Ulbricht and Poland’s Wladislaw Gomulka, and let them know that the Soviet regional buildup was approaching its global objective: a strike at the United States via its Israeli client. He notified them that a “decisive blow” was about to be dealt to American interests in the Middle East, “even at the cost of sacrificing Nasser.”4 On 26 May, a US diplomat remarked in retrospect: “It almost seemed as though the Soviet Union had been aware in advance of the coming Near Eastern crisis, since Brezhnev had first called for the withdrawal of the Sixth Fleet” a month before.5

The Politburo certainly had to approve this major overt change in the USSR’s Mediterranean naval posture. As it happened, Brezhnev’s demand was almost fulfilled at the outset of the war, when the Sixth Fleet was withdrawn westward in order to disprove Arab charges that its aircraft were assisting Israel’s air offensive. From then until 10 June, the Soviet navy enjoyed a virtual monopoly on the eastern Mediterranean—the best conditions Brezhnev could have desired for the projected Soviet intervention in the Arab-Israeli war.

By the time Brezhnev sounded his demand, the Soviet navy had already—for the first time—sent significant detachments of its Baltic and Northern Fleets into the Mediterranean, in addition to units of the Black Sea Fleet, and instead of rotating the ships to keep them at a permanent level of 10–12 vessels,6 they were now accumulated in the Med. The official Russian military history of Soviet participation in regional conflicts, published by the Institute of Military History in 2000, puts the flotilla that was assembled by 1 June 1967 at 30 surface warships (excluding auxiliaries) and 10 submarines, all at full battle readiness; more were to follow as the crisis worsened.7 One of the many Russian researchers in recent years who compiled information on Soviet military operations has collated an “incomplete” list of 31 warships and armed submarine tenders alone that were “carrying out combat assignments in support of
Egypt and Syria” during the 1967 conflict. Since the eskadra’s lineup, as reported in 1973, included 36 “intelligence collection and auxiliary ships,” which made up over half of “some 60” surface vessels, an extrapolation by the same ratio indicates that in the 1967 crisis its strength was roughly equal. This bears out the highest estimate to date by Western analysts for June 1967: “up to 70 units”; Rabin, at the time, put the number at over 70. However, most Western studies have quoted much lower figures, dismissed the Soviet eskadra’s capability to face the Sixth Fleet at this time, and tended to date the flotilla’s growth mainly to the aftermath of the 1967 war.

But this was not the assessment of the Sixth Fleet’s own commander in 1967, Vice Admiral William Martin. By 17 May he was complaining, in a public address: “A Soviet naval build-up in the Mediterranean is threatening the United States Sixth Fleet and limiting its capability as a strike force. . . . The Fleet [is] now no longer able to devote itself entirely to mounting strike operations against the Soviet Union.”

The news agency report of Martin’s address, even discounted for scare tactics aimed at the home front, must have caused considerable satisfaction in Moscow. US naval analysts were busily debating whether “the Soviet Navy’s expansion into the Mediterranean indicates the top Soviet leadership is ‘now thinking in terms of global strategy for its surface ships,’” with the majority answering in the positive.

The most dramatic increase of the “combined eskadra” was, however, in submarines, most of which had to make the long voyage from their bases in the Baltic and Barents Sea, or even farther afield. A crewman on the nuclear submarine K-125, of the Pacific Fleet, told an Israeli newspaper interviewer that after a mission near Cuba his sub was posted to the Med in this period “to escort Russian ships transporting arms to Syria.” The Black Sea Fleet’s newly unified submarine division was constrained by article 12 of the Montreux Convention of 1936 governing passage in the Turkish straits. It states that submarines belonging to Black Sea littoral states may go through only on their way to repairs or “rejoining base.” Such passage is permitted for one submarine at a time, during daylight hours, and on the surface. In other words, while excuses might be found for inserting the Black Sea submarines into the Mediterranean, they could not do so uncounted and undetected. Those that arrived through Gibraltar, including the nuclear subs (of which the Black Sea Fleet had
none), could enter the Med surreptitiously. One technique for accomplishing this was employed by nuclear submarine K-52, which passed through the strait “underneath a passenger liner.”

The newly published history of the Black Sea submarine division confirms that the military echelon observed the same modus operandi as the political leadership, in that the most pivotal and sensitive steps were not documented. The authors—all naval officers, led by the Russian navy’s chief of staff, who in Soviet times served in the 14th Division—state that “the submarines' secret and covert operations in the [Arab-Israeli] conflict area were conducted according to coded directives. . . . Once these were received, no logbooks were kept on board the submarines. This accounts for the difficulty of documenting their participation in extending internationalist aid to friendly countries.”

What might be revealed by those logs, had they been written, was indicated by a recent study conducted under the auspices of the US Naval War College. After interviewing former Soviet officers and studying military and personal journals for the Yom Kippur War period in 1973, Lyle Goldstein and Yuri Zhukov concluded that “this evidence paints a picture of a Fifth Eskadra on the verge of direct confrontation, and much more willing to engage in hostilities than previously thought . . . in contrast to scholarly works that have tended to emphasize Soviet restraint and reluctance.” They found that “America’s opponents could achieve local sea-denial capabilities in the face of severe constraints even in a theater of traditional US naval dominance.” We can only endorse these conclusions—and state, based on similar sources, that this Soviet pattern already prevailed in 1967.

How slowly and inconsistently the USSR’s cover-up of operations in the 1967 crisis is being lifted was illustrated by the Russian naval officers, headed by a rear admiral, who recently chronicled the Black Sea Fleet’s submarine force. They related that, like similar teams in the other fleets, they “invested great efforts in gathering the necessary data. As a result, a directive was issued in late 2002 by the Russian Federation’s Armed Forces General Staff.” It set forth a list of submarines and tenders that were in the conflict area, off Syria and Egypt, in the course of combat there from 1967 to 1974. The list enumerates, among the units of the Black Sea and Northern Fleets that were “in the region of the conflict with Egypt” throughout the 1967 crisis and war, only one diesel submarine,
B-105 of the Northern Fleet (and none in the Syrian arena). This not only contradicts the other, general military history mentioned above; even the text of the Black Sea submarines history itself names at least two such subs (S-38 and S-100, both from the Black Sea Fleet) as operating in the Mediterranean in June 1967 alone. More important, the General Staff’s list includes four of the USSR’s six largest and newest Don-class armed submarine tenders as operating in the Egyptian theater in June 1967, which shows that a much larger submarine force was present there at the time of the Six-Day War. The accounts now emerging from the subs’ commanders and crewmen attest to both their number and their missions.

As the submarine captains were issued their orders before sailing from distant bases, to be activated upon receipt of a code word or under predetermined circumstances, the content of these orders, together with the dates of the subs’ departure, are especially revealing as to the prior preparation of the Soviet role in the joint plans with Egypt and Syria.

In late February or early March, the nuclear submarine K-172 was sent from the Northern Fleet’s arctic base to the eastern Mediterranean. Its commander, Nikolai Shashkov, relates that before sailing, he received oral orders from Gorshkov “to be ready for firing nuclear missiles at the Israeli shore” in response to a supposedly anticipated “joint Israeli and American desant [landing] on the Syrian coast”—another example of “mirror-image policy presentation,” as the Soviets were planning their own landing on the Israeli shore. The coded password to take such action would be transmitted from Moscow, and in order to receive it the submarine had to rise to “radio depth” every two hours. Shashkov arrived at his station by 30 March. “I was very limited by the range of my missiles. It did not exceed 600 km. I was forced . . . to zigzag in dangerous proximity to the American aircraft carrier groups.” The Americans, of course, took such maneuvers to be routine surveillance or obstruction of the Sixth Fleet’s movements.

Another nuclear submarine, K-131, was sent from the Barents Sea into the Mediterranean before the end of April “by decision of the leadership.” In May 1967, the nuclear sub K-52 participated in preplanned war games of the Northern Fleet, after which it was unexpectedly sent to the Med “for combat service.” A Russian naval history enthusiast who collated numerous such reports from published sources adds the diesel sub-
marine B-31 and another “group” (of which one is identified as B-74) that was “in the region of Britain” when, eight to ten days before the outbreak of hostilities, it was ordered to head for Gibraltar, and on 5 June to enter the Med.26

The Mediterranean was not the only Middle Eastern arena for this accelerated Soviet naval buildup. In August 1966, “well-informed” reports about two visits of “apparently conventional” Soviet submarines to the Yemeni port of Hodeida six and eight months previously merited a special, top-secret memo to Israel’s prime minister.27 The official history of Soviet participation in regional conflicts asserts that in 1967, nuclear-armed Soviet surface warships as well as submarines were also dispatched to the Red Sea, as “there existed in Moscow a concern that in a turn of events unfavorable for it, Israel could use certain kinds of WMD, the existence of which never was denied by official Tel Aviv.”28

According to standard Soviet procedure, military moves on this scale required Politburo approval. The list included: “mobilizations general or partial; substantial movements of troops, particularly from one military district to another; large maneuvers, especially unplanned ones; deployment and use of any type of weapons of mass destruction; putting on alert all Soviet armed forces, or forces in one or several military districts; and some other matters.”29

Grechko, then, was not merely boasting when, in parting from Egyptian war minister Shams Badran in Moscow on 28 May 1967, he asserted: “Our fleet is in the Mediterranean, near your shores. We have destroyers and submarines with missiles and arms unknown to you. Do you understand fully what I mean?”30 Aboard submarine K-172, Captain Shashkov also knew the Arabs were aware of his presence in the Med, and that “in a critical situation, the Soviet Union would support them by any means, including nuclear. [They] also guessed from where the strike on Israel would come—from the sea.”31

Yuri Khripunkov, the retired captain whose reminiscences were the starting point for this entire study, related to us that he had been trained in the use of “special”—that is, nonconventional—weapons, before being posted as a gunnery lieutenant in the Baltic Fleet. But the mission in which he was assigned a key role in 1967 was conventional, though astonishing in its audacity, and until his disclosure entirely unknown and unimaginable in Israel and the West. Khripunkov’s ship, SKR-6, was a
brand-new *Petya II*-class antisubmarine frigate of the fastest and most advanced model in the Soviet navy. It had just been completed at the Kaliningrad shipyards and transferred to the Baltic Fleet’s base at Baltiysk when on 3 May, along with its sister ship SKR-13, it was ordered to set sail for the two ships’ maiden voyage—to the Mediterranean, supposedly en route to the Black Sea. (“But when we reached the Med, we were told to stay there,” Khripunkov recalled.) A similar procedure was followed with other naval detachments: Captain Ivan Kapitanets, who retired as Admiral of the Fleet, was in 1967 the skipper of the *Nastoychivy* (a *Kotlin*-class destroyer newly converted to launch anti-aircraft missiles). As he relates in his recently published memoir, his ship was sent from its Northern Fleet base on 20 May ostensibly “for repairs” in Sevastopol, but was reassigned once it reached the Mediterranean.

Although Khripunkov provided the first glimpse of it, this operation was planned to include larger and better-adapted units than improvised landing parties like his own. He knew that “there was also one BDK (large landing ship) with about 40 amphibious tanks and maybe a battalion of infantry.” Until recently, the only supporting evidence that the Soviet landing force included armor and regular marines was an oral statement that a senior US analyst recalled hearing from a GRU officer, who spoke of an *Alligator*-class landing ship and also mentioned the figure of 40 tanks. But this testimony was recorded many years later, and ostensibly might have referred to the landing plan as it evolved after the 1967 war.

Hence the importance of a new publication by Professor Aleksandr Kislov, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who was in 1967 a Middle East correspondent for TASS, the Soviet news agency that has already been shown in previous chapters to have fulfilled a key intelligence and propaganda function in the crisis. Kislov was invited to write a postscript to the first publication of our findings in a Russian scholarly journal. Citing “personal observation,” he disputed our contention that Moscow preplanned an operation against Israel that included landing parties of “volunteer” seamen. Kislov reiterated the official line that the USSR intended to intervene only “in dire necessity, to stop Israeli aggression.” But in so doing he supplied the first confirmation from a source still within the Russian establishment that a Soviet landing force
was prepared to strike at Israel. What need was there for improvised landing parties of untrained sailors, Kislov wrote, when the landing force included “desant ships with marines who were well-prepared both operationally and psychologically?”

Other publications add details of this regular naval infantry force. The 309th Independent Battalion was stationed on board the Black Sea Fleet’s BDK *Krymskiy Komsomolets*, anchored at Port Said—and evidently became the only regular Soviet formation that actually went into combat. Another Black Sea BDK, *Voronezhskiy Komsomolets* was also in the Med, along with two medium landing craft, SDK-34 and SDK-64. Although it cannot yet be asserted that the fleet’s first “brigade” of desant ships, the 197th, was established in July 1966 specifically for the purpose of this operation, it was definitely deployed to the Middle Eastern arena ahead of the 1967 crisis, with its orders ready. In contrast, the US Defense Department was concerned that the Sixth Fleet lacked precisely the capabilities that the Soviet flotilla was now reinforcing—landing forces and anti-submarine units.

But the Americans’ strong suit was aircraft carrier groups, and a main reason why the threat of a Soviet naval intervention in a Middle Eastern conflict was seldom taken seriously in the West was the “combined,” and later the Fifth, eskadra’s lack of air power. The USSR’s first aircraft carrier, the *Moskva*, had yet to enter service, and Western experts held that air support would have to be provided from the nearest Soviet land bases, in Crimea. We now know, however, that such a Soviet air intervention was indeed being readied—thanks to an extraordinary disclosure by its designated commander, which has been on record in English since 1999.

In that year, a World War II flying ace, Aleksandr Vybornov, was invited to take part in the annual international “Gathering of Eagles” at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. The biography that he provided for the organizers included the unprecedented assertion that, in 1967, he was named “to command a possible Soviet Air Force deployment in support of Arab air forces in the Middle East,” and was dispatched to Egypt “to study the feasibility of the plan.” Vybornov was already a Hero of the Soviet Union for shooting down 28 German planes and other feats; he retired as a lieutenant general after serving as inspector general of the De-
fense Ministry. The Middle Eastern mission was not his main claim to fame, and he would have little motive to fabricate its incidental mention in his résumé.

The bio does not give the precise date for his arrival in Egypt, and in a Russian magazine article from 1993 a writer who interviewed Vybornov put it after the June war. But the general stated both in that interview and to a recent researcher that he witnessed the Israeli attack on an Egyptian airfield (which he described as “complete chaos [that] reminded him of the Russian defense of Moscow in ’41”)—ergo, that he was already in Egypt at the war’s outbreak. Also, Vybornov said he was expected to demonstrate to the Egyptians the capabilities of their MiG-15 and MiG-17 aircraft; most of these outdated fighters were destroyed in Israel’s air strike of 5 June, and the models were not included in the postwar Soviet resupply.

Significantly, Vybornov related that he was “called to the Central Committee, [to the] head of the Middle Eastern Group,” who entrusted him with the mission—another testimony to the political authorization for this preplanned air intervention. An Israeli participant in the 1999 gathering, Brigadier General (ret.) Amir Nachumi, and the organizer, Lieutenant Colonel (ret.) David McFarland of the US Air Force, both recalled to us that Vybornov retold his Egyptian exploits there. Oddly, none of the “eagles” appear to have noticed this momentous contribution to the historical record.

Some of the advanced hardware that the USSR delivered to Egypt on an accelerated timetable in early 1967 may have been intended as prepositioned equipment for Vybornov’s putative operation. In April, for example, the Egyptian air force received a batch of 15 Sukhoi-7 attack aircraft, although its pilots “did not have time to master them.” Another, yet-experimental and secret Soviet aircraft also arrived in the Middle East, to be flown personally by Vybornov in dramatic sorties over Israel that in time brought the crisis to its climax.

On 15 April 1967 the CPSU cells of the 14th submarine division conducted their first party conference. On 24 April, the day Brezhnev called at Karlovy Vary for the removal of the Sixth Fleet from the Med, an additional contingent of the Black Sea Fleet left Sevastopol to join the “combined eskadra.” And on 11 May, as the USSR launched the disinformation campaign that was to signal the implementation of the Grechko-Amer
plan, the deputy commander of the Black Sea Fleet, Vice Admiral Viktor Sysoyev, arrived directly from headquarters to hoist his pennant on the cruiser *Slava*, taking command of the immensely reinforced but still officially unnamed Mediterranean flotilla.\(^{46}\)

Only after the Six-Day War was the Fifth Eskadra formally inaugurated, under the lower-ranking permanent command of a rear admiral.\(^{47}\) Sysoyev, whose rank as vice admiral was equal to Martin’s, was evidently charged with commanding a specific operation of outstanding importance, and he came briefed with the special orders that he transmitted to his subordinates three weeks later. On the day that Sysoyev took command, the Soviet Arabic-language interpreters stationed with military advisers in Egypt were summoned to the Soviet embassy in Cairo. One of them later recounted to journalist Aleksandr Khaldeyev that they were told war between Egypt and Israel was “inevitable,” and they soon were assigned to the marine force being readied to attack Israel.\(^{48}\) The stage was set.
CHAPTER 10

Mid-May

DISINFORMATION OR DIRECTIVE?

In order to liquidate the nuclear object in Israel, which was completely “unneeded” by the USSR, Moscow embarked on the course of direct disinformation: On 13 May 1967, Moscow informed Cairo about “top-secret data” that 13 Israeli brigades had been moved to the Syrian border.

— REPORT ON THE RUSSIAN WEB SITE PRESS CENTER, 26 MARCH 2001

THE JEWISH LUNAR CALENDAR CYCLE realigns its dates with the solar calendar every 19 years. Thus, in 1967, Israel celebrated its Independence Day on the same Gregorian date, 15 May, as the end of the British mandate in 1948. The annual military parade was held that year at the Hebrew University Stadium in the Israeli part of Jerusalem, under the severe demilitarization provisions that had been imposed by the 1949 armistice, which left the city divided with Jordan. It was a brief and low-key affair, considered even disgraceful by many, and compatible with the malaise that had set in with an economic recession the previous summer: a 26-minute march-past by several hundred foot soldiers, with few vehicles and no heavy weapons.

The day before, a much more ostentatious and festive parade had taken place in Cairo, involving thousands of troops and reviewed by Marshal Amer. As the “boy-scout march” in Jerusalem progressed, the Israeli leadership was informed that the Egyptian formations had continued directly across the Suez Canal.¹ From documents that Israel later captured in Sinai, it emerged that on 14 May, Amer also issued a “battle order #1,” putting the Egyptian army into immediate and full war readiness.²

The reason for this move, as Nasser stated eight days later, was information received from the Soviet Union, whereby Israel had massed 10
to 13 brigades on its border with Syria, and was planning an imminent invasion to topple the Baath regime. It has become so consensual as to be self-evident in Middle Eastern historiography that the underlying causes of the Six-Day War had accumulated in the region for years, but the immediate trigger for the final escalation was this climactic culmination of the recurring Soviet warnings about Israeli troop concentrations and aggressive designs on Syria.

This is probably why the cover-up of Moscow’s role in the 1967 conflict is especially pronounced on the issue of this final Soviet warning. Some efforts to obscure it resort to complete silence on the matter: a post-Soviet official history of the USSR’s involvement in local wars starts its chronology of the 1967 crisis on 18 May, with the expulsion of UNEF by Egypt—ignoring both the Soviet message and the entry of Egyptian troops into Sinai. A recent history of the State of Israel, published by the Russian Academy of Sciences, states merely that “in May, reports began to appear” that Israel was massing forces, with no mention of the source for this information, and it continues: “Nasser was forced to act.”

At the other extreme, those accounts that do acknowledge the Soviet provenance of the warning differ as to its veracity. The KGB rezident in Israel in 1967 has claimed: “From the regularly incoming information, it transpired that a war in the Middle East was approaching and could break out at the end of 1966 or in the first half of 1967. . . . Our efforts and means were concentrated on gathering reliable secret information.” The Web site of the Russian Federation’s Foreign Intelligence Agency (SVR, the successor of the KGB’s First Main Directorate) is sparse in detail on this period, but it claims that “in the 1960s” the KGB indeed “received information about Israel’s preparations for new aggression against Arab countries, including the date for it to attack Egypt and Syria in 1967. This intelligence was passed on to the leaderships of Arab countries, which, however, undervalued it and overvalued the military potential of their countries.” Gromyko reminisced years later that during the “worrying days of May 1967 . . . our military were apprehensive that Israel any moment would attack Syria.” In contrast, the First Directorate’s chief, Lieutenant General Aleksandr Sakharovsky, has been quoted as explaining that his agency’s operatives themselves “cast doubt on the information received, but thought it was their duty to share it with the Egyptians.”
In Western historiography too, various theories have been proposed—the most far-fetched being that Soviet intelligence actually believed its own allegations. But this episode has been singled out as the most inexplicable and suspicious part of the entire saga, even by those who belittle the May ’67 incident as an ordinary Soviet exercise that happened to get out of hand. This reading was endorsed by the best-informed Israeli actors, as former Mossad chief Amit told a closed audience of intelligence cadets in 1983: “The Russians fell victim to their own disinformation. The Egyptians went much farther than Moscow originally intended.”

Summing up discussion on this issue at the conference to mark the war’s 25th anniversary, Richard Parker noted that several of the participants broached the idea of a deliberate Soviet move as part of a “grand design.” But pending the emergence of further evidence, he concluded that “the Soviets were not quite that reckless,” and therefore “the transmission of the report was done routinely and haphazardly, and was not a deliberate step directed by the highest government levels.”

One reason for Parker to concede that there was reason to suspect a deliberate Soviet move was that Moscow took care to hammer its message home to Nasser through three different channels at once. The title of this chapter uses the unspecific term “mid-May” because there is reason to doubt even the conventional chronology, which puts the outbreak of the crisis on 13 May, when the information was provided by the USSR to the speaker of Egypt’s National Assembly, Sadat, who stopped over in Moscow on his way back from a visit to North Korea.

This particular occasion now appears to have been only one stage, and actually a rather minor one, in a series that began earlier. According to one Egyptian source, “the Soviet warning . . . was repeated twice to the parliamentary group headed by Sadat, on their way [to North Korea] and on their way back”—which puts the initial warning as early as 1 May. In Red Square to watch the May Day parade, Sadat stood near Israeli diplomat Gideon Rafael, who had come to Moscow in an attempt to convince the Soviet leadership that it was “overheating” tensions with its latest round of allegations—in April—about Israeli intentions toward Syria. Rafael and Sadat met, separately, with the same Soviet official, Deputy Foreign Minister Sernyov.

Even if the 1 May date is erroneous, one of the first Israeli writers on the war, Moshe A. Gilboa, quotes testimonies in the Cairo trials a year
later to show that by 10 May, Nasser was “convinced” of the alleged Israeli buildup by “incontrovertible” proof that the Soviets had showed him, including photographs, which must have taken some time and a deliberate effort to obtain and/or to falsify.13 Their presentation to the Egyptians might correspond with the singular and still cryptic reference made by the Russian scholar Vitaly Naumkin at the 25th anniversary conference to a “representative of military intelligence [GRU], named Ryevsky, . . . [who] came in the middle of May to Egypt and . . . had some meetings there.”14 Shortly after the 1967 war, one report put the start of Egyptian preparations for the remilitarization of Sinai at 8 May.15 More recently, the correspondent in Cairo for the Novosty news agency at the time, Anatoly Yegorin, wrote that “in April, our military men in Egypt were already spreading out the maps.”16

The evidence that emerged for dating the Soviet message before 13 May disposes of one pretext that had been offered for the false warning: an aggressive statement toward Syria—the threat of a “lightning strike” to “occupy Damascus [and] overthrow the regime there”—which was attributed to IDF Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin. Nasser, speaking on 22 May in Sinai, referred to a “very impertinent” threat made by Israel on 12 May, after which “one simply cannot remain silent.” (He attributed the threat to Eshkol himself.)17 The closest published statement by Rabin in the numerous interviews to mark Independence Day is a veiled warning that the Syrian regime, which was sponsoring and directing Palestinian terrorists, would require different Israeli treatment than Jordan and Lebanon, where the terrorists were operating against the governments’ will.

Even for this, Rabin was chastised in a cabinet meeting, and reprimanded by Eshkol, for interfering in policy and embroiling Israel unnecessarily.18 In an apparent bid to prevent further inflammation, the Israeli authorities refrained from publishing—but later disclosed to the US ambassador—that on 5 or 6 May, a “higher-standard” and well-equipped infiltrator from Syria had been captured on a mission of “sabotage against Israeli leaders.”19 A study by Ami Gluska of Eshkol’s role in the crisis demonstrates that although Rabin had previously advocated landing a “strong blow” on Syria, provided this did not risk turning into a total war, he had in fact given up on the idea by May 1967.20 The dissemination of his purported threat has been attributed—among other sources—to a misquote by United Press International from an IDF press
briefing on 11 May. However, the evidence that the Soviets transmitted their warning, and certainly prepared it, before that date obviates any further discussion of this claim.

Sadat’s subsequent prominence as Nasser’s successor may help to explain why undue attention has centered on his role in receiving and conveying the message from Moscow. But the discussion focusing on Sadat has produced some statements that are remarkably revealing in themselves.

According to Mohammed Hassanein Heikal, Nasser’s confidant and the editor of *Al-Ahram*, as well as Sadat himself, Sadat was given the information by his formal counterpart Nikolai Podgorny, chairman of the Supreme Soviet. Russian attempts to minimize the import of this communication, however, have attributed it to the relatively junior figure of Semyonov. Yevgeny Pyrlin’s memoirs state that Semyonov passed the information to Sadat on 12 May at the airport, before the latter’s departure. This appears to misdate the exchange, as Sadat is known to have left on the 13th; a report of an earlier discussion that he held at his hotel with Gromyko and Semyonov does not mention the warning about Israel’s troop concentrations. What now seems more important than the precise time is the statement that Pyrlin, who during the crisis was a senior member of the Egyptian desk in the Soviet Foreign Ministry, made to BBC researchers when in 1997 they prepared a documentary on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Pyrlin stated to them: “He [Semyonov] told it not for the personal information of Sadat, it was rather to be transformed [transmitted] to Nasser. Relative [appropriate] steps were supposed to be taken by the Egyptian side.” This hardly conforms with Pyrlin’s own memoirs, in which he held that “our information, which was passed among other confidential messages to the Egyptian President, was an ordinary message, one of many dozens of communications that were passed then.”

Pyrlin’s book decries Western “attempts . . . to justify the provocative Israeli behavior by the actions of the Soviet side, which on May 12 informed Nasser about a dangerous concentration of Israeli troops on the border with Syria.” In this, he closed ranks with other Soviet actors in 1967, including former CPSU Central Committee counselor Karen Brutents, who even in post-Soviet times adamantly rejected “American and Israeli” charges “that the Soviet Union blessed, so to speak, the events that led to the Six-Day War.”
To disprove these accusations, Brutents recently asserted to Oren that Semyonov simply “couldn’t control himself” and prematurely revealed yet-unconfirmed intelligence to Sadat.\textsuperscript{28} Brutents, in effect, reiterated a claim that former first deputy foreign minister Georgy Korniyenko had first made a decade earlier—conveniently, just after Semyonov died in 1992.\textsuperscript{29} In our first paper exposing the Soviet cover-up, the editors toned down our qualification of this claim as “egregious.” But could such party insiders as Brutents and Korniyenko really believe that a ranking apparatchik like Semyonov had a mere “slip of the tongue” in such a critical matter? Answering this question requires another digression, this time into the decision-making process and code of behavior that characterized the Soviet elite.

Like most of the other Soviet diplomatic players in this drama (including Gromyko, Dobrynin, Pozhidayev, and Chuvakhin), Vladimir Sem'yonovich Semyonov started his career in 1939, with what is known as “Stalin’s cadres” and “Molotov’s draft”—the young, inexperienced but obedient diplomats who were recruited to replace those who had been purged in the Great Terror.\textsuperscript{30} By 1953, he was Soviet high commissioner in East Germany, following which he served for 22 years as deputy foreign minister. In 1968, he was trusted with a most sensitive mission as head of the Soviet team at the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) in Helsinki, of which a Foreign Ministry veteran has said: “Never did such a high and representative Soviet delegation go abroad.”\textsuperscript{31} His candidate membership in the Central Committee was reconfirmed in successive party congresses until his retirement in 1986.

In the Soviet system, such status was not attained, let alone held for so long, by anyone prone to such lapses, as another deputy foreign minister, Yakov Malik, learned in 1960. Malik did contravene his instructions by losing his temper and blurting out to Western diplomats that the downed U-2 pilot Gary Powers had been captured alive. His listeners initially dismissed his disclosure as disinformation, as “people like Malik do nothing just so, and when necessary they know how to hold their tongues.” Ambassador Thompson estimated in an urgent cable to Washington that Malik could not have simply misspoken, “as this rarely happens to the highly disciplined Soviet diplomats.” Malik escaped disgrace and dismissal from the ministry and the party only after begging on his knees before a furious Khrushchev, receiving a severe reprimand for “re-
vealing secret information,” and undergoing a humiliating procedure before an assembly of the Communist Party members in the ministry.32

Nothing of the kind befell Semyonov. If he had indeed been “notorious for scanning intelligence reports before such meetings [as with Sadat] and then retailing them as the latest gossip,”33 and in this momentous case acted on his own impulse rather than on instructions, at the very least he would hardly have been included—from the crisis he supposedly caused had reached the brink of war—in the crucial talks with the Egyptian minister of war Shams Badran two weeks later.34 Nor, a year after the calamitous outcome of this crisis played out, would he have been assigned to conduct top-secret talks in New York with a senior Israeli official, a task so delicate that “nobody thought of entrusting” it to Malik.35

In brief, the suggestion that Semyonov just couldn't resist blabbing to the Egyptians about dubious intelligence (and got away with it) illustrates the lengths that cover-up attempts have gone to. Indeed, Sadat judged Semyonov’s information about “10 Israeli brigades . . . concentrating on the Syrian border” urgent enough for him to rush, upon his return to Cairo shortly after midnight on 13 May, straight from the airport to Nasser’s residence to report it. But he found the president already closeted with Amer. Sadat then “realized that the Soviet Union had informed Nasser of this” through other channels as well.36

One of these was a visit by Ambassador Pozhidayev to the undersecretary at the Foreign Ministry, Ahmad al-Feki, earlier on the 13th. As an Egyptian official who recorded this meeting pointed out 25 years later, “It was not customary for the Soviet ambassador to deliver such reports . . . it never happened before, so why did the Soviets choose to act this way? Was it to confirm the seriousness of the situation and to leave no doubt that an Egyptian action is required?” Korniyenko accused Pozhidayev, too—along with Semyonov—of behavior incompatible with his training and office, for his role in informing Nasser. The note-taker, Salah Bassioumy, went on to relate how after meeting Pozhidayev, al-Feki sent “an alarming report . . . to the Presidency, based on the Soviet ambassador’s repeating . . . that this was Soviet intelligence, [and] that it should be seriously considered in the light of Syrian fears and the reported Israeli massing of 10 to 20 brigades on the Syrian border.”37

But the order to move a massive military force through Cairo into Sinai could not have been implemented within a few hours, and so must
have been issued before Pozhidayev’s warning supposedly triggered the Nasser-Amer meeting. The Soviet intelligence rezident in Cairo had also passed on the warning to “heads of Egyptian Intelligence”—evidently, even before the contacts at the diplomatic and political levels took place. According to Heikal, this was done by an operative named Sergei who held the official rank of counselor at the Soviet embassy. Yegorin mentions a “big intelligence expert,” Sergei Vasilyevich Katasonov, as winning the Order of the Red Banner for correctly forecasting the day the war would break out and the way it developed. Like Ryevsky, whose first name Naumkin did not mention, Katasonov’s role still awaits clarification.

In the early evening of 12 May, a coded message from the Soviet embassy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow was intercepted “somewhere in Western Europe.” It reported that “today we passed on to the Egyptian authorities information concerning the massing of Israeli troops on the northern frontier for a surprise attack on Syria. We have advised the UAR government to take the necessary steps.” The head of Egyptian intelligence was Salah Nasr—who was a member of Amer’s delegation to Moscow that shaped the joint plan with Grechko, and therefore knew what steps were meant.

A common feature in all three versions of the Soviet message thus seems to be the signal to Egypt to take the appropriate/relative/necessary measures, as if these measures had been previously agreed upon and were now to be implemented at a time decided by the highest Soviet authority, the Politburo. We now know—on Brezhnev’s own authority—that such a resolution was in fact adopted.

Seldom does such significance hinge on a single phrase in any document. The unveiling of Brezhnev’s hitherto secret speech on the crisis and war at an urgent Central Committee session on 20 June 1967 has rendered much of the preceding argument redundant, and conclusively laid to rest any claim that the warning to Egypt was random, inadvertent, or the result of an individual error.

Brezhnev’s speech was never published, but a typescript translation was recently discovered in the Berlin archives of the Stasi, the former East German counterpart of the KGB, and published by the Munich-based historian Stefan Meining. A corresponding Polish translation was found in the Communist Party archive in Warsaw, confirming the document’s authenticity. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the copies of Brezhnev’s
speech were found in East German and Polish Communist Party archives, given the record of Brezhnev's boast to Ulbricht and Gomulka that he was about to deal a blow to American interests. Both William Quandt and Ambassador Parker have cited a postwar CIA report based on disclosures of “a medium level Soviet official” who related that the Soviet aim was “to create a situation in which the US would become seriously involved, economically, politically, and possibly even militarily, and in which the US would suffer serious political reverses as a result of its siding against the Arabs.” Quandt and Parker noted, however, that this report could be considered as evidence only if the source was identified or his version supported—as we now believe it has been by the discovery of Brezhnev's speech.43

Judging by the recently exposed differences between Khrushchëv's actual speech at the 20th Party Congress and the edited version that reached the West via Poland and Israel,44 Brezhnev's speech too was almost certainly revised before being relayed to “sister parties.” Besides serving as a directive for the party hierarchy for dealing with the charged issue created by the military debacle of Soviet weaponry and doctrine as employed by the USSR's Arab clients in the Six-Day War, the text must also be read (and discounted) as an apology for Brezhnev's own role and that of his colleagues. Indeed, it is perhaps the first instance and tone setter for the extended cover-up described above. Still, it does give away several crucial factual disclosures. In one of these startling statements, Brezhnev confirmed that the warning to Egypt, which he still held to have been valid, was transmitted according to a decision by the Politburo—that is, as a matter of strategic policy determined at the highest level. He said: “In mid-May—and to this I want to draw your attention—reports reached us that Israel was intending to land a military blow on Syria and other Arab states. The Politburo resolved to bring this information to the attention of the governments of the UAR and Syria.”45

In the context of this Soviet warning, Brezhnev's speech already uses the key phrase that recurs in so many subsequent versions: “necessary steps.” Although he states that it was Egypt and Syria that informed Moscow that they were taking these measures, the phrase was more likely included in the Politburo resolution.

In any case, the very fact that such a resolution was formally adopted
calls into question the conclusion reached by Oren that “why, exactly, the Soviets acted as they did proved less important than the way the Egyptians reacted.” The emergence of this resolution indicates that the Kremlin played more than a mere “catalytic role” in precipitating the war, as ascribed even by historians who did recognize intentional Soviet involvement. It supports Cohen’s hypothesis that the warning served as a premeditated “pretext for another policy objective,” which included the elimination of Dimona.48

In other words, this is precisely the further evidence that Quandt and Parker demanded for verification of a Soviet “grand design.” Ironically, at the conference that Parker summarized, in line with the Soviet-Russian cover-up, Naumkin reported that no instructions to Pozhidayev to transmit the warning had been found in the Foreign Ministry archive—adding correctly that “without the decision of the Politburo, none of the ambassadors would have been allowed to pass it on.”49

If it was not an actual move by Israel, what caused the Politburo at this particular time not only to issue the most forceful of its warnings about impending Israeli aggression, but also to change the mode of pressing the charge? Heretofore, the procedure usually began with reports in the Soviet media and continued with official diplomatic protests to Israel. In mid-May 1967, communications to Cairo and Damascus came first.

An indication of the reason for this timing was provided by Pyrlin. “Three weeks before the war,” he related—that is, in mid-May—“several people of the [Foreign] Ministry . . . were addressed . . . not with a request but with the order, instruction to prepare . . . a document which would evaluate the war [between Israel and Egypt] as if it had happened, as if the war were over.” Such a report could be ordered only by the top party leadership. The report’s “unanimous” opinion, which according to Pyrlin was shared by the KGB and the military command, was “that the war would end up without anybody winning.”50

Whether this report itself determined the Politburo’s timing, or it was commissioned following some other development that pointed in the same direction (and the precise date of the report might help to settle this question), it indicated that the optimal moment for action on the Grechko-Amer plan had arrived. The two timelines had converged: While the Israeli nuclear project had not quite reached the deliverable weapon stage, Arab
military cohesion and capability had—so the Soviets now assessed—reached the point where they could hold the Israelis to a standoff, and even a limited Soviet intervention could tip the balance in favor of the Arab side.

Despite the claims that Soviet intelligence had excellent sources in Israel, some of which our research has confirmed, this forecast soon proved to be wildly unrealistic. It can only be conjectured whether this stemmed from poor analysis of solid information or from a preference to satisfy political expectations over honest assessment—two syndromes that have bedeviled not only the Soviet system. But either way, this report’s findings were evidently factored into the estimate circulated to Soviet intelligence and diplomatic missions. Former KGB general Oleg Kalugin, then the agency’s deputy rezident for political intelligence in Washington, recalls that “no one in Moscow had any doubt” that Israel would be quickly defeated.51 When the war did erupt, the Soviet ambassador in Jordan said to his American counterpart, “in a perfectly matter-of-fact way ‘you know, our estimate is that if the Israelis do not receive large-scale outside assistance . . . we think the Arabs will win the war, if [it] is allowed to be fought to the finish.’”52

Remarkably, in view of the version that he propagated about the origin of the Soviet warning, Brutents not only knew about Brezhnev’s speech; he wrote it. In his memoirs, Brutents relates being instructed on 5 June to prepare a speech on the Middle Eastern crisis and the newly erupted war for Brezhnev to deliver before the Central Committee.53 Brutents told us personally: “I and one of my colleagues prepared the urgent plenum. We were called in the evening to Brezhnev and were told that in the morning we had to submit Brezhnev’s speech to the plenum”54—which was, however, ultimately convened only on 20 June. Moreover, Brutents states that the draft he prepared for the speech was based on party documents supplied for the purpose.55 Korniyenko too “was a member of the working group which prepared a detailed study of the 1967 crisis for the Central Committee . . . during which he had access to all the relevant papers.”56 Their attempts to blame the disinformation on an individual error must then be seen as recent examples of the continuing efforts in Moscow to cover up the Soviet instigation of the crisis.

In another and more extreme case, Parker was told during a visit to Moscow in September 1990 that Ambassador Chuvakhin, whom he wished to interview on his role in the crisis, had already died.57 Chuv-
vakhin, however, was in fact alive enough to be interviewed subsequently by at least two journalists, including Isabella—not that he contributed much to elucidating the affair in question. When asked why he declined an Israeli invitation to see for himself that the charges of troop concentrations were baseless, Chuvakhin maintained that “Eshkol did pose the question, but unfortunately it isn’t a diplomat’s assignment to tour frontiers and see whether forces are being massed there or not.”

The standard practice in preparing “Politburo top-secret documents . . . never disclose[d] the authors of the proposals or how the decision was made.” Brezhnev’s almost offhand mention of a Politburo resolution therefore seems aimed primarily to deflect responsibility for the resulting fiasco from himself personally and to spread it over the collective body, which “was simply a group of people clustered around a leader whose point of view invariably prevailed.” But with most members of the Politburo present as he spoke, Brezhnev could hardly have invented a resolution that was never adopted.

Brezhnev’s assertion that the Politburo decided to inform Egypt and Syria of Israel’s aggressive intent (he made no explicit mention of the supposed “troop concentrations”) does not in itself entirely rule out the possibility that the Soviet political leadership—as distinct from the intelligence apparatus—believed the allegation. This version is still proposed by some Western analysts, resting on Kosygin’s repeated confirmation of the “troop concentrations” to Minister Badran during the latter’s visit to Moscow on 25–28 May, and on 19 June at the UN General Assembly.

On the other hand, a recent Russian history suggests that the Soviets—due to their ideological affinity with the new Syrian regime—were actually misled by the Syrians: “Faithful to its commitments, Moscow expressed constant readiness to accommodate Damascus’s wishes. Evidently, this was done even at the expense of Moscow’s own self-interest in the Middle East. It cannot be ruled out that the information about Israeli troop concentrations that allegedly had been massed near the Syrian border was received by the Foreign Ministry from the Syrians themselves, and acted upon according to its discretion. . . . Since Israeli-Syrian relations indeed were strained, Moscow did not doubt the Israeli interest in weakening or even toppling the Syrian regime.” But a recently released US diplomatic report shows that it was the Soviet ambassador in Damascus who forcefully impressed the warning on the Syrian leadership—which ought
hardly to have been necessary, as the purported staging area for the Israeli forces was all in clear view of the Syrians’ own observation points on the commanding Golan Heights. Yegorychev appeared to claim that this was precisely how the Israeli “concentrations” were detected, when he asked an Israeli interviewer: “Why did you have to be so provocative? Couldn’t you hide your troops in the forests, 70 kilometers from the border?”

Only naval forces could have been massed 70 kilometers from the border, as northern Israel was barely 50 kilometers wide from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean. The rather sparse forests of eastern Galilee could hardly have concealed the order of forces that the Soviet warning described, even if Israel’s standing army could muster so many brigades at the time. On 8–9 June, when the IDF did prepare to scale the Golan Heights with a force smaller than the lowest figure attributed by the Soviet warning, the area’s few and narrow roads were choked with military convoys. A reminder was provided in July 2006 by the television coverage of the second Lebanese war, when an Israeli force of similar scale visibly congested the roads in the border area. The sheer numbers quoted in the mid-May 1967 warning seem designed more to impress party leaders, who held Soviet concepts of geography and military scale, than to conform with Middle Eastern realities.

Brutents indeed hinted to us that Soviet intelligence foisted fabrications on the political leadership: “Neither you nor I can guarantee that intelligence does not do some things. In my opinion they are capable of anything. . . . And they have closely guarded secrets which they do not disclose to anyone, even . . . to their own governments.”

But in view of the disastrous results, perpetrating disinformation on the USSR’s political leadership by either the KGB or its bitter rival the GRU (or in a rare case of collusion by the two agencies), without the blessing of a ranking patron, would certainly have been punished. In reality, both KGB chairman Yuri Andropov and Defense Minister Andrei Grechko were promoted to Politburo candidate-membership status near the end of June 1967—that is, not only following this incident but also after its outcome had become apparent. Some lesser figures, of whom a few have already been mentioned, received various decorations. It might be argued that both Grechko and Andropov were fresh appointees to their positions (Grechko in mid-April and Andropov on 19 May 1967),
and could not be blamed for misdeeds originated by their predecessors. Grechko did try to lay the blame for overevaluation of the Egyptian army’s preparedness on the previous defense minister, Rodion Malinovsky, who died on 31 March 1967.70

Grechko, however (as first deputy minister of defense and commander-in-chief of Warsaw Pact forces), is recorded as having informally but effectively assumed the duties of the ailing Malinovsky by November 1966.71 Andropov, as a secretary of the Central Committee, functioned as “curator” of the KGB for at least a year before Brezhnev exploited the defection to the West of Stalin’s daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva, in April 1967 in order to remove the mistrusted Vladimir Semichastny from formal leadership of the agency.72 Both of the new nominees, as well as Foreign Minister Gromyko, were or became allies and personal friends of Brezhnev, and all three were elevated later to full membership of the Politburo.

Moreover, shortly after the war there were indications by diplomatic spokesmen of the USSR and its allies that at least by then, they knew the troop-concentration charge was untrue. On 13 June 1967, Bulgarian UN delegate Milko Tarabanov, “the loyal echo of [Soviet ambassador Nikolai] Fedorenko,” as much as confirmed the falsification by asserting at the Security Council: “The question of concentration of forces being true or not does not matter at all, as it is known that Israel is able to mobilize within 24 hours.”73 This extraordinary equation of potentiality with fact in order to justify a lie was still maintained recently by a former Soviet official: “Israel . . . is well organised from the inside, so for them to mobilise the reserve is a matter of 24 hours, not more. . . . [T]heir army had always been . . . prepared both for defense and for attack.”74 Against this background, it appears highly unlikely that Brezhnev was misled by his own protégés, and much more probable that he was privy to their initiative—if not its actual instigator.

The USSR and its satellites had few compunctions about misleading their closest allies in the Arab world, including both Egypt and Syria. Some of this is revealed by another document that Meining discovered in the Stasi archive. This paper contains the minutes of a KGB-Stasi meeting in Moscow between 10 and 15 April, 1967 (with Sakharovsky leading the Soviet delegation). It delineates a complex joint program of “active measures” for 1967. It mandates, among many other items, the continuation of Operation Marabu, which was aimed at “aggravating tensions
between West Germany and the Arab countries, in particular by [pointing up] the politico-military and economic cooperation of West Germany and Israel” by means of forgeries and rumors: “The KGB will undertake measures in Arab countries (UAR, Algeria, Yemen, Iraq, Syria), around documents manufactured by the MfS of the DDR [Stasi] and verbal information, exposing the policy of West Germany and the USA against these countries and the common actions of West Germany and Israel against Arab interests, aimed at causing a government crisis [Regierungskrise] in Arab countries.”

Some of these measures may have had a direct connection to the May crisis, and this may even suggest the provenance of Rabin’s “threat.” Overall, Operation Marabu demonstrates that the Soviets systematically dis-informed their Arab clients—and thus offers a plausible motivation for their persistent attempts to cover up the case that exposed this practice most dramatically. The Stasi document mentions a number of other operations in progress, all of which target the West. Lev Bausin, a former KGB operative in Cairo, relates several of his projects that fit its description.

But were Nasser and Amer really fooled by the patently preposterous Soviet message? Was it at all an attempt to persuade them in matters that they could easily verify (in the case of the supposed Israeli threat, even by reading the newspapers)? Much has been made of Nasser’s dispatching General Muhammad Fawzi, the Egyptian army’s chief of staff, to Syria to see for himself, and it has been widely questioned why the Egyptian president ignored Fawzi’s report that “there was no sign of Israeli troop concentrations and the Russians must have been having hallucinations.” The KGB was reported, by a defector, to have planted agents among Nasser’s closest advisers, and one answer might have been that he believed them, rather than Fawzi.

But in fact Fawzi was sent to Syria on 14 May, after the Grechko-Amer plan was already set in motion by moving troops into Sinai. Considering the evidence that Nasser endorsed the plan, which provided for the actions that he indeed took following the Soviet message, it seems more likely that he simply stuck to the plan, and only went through the motions of checking out an ostensibly surprising report. A Soviet dispatch from Cairo dated 16 May mentions the Fawzi mission as one of the coordinated actions taken by the Egyptian authorities following the Soviet message. Fawzi’s dismissal of Soviet “hallucinations” is known only
from testimony at a postwar trial, and may have been retrospective; it
certainly was not circulated at the time of his mission. On the contrary,
Pozhidayev reported on 22 May: “Today I was received by Nasser, [who]
expressed his gratitude to the Soviet government for its valuable consid-
eration in respect of the tension in the Middle East, as well as for the
information, passed earlier to UAR Minister of War Badran. The Presi-
dent noted that before receiving this information they were in difficul-
ties, as they did not have adequate knowledge of the numbers and dispo-
sition of the Israeli forces.”

The disinformation about Israel’s troop concentrations was, then,
aimed mainly at the lower echelons in both Moscow and Cairo, who had
not been privy to the plan, as well as for external propaganda purposes; this
was carried on by the Soviet press, including Pravda’s Cairo correspon-
dent Yevgeny Primakov (later Russia’s SVR [Foreign Intelligence] chief,
foreign minister, and premier), who contributed inflammatory allega-
tions about Israel’s aggressive intent.

“Disinformation” thus applies to the mid-May messages only in a
very limited sense. Purveying the blatantly bogus allegation about Israeli
troop concentrations appears not to have been the main operational pur-
pose, though it set the line for coordinated propaganda—both domestic
and external. The signals were primarily calculated to trigger a specific
result, and every precaution was taken to ensure that Egypt followed up
with the “relative” or “necessary” steps that the Soviet leadership “advised”
and expected. Egyptian diplomat Bassiouny appears to be glossing over
this in stating, “the fact is that the report was presented to us, whether
with instructions or not.”

As Brezhnev’s speech confirms: “They [the
governments of UAR and Syria] informed us immediately that they
were taking the necessary steps in the military sphere, and their forces
were being put on full combat alert.” The recent official Russian history
states unequivocally: “The Soviet leadership also knew about the war
being prepared.”
ADDRESSING THE PARTY LEADERSHIP after the Soviet initiative foundered, Brezhnev did not specify what measures the Politburo had “advised” or expected Egypt and Syria to take following its message in mid-May. In the event, Egypt took three steps: On 14 May it began to move massive forces into Sinai, on the 16th it asked UNEF to leave its positions along the Egyptian border with Israel, and on the 22nd Nasser declared a blockade on Israeli shipping through the Straits of Tiran. In his retrospective review, Brezhnev ignored the first move entirely—a significant omission, given the Soviet inspiration of Egypt’s force disposition. Oren points out correctly that such a conspicuous military advance as Amer ordered into Sinai could hardly be designed for an actual attack on Israel, and its purpose mystified Egyptian diplomats and generals alike, including Fawzi.¹

This enigma, however, is dispelled in view of the Soviet-Egyptian plan’s aim to provoke an Israeli first strike. The head of Egyptian military intelligence at the time, Muhammad Sadek, wrote in retrospect that Amer packed the front line with hastily mobilized, poorly trained, ill-equipped, and badly commanded reserve units whose very mass “would drive Tel Aviv toward a course of action.” These unfortunates were intended to bear the brunt of the expected attack, sparing the seasoned troops behind them to repulse the Israelis. Sadek says he feared the op-
posite result would ensue: If the front-line cannon fodder “succumbed to mass slaughter, it would demoralize rear-echelon regular formations.” This may have been written with the benefit of hindsight, but the outcome of the war bore out Sadek’s concern.2

Small wonder, then, that Brezhnev omitted any mention of this first Egyptian response to the Soviet signal. For the latter two, he took care to disclaim any Soviet collusion:

I must say that the UAR government took a series of steps which were not thought out all the way. As a complete surprise for us, the UAR government demanded on May 19 [sic] the withdrawal of UN forces from the armistice line. The UAR government did not consult with us on this momentous step, which in the developing situation could have been understood as a step toward its escalation. . . . [On May 22] President Nasser explained to us through the Soviet Ambassador that the situation in the Middle East had improved as a result of the determined steps that were taken by the UAR leadership. At this time he also informed the Ambassador, as a fait accompli, that the UAR government had closed the Aqaba Gulf to Israeli ships. . . . Again, no prior notice was given to the Soviet government of this important action, which caused serious results.3

Could this indicate that the “appropriate measures” that were to be activated on cue from Moscow included only the troop movements, and thenceforth Nasser took the initiative on his own? An anonymous Soviet diplomat, speaking with Le Nouvel Observateur in “early July” (1967), admitted that “President Nasser stationed the Egyptian Army on the Sinai-Israeli frontier in agreement with the Soviet Union, in order to prevent an Israeli attack on Syria. The other two serious decisions, however—to demand the evacuation of the UN Forces and to close the Straits—‘Nasser took on his own and only told us about them afterwards.’”4 Contemporary Western analyses found that “the evidence is conflicting.”5 But the Soviet Foreign Ministry’s published documents now show that on 25 May, Gromyko instructed Pozhidayev to inform Nasser: “Soviet government justifies the UAR government’s demand for withdrawal of the UN forces,” describing it with the mid-May messages’ key operative phrase: “appropriate positive action.”6
Russian sources remain extremely reticent on the question to this day. “The Soviet leadership did not react in any way to Egypt’s steps to close Aqaba and Tiran, apparently not wishing to ‘annoy Nasser,’” Pyrlin wrote in his recently published memoirs. Interestingly, he cited legalistic arguments—including Israeli trade statistics—which the Soviets apparently had at the ready ahead of Nasser’s announcement, in order to prove that closure of the Straits could not constitute a legitimate casus belli for Israel. Nonetheless, Pyrlin contended that the USSR might have dissuaded Nasser, had it been consulted.\(^7\)

Deputy Foreign Minister Korniyenko, who at the time was a senior member of the US desk, gave rather conflicting explanations 25 years after the events: On one hand he claimed that “no consultations took place between Cairo and Moscow about the withdrawal of UN forces, about the Strait of Tiran, and so on,” and attributed the lack of Soviet objection to the UNEF removal to “the situation . . . developing too fast for our bureaucratic machine to react properly.” On the other hand he cited “ideological, political considerations” of “solidarity . . . in general and not on this particular question.”\(^8\) A similar line was taken by Semyonov at the height of the crisis: Meeting with the Lebanese ambassador in Moscow on 26 May 1967, Semyonov explained that the closure of the straits was not mentioned in the Soviet government’s public statement [of 23 May] because “it pertains to the interested Arab states . . . and the Soviet Union does not want to interfere in their internal affairs,” but “it stands on the Arab side.”\(^9\)

Prior Soviet consent to, if not instigation of, these initial Egyptian steps is, however, indicated by the fact that Nasser did deem it necessary to obtain Soviet approval (through Minister Badran’s mission to the Kremlin on 25–28 May) only for the ultimate escalation of a preemptive strike against Israel, which contravened the original “Conqueror” plan.

Brezhnev’s speech does confirm that following the Egyptian moves, “in the United Nations Organization we did everything that depended on us, comrades, to lessen the pressure of the Western superpowers on the UAR in connection with the question of the free passage in the Aqaba Gulf and in order to frustrate the plans for military provocation against the UAR.”\(^10\)

In New York, Fedorenko—acting on instructions from Gromyko—so diligently stalled proposals to lift the blockade (or even to convene the
Security Council) that his Canadian and Danish colleagues told him they had “a nasty feeling [that the] USSR [was] playing [a] game of allowing crisis to build to force Israel to act.”

In Israel, “the most grave” concern about a Soviet role behind Egypt’s bellicose moves was first expressed on 16 May and steadily intensified. A member of the Israeli general staff at the time recalls hearing that a Soviet landing was “discussed at cabinet sessions, though only as a theoretical possibility.” But after the mid-May warning was transmitted to Egypt, Soviet “propaganda insurance” concentrated on “pushing the United States into the forefront of the Middle East crisis by making Washington responsible for Israel’s actions” in its allegedly forthcoming assault on Syria—precisely according to the guidelines revealed for Operation Marabu. The tactic evidently worked: While listening to Israeli alarms, Washington did its utmost to discourage Israeli action, and did little to deter the Soviets.

For the Israelis, a watershed occurred on 17 May, when the cabinet was informed in mid-session that two hostile aircraft had made an unprecedented photoreconnaissance flight across southern Israel, passing directly over the Dimona facility. The first published account that pinpointed Dimona as the target was made by Michael Brecher in 1980. It was based on a statement he received from military intelligence chief Aharon Yariv a decade after the war, which rated the overflight as so significant that Brecher suggested dating the beginning of the crisis from that day, since “this was seen as a grave threat to [Israel’s] deterrent capability.” His account reflects the detailed information his source possessed, which is particularly evident when he mentions that the event lasted one minute.

As a subsequent chapter demonstrates, this was the first direct Soviet military intervention in the crisis, as part of General Vybornov’s mission. If at the time Israel had a clear idea that this was the case, the information has been suppressed to this day—but Israeli assessments of Soviet involvement rose steeply. The call-up of reserve units was massively increased, a state that Israel could not sustain for long. The fears of a bombing raid on the reactor were even more pressing, but this could not be shared with the Americans, who were unlikely to take a firmer stand if the main threat was to a project they had, at best, reluctantly agreed to disregard.
On 18 May, the day after the overflight of Dimona, Eban handed Ambassador Barbour a letter to President Johnson stating, “There may be an impression in Cairo and Damascus that Soviet support . . . is assured, and that therefore they have no need of restraint.” He asked for “an emphatic clarification by the United States to the Soviet Union of the American commitment to Israel. . . . I can hardly exaggerate the importance and urgency of such an approach.” On the 19th, in a briefing attended by the US defense attaché in Tel Aviv, Yariv said that the Egyptian and Syrian governments believed their “present actions [have the] backing of USSR,” and he thought so, too—though he was “not sure how deep USSR is committed.” Yariv said the same at a General Staff session that day, adding that “there might be a direct Soviet interest in fanning the tension.” Specifically, he now hypothesized that it was not any concern for Syria that had motivated the Egyptians, but rather estimates that Israel’s nuclear program was approaching fruition—and that this information was provided by the Soviets. The nuclear issue was, for the first time, connected with a Soviet initiative. “This estimate of the Soviet role,” as Gluska summarizes the ensuing developments, “henceforth constrained [Israel’s] political decision makers.”

The United States, however, either remained unaware of this new turn or preferred to ignore it, leaving the stress on the Syrian issue. The same day, Undersecretary of State Eugene Rostow expressed to Soviet chargé d’affaires Yuri Chernyakov “concern . . . over Israeli-Syrian tensions and told him that the Syrian Government was spreading rumors in the Middle East . . . that Syria had been promised unlimited military and political support by USSR in case of a military embroilment.” Rostow added that the “US government assumes and he hopes that this is not true.” Chernyakov said that he was unaware of such a commitment, but it was hard to scotch rumors; he would pass the matter on to Moscow.

In a subsequent talk with Avraham Harman, the Israeli ambassador in Washington, Rostow assured him that the embassy in Moscow had been instructed to use language similar to his statement, and promised that the United States would persist in such action vis-à-vis the USSR. But two days later, Harman called on Rostow again, “urgently,” to report full details of a “disturbing” talk that Eban had held with Chuvakhin: “[The] latter asserted [that] terror incidents on Syrian border [were the] work of [the] CIA, adding, ‘We have warned you. You are responsible.’”
Harman stressed “[the] possibility we may be getting double talk from [the] Soviets . . . [and the] possibility of Soviet-Syrian-Egyptian collusion.”

There are indications that some in Washington, including presidential adviser Walt Rostow (Eugene’s brother), recognized that a Soviet intervention might occur if it was legitimized by an Israeli initial strike. But this was perceived as a potentiality that might be created by Israel’s response to an essentially Egyptian provocation, not as a joint Soviet-Egyptian initiative that was already in progress and that would escalate until it overcame any restraint that the United States managed to impose on the Israelis. Just as the Soviets thought in their own terms of military scale, the Americans appear to have equated Israel with other regional actors such as South Vietnam: It might be persuaded to accept “greater casualties” initially as the price for US backing and ultimate victory.

Looking back 34 years later, Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara told us that in such a scenario, the US would have used force to defend Israel. The Soviet preparations for an invasion were unknown to him at the time, he said, but “[Israel’s] intelligence services, ours, [and] the British all had information that Nasser was going to attack Israel and literally destroy the country. . . . There was a great risk that if Egypt attacked [Israel and that if Israel] defeated Egypt, that the Soviets would [intervene] in support of Egypt.” McNamara claimed that “we wanted . . . to be in a position to apply our military force in [Israel’s] support to prevent [its] being annihilated by a combination of Egypt, Syria and the Soviet Union.” At the time, however, the Israelis were not given any explicit guarantee—which created a marked asymmetry with the Soviets’ nuclear pledge to Egypt.

When Egypt raised the stakes by blockading the straits, the US embassies in Cairo and Moscow definitely perceived Soviet collusion. Lucius Battle, who had just ended his tenure as US ambassador in Egypt, opined that Nasser “either has more Soviet support than we know of, or he’s gone slightly insane.” The embassy staff was soon convinced that Egypt indeed had “full Soviet backing” for the blockade of Eilat, and registered its concern that Washington officialdom was still estimating otherwise. In Moscow, US ambassador Thompson asked a “well-informed” Soviet source “point blank whether Soviets knew in advance of Egyptian action in closing Gulf of Aqaba. He was obviously embarrassed . . . and after a long pause said he thought Nasser had acted on his own.” The next day,
before leaving for Washington, Thompson relayed a warning from the Egyptian embassy’s political counselor that “absence of Soviet public endorsement of UAR position on Aqaba [is] not important because Soviets [are] supporting UAR ‘in other ways.’”

But as the blockade was much more flagrant in terms of international law than the previous two Egyptian moves, it effectively permitted the United States to show Israel a countervailing effort without infringing the neutrality that the State Department had as much as declared. Oren has shown that the idea of mobilizing an international “regatta” to force a reopening of the straits, which the US administration described as approaching implementation for the following week in order to hold back an Israeli attack, was in effect stillborn. In any event, Pyrlin’s figures were correct: Israel’s real dependence on imports through Eilat was much less critical than its incapability to sustain long-term mobilization (which was forced by the Egyptian buildup in Sinai), as well as its growing fears of an attack on Dimona. It would have to ignore US advice and strike, regatta or not—thus playing into the Soviet hand.

On 24 May, Deputy Undersecretary of State Raymond L. Garthoff had one of his frequent appointments with Boris Sedov, “KGB officer and second secretary of the Soviet Embassy,” as Garthoff later described him. “Sedov left the general impression that if the United States were to become directly involved militarily in the escalating Middle East conflict, the Soviet Union, too, would have to become involved. But he was vague and noncommittal as to the way it would become involved.” This reminded Garthoff that Sedov had mentioned to him, a month earlier, Brezhnev’s demand for withdrawal of the US Sixth Fleet from the Mediterranean, and this time he included it in his report of the conversation. Sedov would soon become much more specific.

The IDF spokesman told the US defense attaché on 25 May: “We are very anxious to know what [the] Soviet fleet in [the] East Mediterranean is doing. We knew they were in the area of Crete and think they may have moved north.” But for the time being the State Department did not change or retract the optimistic estimate it had circulated to major US embassies: “If conflict occurred in the Middle East, the USSR would be in difficult spot. Russian temptation would be to aid Egypt and Syria, but [the] USSR was reluctant to promote hostilities in Arab world as means to exert pressure on US over Vietnam. The USSR realized [a] Middle East-
ern war would be hard to control. They would make at least unilateral ef-
forts to stop it.”

Israeli intelligence, however, had already reached the opposite con-
clusion. Meeting the CIA station chief in Tel Aviv, John Hadden, Mossad
director Amit—backed up by the deputy head of military intelligence,
Colonel Yigal Carmon—repeatedly tried to convince the American that
“the other side (including the Soviet side) has been operating as part of a
grand design.” However, either Amit did not estimate that the Soviet-
Arab design called for drawing Israel into an attack, or he considered that
this plan might have been disrupted by prompt Israeli action before the
Egyptian remilitarization of Sinai.

Mossad chief: We should have struck before the buildup. . . . I tell you
in all sincerity that we were in favor of immediate action. . . .

John: That would have brought in the Soviet Union and the United
States against you.

Mossad chief: You are wrong. This is a confrontation between the
United States and the Soviet Union.

Amit went on, pointing to an imminent ground invasion from Sinai.
He was perhaps overstating even his own assessment in order to impress
the CIA operative:

Mossad chief: The question is whether or not this region is going to
become part of the area behind the Iron Curtain. The entire portion of
the Middle East that is not under Soviet influence, from Morocco to
Saudi Arabia, will be hurt. This will be a death blow for these regimes.
So far, I did not believe that the Soviets would view this as a global
move connected with Vietnam. I am beginning to think that there is
something [like that] here, and that there was global planning here.
The Middle East is more important than Vietnam for them, and this
should be clear to you. . . .

John: If you attack, the United States will land forces on Egypt’s side, in
order to defend it.33

Hadden too may have been exaggerating for effect; there is no other
recorded instance of such a US threat. But when the Israeli daily Yediot
Ahronot recently reproduced in facsimile this last remark alone, he de-
nied making such a threat at all, and attributed it to a misunderstanding
by the Israeli note-taker—Ephraim Halevy, a future Mossad chief himself.\textsuperscript{34} The full transcript, however, shows Hadden reiterating several times that the United States would intervene on Egypt’s behalf if Israel struck first, which makes such an error by Halevy (and its approval by Amit in sending the report to Eshkol) highly unlikely.

Hadden emphasized, time and again: “We have only one commitment—about the Straits. If you attack over anything that is not connected with the straits, we are not committed. This is what will make the difference whether the United States is on your side or against you.” But no mention of the regatta idea was made. Instead, the CIA operative suggested that Israel send a ship to test the blockade; if it was fired upon, that would justify Israeli action. Otherwise, he said over and over, if Israel struck first, “the United States will support Egypt all the way,” and went even as far as putting it: “We will act against you.”

\textbf{Col. Carmon:} Even against your own interests?
\textbf{John:} Yes.
\textbf{Mossad Chief:} Are you ready for [such] action?
\textbf{John:} I assume so.

\textbf{Col. Carmon:} According to our reports, the Soviet Navy was considering to go north yesterday, to the Black Sea. It has now been learned that they are near us. The Soviets are taking a risk, because if they lose this round, they lose the Middle East.

\textbf{John:} We too.

This cryptic rejoinder was the only response Hadden made to the Israelis’ warnings about a Soviet “grand design.”

In the plausible case that this transcript and other Israeli reports on the US posture (erroneous or not) were relayed to Moscow by genuine spies or double agents in Israel, they must have generated satisfaction, and in the last instance—the US threat to land forces in Egypt’s defense—even a chuckle. If the Soviet plan worked, and Israel was provoked into striking first, the risk of a head-on superpower clash was receding. Soviet diplomacy could now focus on ensuring that the Americans would make good on their declared intention at least to stand aside, as Washington could offer Israel nothing that might prevent its going to war. In fact, a message to that effect had been passed directly to the KGB’s Tel Aviv rezidentura—by the Israelis themselves.
The most sensational claim made by Victor Grajewski, Israel’s newly acknowledged double agent, is that “about 10 days before the war began”—that is, on or about 26 May 1967—he was urgently entrusted by the Israeli security services with conveying a genuine message to his Soviet handlers, instead of the usual disinformation. Meeting in his car, in a wooded area near Jerusalem, he told a KGB operative from the Soviet embassy: “From the information I have, I understand that Israel intends to go to war and to attack Nasser,” as it could not put up with Egypt’s closure of the straits. He claimed to have heard this on his job as a radio broadcaster, at a press briefing by a senior military officer in the prime minister’s bureau. In the interview revealing his liaison with the Soviets, Grajewski says he has received confirmation that the message was meant to induce the USSR to restrain Nasser. However, he was told, either the KGB failed to pass the tip on to the Politburo, or the Politburo did not transmit it to the Egyptian president.

An unnamed reader responded to this story on the Haaretz Web site: “Maybe the Soviets simply wanted a war? After all, they really spurred the Syrians into it in ‘67. Strange that no historian has put two and two together in this matter.”

Indeed, Grajewski’s message must have been music to the Soviets’ ears—at least at the top level in Moscow: Assuming it reflected Eshkol’s
decision, it meant that their gambit had been accepted and that Israel would deliver the desired first strike. Despite the ultimate debacle of their plan, the Soviets showed their appreciation for the double agent’s contribution. Before leaving Israel due to the severance of diplomatic relations on 10 June, Grajewski’s embassy handler commended him for “doing a great thing for the USSR” and informed him that he had been awarded the Order of Lenin (the medal still awaits him in Moscow).

Grajewski’s message may have provided the clincher for newly appointed KGB chairman Andropov when he briefed the CPSU Central Committee on the Middle East situation, “as of 26 May.” Andropov stated that the day before, “at a meeting of Israel’s propaganda services’ chiefs, Propaganda Minister [Yisrael] Galili declared that the government of Israel had decided to commence military operations against [Egypt] in two or three days. This data . . . is confirmed by reports received from Israeli military circles. The Eshkol cabinet has completed its war preparations.”

The timing was especially important, as it coincided with the arrival of an Egyptian delegation in Moscow on a mission that might hinge on this assessment.

In the 25 May meeting with the CIA’s Tel Aviv station chief Hadden, Colonel Carmon noted that “Shams Badran has gone to Moscow, apparently in order to check out the new possibilities that have opened up following [their] successes to date.” Hadden did not respond to Carmon’s question: “Can you give us a guarantee that the Egyptians will not surprise us on Saturday morning [the next day, 26 May]? What will the Soviets give to Shams Badran?”

The next day, Foreign Ministry director general Aryeh Levavi clarified Israel’s reading of Badran’s mission to US ambassador Barbour: “[Egypt] has sent cabinet minister to Moscow to coordinate operations between Egyptian and Soviet governments.” Informing Soviet missions in allied countries on 28 May, Gromyko also stated that the “military delegation led by” Badran was received in Moscow “according to the request of the UAR government, which also coincided with our wishes.”

The conventional narrative holds that by this stage, the USSR’s policy was aimed at deescalating the crisis by preventing Egypt from launching any attack on Israel. This refers in particular to the talks in Moscow with Badran’s delegation, which went on until the 28th. In his speech on 20 June, Brezhnev described Badran’s mission as limited to a “request of
military assistance that was sent by the UAR leadership to the Central Committee.” This request to bring forward the supply of military hardware originally scheduled for 1968–69 was accepted, with delivery dates now set to begin in June 1967. This accelerated timetable apparently meant that all arms deliveries scheduled for 1967 had already been completed before the end of May; this is known specifically about such advanced weapons as Sukhoi-7 aircraft, which were delivered before Egyptian pilots were prepared to fly them.

But Pavel Akopov—who attended the talks as an Egyptian desk officer at the Soviet Foreign Ministry—denies this. “As far as the Egyptians’ requests to increase the armament supplies for the Egyptian army, at the talks where I was present this matter was not raised,” he said. According to his account, Badran addressed “the Soviet leadership with their [the Egyptians’] request to approve of preemptive measures, . . . early strikes to prevent Israel from being the first.” Describing the talks with Badran, Akopov adds: “The first thing he [Kosygin] marked and sounded from the very beginning without any diplomatic mannerism, that we, the Soviet Union, cannot give you our consent for your preemptive strikes against Israel. This would contradict our policy and our position. Should you be first to attack, you will be aggressors, and once you are aggressors . . . we cannot support you.” Brutents also told us: “Kosygin was saying ‘Nyet’ to him; . . . these talks ended with a ‘sour reaction’ by Badran. He received an instruction from Nasser: . . . Nu, if our Soviet friends do not support us, if they are opposed, we do not have a choice.”

Or, in Akopov’s almost identical words: “Nasser decided to consult and obtain the approval of his Soviet friends for landing a preemptive blow on Israel, for which purpose he sent . . . Badran to Moscow. . . . [T]he main order of business was obtaining the USSR’s agreement for such a preemptive blow, in order to prevent it [Israel] from invading Syria. Badran spread out maps, and described the situation in detail.” When Kosygin rejected the idea, “the next day he reiterated Nasser’s request, and again was given a resolute ‘nyet.’ On the third day, he relayed Nasser’s response, which had arrived during the night from Cairo: if the Soviet friends held firmly to that position, there would be no attack.”

The official Russian military history of Soviet participation in regional conflicts published in 2000 clarifies that the Arab attack was, at Soviet behest, not canceled but only restored to its original design as a counter-
strike: “The Arabs planned to open the offensive first, but because of some difference of opinion within their leadership (and perhaps the Soviet warning had its effect), the date for the beginning of the ‘decisive actions’ was postponed... The Soviet experts were of the opinion that in the impending war... an important part would be played also by [the question of] who would appear as direct initiator of the offensive.”

Referring to Badran’s mission, Akopov adds: “Kosygin probably has reported it to the Politburo... Because it was a question of war and peace and our involvement. Naturally it was discussed at the Politburo.”

This, presumably, was the discussion for which Andropov submitted the KGB report. It estimated that American military intervention was likely, especially to open the Gulf of Aqaba, and stated that “aircraft of the Sixth Fleet are, since May 23, routinely carrying out reconnaissance flights over the northern coast of [Egypt] and in the region of Gaza” (this was almost correct; US planes were flying such sorties, but from Greece, not Sixth Fleet ships). Combined with Grajewski’s message that Israel was resolved to attack, which would scuttle any US intervention, this assessment now gave the Soviets every reason to hold back until the Israelis moved. The exchange with Badran, Akopov said, continued for two days of “sharp” conversation until “apparently he [Nasser] accepted the argument of the Soviet leadership.”

Brezhnev attributed this result to a note that Pozhidayev handed to Nasser in the wee hours of 27 May: The Egyptian president then expressed full agreement with the Soviet considerations outlined in the paper, and “stated to our ambassador... that the UAR never will start first the armed conflict.” This position was later confirmed by Nasser to President Johnson’s special envoy to Cairo, former secretary of the treasury Robert Anderson, by stating that “he would wait until the Israelis had moved.”

In order to follow the sequence of events, from this point it becomes necessary to adjust for the time differences between Washington and Jerusalem (six hours), Cairo (seven), and Moscow (eight). Oren (among others) credits a “cable from Washington” in “the first hours of the 27th” for alerting Kosygin that Israel was aware of Egypt’s attack plans, and impelling him to curb the Egyptians. Citing Arab sources (alone), Oren then quotes Pozhidayev as reading to Nasser, on the night of the 26th, a
letter from Kosygin beginning: “One hour ago, President Johnson informed me that Egyptian forces are preparing to attack . . .”

But Johnson is not recorded as sending anything at all to Kosygin on this pivotal weekend until he received one of Kosygin’s own round-robin missives, which also included notes to Eshkol and to British prime minister Harold Wilson. This letter to Johnson was handed to Secretary of State Rusk only in the afternoon (Washington time) of 27 May by Chernyakov, who had requested an urgent Sunday meeting for the purpose. Kosygin warned in the strongest terms yet that “Israel is actively engaged in military preparations and evidently intends to carry out armed aggression. . . . Israeli militant circles are attempting to impose . . . an ‘adventurist’ action . . . [and] may cause an armed conflict.” The Soviet premier cautioned that “if arms should be used this could be the beginning of far-reaching events. Should Israel commit aggression and military operations begin, then we will render assistance to those countries that are subject to aggression.”

By this time, Washington had already received, evaluated, and in effect dismissed the Israeli warning. The Israelis did not count on Hadden alone to transmit their appeal. At 6:43 p.m. Washington time on the 25th—well after midnight in the Middle East—Rusk cabled a “flash” to the embassies and, extraordinarily, to US military commanders in the region. He related that shortly before, Eban (who was then in the United States) had advised him of a “flash message from Prime Minister Eshkol indicating GOI [government of Israel] now convinced that ‘allout general UAR-Syrian attack imminent and could occur at any minute.’” But Rusk added: “Other reports available to us as of this time do not substantiate” the Israeli claim, “or permit us to reach similar conclusion . . . request addressees comments soonest.”

When he submitted his advice to Johnson on the 26th, ahead of the president’s own meeting with Eban that evening, Rusk could already state: “Our intelligence does not confirm this Israeli estimate.” Rusk did not specify whether this was based on new data received in response to his circular, but he did point out that Eban himself had “indicated he would not press this Israeli view and request” for “a US public statement of assurance and support.” Rusk implied that Eban had even undercut the sense of urgency that his own premier had sought to convey, by say-
Indeed, while making the same case to Ambassador Barbour in Israel, Foreign Ministry director general Levavi had called for “appropriate movement [of] US forces to Israel’s support,” a request that Eban did not make in Washington. Barbour estimated that Levavi’s “information . . . is in large part result of hard intelligence, and there [is] collateral indication Egyptian belligerence unabated.”

But Barbour’s report arrived after Rusk’s own talk with Eban, and anyway the ambassador was evidently perceived in Washington as having gone hopelessly native; he had been instrumental in reducing US pressure on Israel for inspections at Dimona. At a consultation in the White House before the meeting with Eban, Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), “described the military situation as static . . . . The UAR’s dispositions are defensive and do not look as if they are preparatory to an invasion of Israel. . . . [T]here were no indications that Egypt would attack.” The possibility of an Egyptian air strike was not raised. Although CIA director Richard Helms was in attendance, he did not introduce a memorandum from his agency that he submitted to Johnson the same day, which predicted that in such a case “Israel might lose up to half of its air force” but still would somehow “attain air superiority . . . in two or three days.” The CIA’s Board of National Estimates told Helms the same day, “We do not believe the Soviets would intervene . . . with their own combat forces,” including bombers and missiles, even if Israel attacked Egypt first.

Against the sole dissenting voice of his adviser Abe Fortas, Johnson went ahead on Rusk’s advice to tell Eban that “if Israel strikes first, it would have to forget the US.” The president promised Eban only to keep on pursuing the regatta idea, and that only if the United Nations failed to take action. He also mentioned, as proposed by a draft apparently submitted by Walt Rostow, the “constitutional processes” of the United States. On his way home, Eban was given a translation of Johnson’s remarks into plain English by the US ambassador at the United Nations, Arthur Goldberg:

He [Eban] reported, “The President said to me: ‘Subject to our constitutional proscriptions, we are with you.’” I said to Eban:
“You owe it to your government, because lives are going to be lost and your security is involved, to tell your cabinet that the President’s statement means a joint resolution of Congress before coming to your aid, and the President can’t get such a resolution because of the Vietnam War.”

Johnson faithfully enough relayed to Eban the US intelligence assessment of the Egyptian array in Sinai as “defensive, though this might change.” This turned out, in retrospect, to be a pretty accurate reading of the Grechko-Amer plan. But at this point, Israel may have overstated its alarm by emphasizing the threat of a ground attack, allowing the United States to dismiss the warning entirely.

Rusk took the Soviet-Egyptian posture seriously only after Chernyakov handed him Kosygin’s threatening letter, but the response he proposed was to restrain Israel rather than to confront the Soviets. He urged Johnson—who had already gone to his Texas ranch—to relay Kosygin’s message to Eshkol immediately, coupled with a warning against preemptive action, “which would make it impossible for friends . . . to stand by you.” Johnson did so, and used even stronger language than Kosygin had, signing off with a warning that “unilateral action on the part of Israel would be irresponsible and catastrophic.”

In contrast, Johnson’s response to Kosygin himself was quite conciliatory. It was handed to Chernyakov only that night, and was sent to the US embassy in Moscow only at 1:31 a.m. (Washington time) on 28 May for delivery via Gromyko, so that Kosygin received it well after Nasser had acceded to the Soviet request and postponed the strike on Israel. In any case, it made no mention of Israel’s warning about an impending attack.

Meanwhile, at 2:10 a.m. on 27 May, Chuvakhin woke up Eshkol and handed him Kosygin’s message—while also reiterating the original Soviet allegation. “I urged Eshkol to stop the escalation, stop the concentration [of forces] on the Syrian border and start negotiations with Arab states,” Chuvakhin later recalled. This was the line propagated by the Soviets after the war, as laid down by Brezhnev in his 20 June speech whereby “the Soviet message from May 26 to Prime Minister Levi Eshkol . . . included a warning to the Israeli government not to increase the tension and not to escalate the situation to the point of letting the weapons talk”—
an expression apparently used in the Politburo discussion where all the letters were approved, as it is virtually identical with the language used in Kosygin’s letters to the Western leaders.\textsuperscript{30}

In reply Eshkol offered to meet the Soviet leadership in Moscow, but this “was left unresponded” to, according to Pyrlin. Actually, the Politburo did act formally on Eshkol’s request; on 28 May, it adopted resolution P-43/15, which subordinated acceptance of his proposal to the consent of the UAR and Syrian presidents. According to a retrospective summary composed in the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Nasser briefly entertained the idea, “in order to gain time” to strengthen his defenses once Egypt had forgone a preemptive strike, but the Syrians vetoed any invitation for Eshkol forthwith, and by 1 June Nasser came around to their opinion.\textsuperscript{31}

However, Pyrlin confided that from the outset, the Foreign Ministry officialdom did not dare “to push the leadership towards some constructive solution or response. We could have received a reproach for that.”\textsuperscript{32}

It emerges, then, that during the talks with Badran’s delegation and a Syrian one that arrived on 29 May, the Soviet bureaucracy was given to understand that the leadership desired to precipitate a crisis, not to defuse it. There thus appears to be little substance to the contention that Johnson, Israel, or both cowed the USSR into restraining Egypt. What, then, did the Egyptians have in mind, and what arguments could Moscow add, sometime on 26–27 May, that dissuaded them? In addition to the message relayed from Israel through Grajewski and possibly other channels, the Soviets added some action on their own part: a direct display of Soviet military prowess over the prime target in Israel.
Chapter 13

Foxbats over Dimona

We chose the title of this chapter for our book as it encapsulates our three main claims: that the USSR deliberately instigated the crisis and war of 1967; that it did so in the context of blocking Israel's nuclear program; and that it committed Soviet personnel and weapons for a direct military intervention.

Fourteen years after the Six-Day War, the Soviet Union’s timeless foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, gathered his “think tank” at the ministry. Oleg Grinevsky, who was in attendance, published his account of this meeting only after another 21 years, so since he names all the other participants and gives the exact date, 15 July 1981, he evidently relied on notes taken at the time. The discussion focused on the nuclear potential of the Middle Eastern actors, as the conflict again threatened to become a nuclear war. The circumstances must have been eerily reminiscent for Gromyko. On 7 June 1981, an Israeli air raid had destroyed Iraq’s nuclear reactor, which was defended by Soviet-manned surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries. Shortly afterward, Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi surprised the Soviets with a request for help in a revenge attack on Dimona.

Gromyko—writes Grinevsky—“was in a philosophical frame of mind” and listened impassively to a lengthy report on the history of Israel’s nuclear project. He spoke up only at the mention of “reports” that
blocking Israel’s nuclear development before it attained a deliverable weapon had been among Egypt’s motivations to launch a war in 1967.

Here Gromyko interrupted the review by his Middle Eastern experts and drifted into memories. It seems that with age—and he was already over 70—he did so more and more frequently. . . . his memory was excellent. “I very well remember those fretful days. . . . [S]uddenly, in mid-May, two Egyptian MiGs performed a reconnaissance flight over Dimona. To Nasser’s surprise, they returned home intact, despite the fact that the reactor was under the special protection of the American Hawk missiles. A little more than a week passed, and they again overflew Dimona, and again the Israeli anti-aircraft defense was idle. After that, Marshal Amer—a decisive and even aggressive man—gave orders to bomb Dimona and other important objects in Israel’s territory. But at our request, Nasser voided this order.

“The Soviet leadership was not aware of the Egyptian intent to destroy Israel’s nuclear potential. We only knew about the intent to land a surprise blow on important objects in Israel’s territory, with no concrete details. Therefore, we sent a letter to Nasser, in which we insistently advised him not to launch this war. . . . I think that if we had imagined clearly at the time that the main target of this strike [was] to eliminate Israel’s nuclear potential, we would not have dissuaded Nasser—on the contrary.”

By the time Grinevsky wrote, he could append a footnote, based on Israeli publications, specifying that Gromyko was referring to two overflights of the Dimona reactor “by Egyptian MiG-21s” on 17 and 26 May 1967. But when Gromyko spoke, no open Israeli source had yet connected these flights with the nuclear facility. He must have made the connection based on the Soviets’ own knowledge.

For us, this was one reason to suspect that while Gromyko may have indulged in nostalgia, he was still observing his own “thirty-year rule”—casting the historical record in the desired political light. The military historian Valery Yaremenko summarized the foreign minister’s retrospective opinion: “nuclear war in the Middle East could have been bene-
ficial for the USSR.”⁴ Yaremenko’s analysis clearly refers to a war for nuclear policy purposes, not to an exchange of nuclear blows; after Dimona was destroyed, he writes, the “imperialist powers” would be obliged to mediate a settlement. As always in such cases, mere suspicion—in this instance, that this supposedly hypothetical scenario was in fact Moscow’s plan—is not enough to prove that any statement is actually evidence to the contrary. But it can point quite effectively which way to look.

Since Gromyko mentioned a Soviet letter that “dissuaded” Nasser, he clearly was referring to Kosygin’s letter of 26 May, which was sent while the talks with Badran were in progress in Moscow. How credible, then, is his claim that at this stage, the Soviet leadership knew nothing of—much less was responsible for—Dimona’s central place in the Egyptian attack plan? Could the Soviets have prevailed on Nasser to “void” an Egyptian plan to bomb “important targets,” with no inkling that Dimona was involved?

Yaremenko writes that “Nasser and . . . Amer reached, in absolute secrecy, a decision to destroy the Israeli reactor. . . . Intensive training flights were started, with live bombing of a ‘full-scale Dimona model’ in the Egyptian desert.”⁵ This obviously dates the targeting of Dimona well before the orders were issued in May: planning and building such a model would have taken time. Given the essential role of Soviet advisers in training Egyptian pilots, it seems prima facie unlikely that the Soviets were totally unaware of this target practice. Indeed, Yaremenko states that “Moscow remained a passive observer” of this activity—that is, the Soviets knew about it but did not interfere.

But the last surviving Soviet participant from Badran’s talks in Moscow—Akopov—describes the Egyptian war minister as presenting the Soviets with detailed plans, including maps of the intended targets.⁶ Could the most important target have been concealed? There is now also direct evidence that it was at least shared with the Soviets, if not prepared by them.

During the course of the war, Israeli troops captured maps from the attack plan, “which was about to be effected by the Egyptian Air Force on the morning of May 26.” The first official Israeli report on the capture of these documents, which was published shortly after the Six-Day War, included a little-noticed detail: “In the operational orders listing the targets to be attacked, the research centers [Dimona and Nahal Sorek] were not
marked as atomic reactors, but were apparently included in the category of Hawk missile launching sites, on the assumption that the Israeli reactors are protected against aerial attack by batteries of these missiles.\textsuperscript{6}

Israel’s foremost aviation writer, Danny Shalom, was barred by censors from publishing the captured copy of Amer’s battle order \#4, which “apparently” related specifically to an attack on the nuclear complex itself. He notes that the operational maps marked Dimona both as a Hawk and anti-aircraft cannon site \textit{and} as a bombing target. One of these maps—which has been released—marks the target about 20 kilometers to the northwest, on a ridge overlooking the plain where the reactor is situated and in the direction of the Egyptian border; it features a circle around this point, which might indicate the missiles’ range or that of their radar system (map on following page).\textsuperscript{7}

Dimona was the first site that Israel protected with Hawk missiles when it began to receive them from the United States in 1965.\textsuperscript{8} The commander of the Hawk array that defended the nuclear complex in May–June 1967, Colonel (retired) Yehiel Omri—then a lieutenant—confirmed to us that his missiles were still Israel’s only operational ones at the time; another battery was in training, and dummy batteries may have been set up at other sites.\textsuperscript{9} The dates on the maps found at Sinai air bases show that they were similar to those that Badran discussed in Moscow. In addition to Gromyko’s reference to the Hawk missiles protecting Dimona, there is a precisely corresponding description of the target maps that were issued to Soviet strategic-bomber pilots on 3 June 1967—as related by their commander, General Vasily Reshetnikov: “The objects—they were named to us—that strikes had to be delivered against: they were marked by the geographical terms on the map; and we were particularly interested about the anti-aircraft defence systems, the Hock (\textit{sic}) complexes. We had this information as well and we gave it to the pilots. . . . My task was . . . to reach the targets and to deliver the strike. The crews were assigned, the objects were given certain numbers, and that’s how I was prepared for the mission.”\textsuperscript{10}

In his published memoirs, Reshetnikov clarifies that his bombers’ main targets were the objects \textit{protected} by Hawk batteries, rather than the batteries themselves.\textsuperscript{11} Grinevsky’s assertion that the ultimate outcome of the war “saved Dimona from annihilation and Israel from radioactive contamination” also confirms that the reactor itself was to be destroyed.\textsuperscript{12}
An Egyptian operational map captured by the IDF in Sinai, showing Dimona circled as a target.
The designation of Dimona as a Hawk site was, then, a feature of operational maps used by both the Soviets and the Egyptians. If any Soviets were ignorant of the target’s true nature, it was the pilots involved. “We had large-scale maps, and we would be informed that at such and such coordinate, there were such and such objectives,” Reshetnikov recalled. He reckoned that “we almost certainly had to bomb forces in the battlefield. These could also be headquarters and control centers.”

But the political and military leadership, which as Grinevsky confirms was well aware of goings-on at Dimona, certainly knew better.

Gromyko’s statement can thus be seen as another, retrospective, example of a technique that we have distinguished in other Soviet pronouncements: threatening “hypothetically” what the USSR had in effect already done. In this case, it was to plan, approve, and help implement the bombing of Dimona, though not as a first strike but only in response to an Israeli attack, which other Soviet and Egyptian moves were designed to provoke.

Were the Soviets also involved in the reconnaissance sorties over the Israeli nuclear center? Gromyko’s assertion had Egyptian MiGs performing these flights, but this statement also merits some scrutiny. One reason is that during the War of Attrition and afterward, in 1969–72, all such deep-penetration photoreconnaissance over Israel was performed for Egypt by Soviet personnel in Egyptian uniforms, flying planes painted with Egyptian markings. It therefore seemed questionable whether the Soviets had entrusted such missions solely to the Egyptians five years earlier. Our inquiry ultimately established that there was more than Israeli military folklore to the possibility that Soviet planes and pilots carried out at least some of these overflights.

During the crisis of May 1967, Israel totally suppressed the news of the flights over its nuclear complex—which was top secret in itself. The very fact that they took place emerged only over time and in a bewildering variety of versions as to the number of flights and aircraft involved, their paths, and the object of their reconnaissance. Some of these differences reflect a gradual relaxation of censorship; others appear to stem from a compression of several other flights’ characteristics into the two instances that made the greatest impact. What most of the accounts have in common is the definite or probable identification of the aircraft as Egyptian MiG-21s, and the description of their flights as extraordinary
both in audacity and in performance—at an altitude of 50,000 to 55,000 or even 60,000 feet and a speed of mach 1.7 to mach 2, which prevented Israeli interceptors even from making visual contact with the intruders, much less engaging them.

This aroused our initial doubts. Such a flight envelope, while within the upper limits of the MiG-21’s capability, was also attainable by Israel’s most advanced fighter at the time, the Mirage IIIC. The two models’ specifications were almost identical in these categories, though after a defecting Iraqi pilot presented Israel, in 1966, with the West’s first exemplar of a MiG-21, Israel’s top test pilot, Danny Shapira, established that the Soviet plane had a slight advantage in acceleration and climb, particularly at takeoff. Still, Israeli Mirages shot down six Syrian MiG-21s in the major dogfight of 7 April 1967; some of them were successfully chased and shot down over Damascus.

But in 2002, Shalom’s comprehensive and definitive study of the Israeli Air Force’s role in the Six-Day War included for the first time a detailed chapter on the penetrations of Israel’s southern airspace by hostile aircraft, which the Israelis code-named “fledglings.” It established that there were at least seven such incursions, of which only the flights on 17 and 26 May passed directly over Dimona (map on following page). This contrasted with a statement by Muhammad Sadek, who in 1967 was director of Egyptian military intelligence, that his country’s air force had “conducted only two aerial reconnaissance missions” before the war, one of which was over the Jordanian port of Aqaba (next to Eilat). Who, then, flew the other sorties?

Shalom quoted detailed accounts by—among others—the Israeli pilots who were scrambled at the incoming craft on 17 and 26 May. In both cases, not only was visual contact made, the Israeli pilots claimed that they identified the intruders positively as MiG-21s, and followed them in hot pursuit into Sinai. On the 26th, an Israeli pilot even had an air-to-air missile locked onto one MiG, but was not given clearance to fire. Of course, the pilots could have been Soviets—but on 17 May, the Israelis even heard the radio calls (evidently in Arabic) exchanged by a panicky Egyptian pilot with controllers at the Bir Gafgafa air base before he managed to land there.

The Mirages were, then, capable of coping with the MiG-21s, as we had conjectured; but the model of the intruding planes and their Egypt-
ian identity appeared to be firmly established. Why then, we wondered, does the IAF’s official Web site still refer to “a mystery enemy plane, which seemed to be a MiG-21”—in the singular—as having appeared on Israel’s radar screens? And why did the flights, on both occasions, cause such extreme consternation in the Israeli leadership, not only because they indicated an intent to strike at Dimona, but also because the IAF’s defense system was perceived as powerless to thwart them?

We have already noted the alarm that the first overflight, on 17 May, caused among Israel’s political and military leaders. There is no evidence that the Israelis notified the United States at all of that incident. But on 27 May, US ambassador Barbour cabled that the Israelis were “frightened

An IAF map showing the paths of reconnaissance flights intruding over Israel, labeled with their dates, in May and June 1967. The flight paths shown in the upper portion of the map are focused on Dimona; those in the south are centered on Eilat.
by fact four MiGs overflew Israel yesterday.” Later evidence has confirmed
Barbour’s description: As Gluska sums up records of the day’s deliberations in the cabinet, “this suddenly renewed the sense of anxiety and ur-
gency” about an impending Arab attack. “The fear was that the Egyptians
had struck first and begun the war, or a bombing of the reactor.”

There is no evidence that at the time or even later, the Israelis dis-
closed to the United States that the object of the overflight was their nu-
clear facility; if they did mention Dimona, Barbour omitted it. He noted
only, “Israeli airforce not able intercept,” which indicates the Israelis did
not claim at the time, as their pilots did later, that their planes beat off the
intruders. On the contrary, the Israelis’ purpose was to emphasize their
vulnerability, and the ambassador cited the intrusion as part of the “con-
clusive” proof Israel pointed to “that Nasser has ‘crossed the Rubicon’
and surprise aerial attack expected any moment.”

We returned, therefore, to a closer examination of Shalom’s inter-
views. It revealed that in both cases, the identification of all the planes as
Egyptian MiG-21s was not entirely definite; the big one might have got
away. Out of two intruders on 17 May, one is described by a pilot in the
first pair of Israeli planes that attempted an interception: “The MiG was
faster than us. At a certain point, he steadily opened up [a distance] from
us. We were pretty hard pressed to pursue him.” When a second pair of
Mirages gave chase, the frightened Egyptian pilot’s MiG-21 was the only
bandit that the Israelis actually sighted. “We saw one MiG; don’t know if
there was another.”

On the 26th, the four incoming aircraft split up into two pairs, one
of which headed directly for Dimona. Of the two Israeli pilots that took off
to intercept them, number two claims he identified them as MiG-21s—
although he got no closer than a mile, at an altitude difference of 15,000
feet. He relates that as he had no chance of overtaking them, he tried to
cut off their return route, and came into a firing position twice, once with
a missile and once with cannon, but did not get authorization to shoot.
The leader, future IAF commander David Ivry, “remembered the event
otherwise and noted that neither of them reached a firing position in all
of that interception sortie.”

The other two planes headed south, along the Israeli-Egyptian bor-
der, which the Israelis later interpreted as a decoy maneuver. They evaded
one pair of Israeli Mirages, and another pair that was scrambled from a
base farther south also reported not having sighted either of the intruders. The Israeli pilots assumed that one of these planes landed at the Egyptian base at Ghardaqa, on the Red Sea opposite the southern tip of Sinai. No information is given as to the fourth intruder.

Even this detailed account, then, was inconclusive. At least one plane in each case did outperform the Mirages and evaded them unseen and unidentified. If not Egyptian MiG-21s, what could these planes have been?

We harked back to the relatively well known Soviet photoreconnaissance flights over Israeli-held Sinai and Israel itself in the early 1970s. The USSR then deployed to Egypt four aircraft of their most advanced model. Even in 1971–72, this model was still experimental, known by the temporary designation X-500, and flown only by top Soviet test pilots. As its Soviet crews noted proudly, it was still mistakenly identified by Western observers as MiG-23. The craft that was ultimately dubbed MiG-25 was designed for a top speed approaching mach 3 and a ceiling close to 70,000 feet. But this made it much less maneuverable, and therefore vulnerable, during takeoff and landing. It was therefore escorted by several MiG-21s—a pattern that might help explain how in May 1967 one plane in each formation broke away from the other intruders and escaped the Israeli Mirages. But was the MiG-25 available for operational missions four years before its first known appearance in the Middle East?

It was. The USSR began developing this model in 1962, in response to the expected construction of a mach-3 strategic bomber (the B-70 Valkyrie) by the United States. The American bomber was scratched, but the Soviet project went on—ultimately equipping the USSR with a fighter model that was problematic from the outset, but that was nonetheless unmatched by anything the West could range against it. In 1971–72, the IAF was still helpless to interdict the Soviet MiG-25 flights over its territory. Only in the 1980s, once the United States had developed the F-15 as a response to the MiG-25, did the IAF successfully use the advanced US fighter (in one case together with specially upgraded Hawk missiles) to shoot down (over Lebanon) three MiG-25s, which were by then operated by the Syrian air force.

The MiG-25 made its first test flight in 1964, but at the time of the Dimona overflights it had not yet been assigned its NATO appellation (Foxbat), and had never been detected in flight. Though still under development, it had already begun to set world records for velocity and alti-
tude, but there is no indication that either Israel or the United States was even aware of the model’s existence yet. It was first glimpsed by Western observers only on 9 July 1967, at an air show near Moscow.26

But we soon found positive evidence that this demonstration was staged after the plane had been put through its paces in the field—over Israel. The official Russian military history published in 2000 stated: “The Mig-25 . . . was used in the late 1960s on the Egyptian-Israeli front as a reconnaissance aircraft.”27 Once this direction was indicated, it took only an Internet search to find the explicit confirmation—in Aleksandr Vybornov’s biography, on a US Air Force Web site. The résumé that the Soviet air force general himself provided for the “Gathering of Eagles” in 1999 states that while in Egypt in 1967 “to study the feasibility” of the Soviet air intervention plan, “Vybornov flew 12 operational sorties in three months. These sorties were so sensitive that the Soviet Ministry of Defense approved each sortie. He twice flew reconnaissance missions over Israel in a Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-25 ‘Foxbat’ and was again decorated with the ‘Order of the Red Banner.’”28 This was no error or chance misstatement: A year before the Gathering of Eagles, a Russian book on Soviet flying aces offered a version that differed only slightly in detail: “In 1967, [Vybornov] carried out 15 combat sorties during the Arab-Israeli conflict. Several times, he made reconnaissance sorties over Israel in a MiG-25.”29

In a previous interview, Vybornov elaborated on the circumstances of his Foxbat missions in 1967. He told a Russian magazine in 1993 that two prototypes of the state-of-the-art model were based in southern Yemen, because security at Egyptian air bases was inadequate.30 This precaution paid off: it not only shielded the planes from Western intelligence but evidently saved the Foxbats from the Israeli attack on 5 June, which Vybornov witnessed. As already mentioned, he described it as “total pandemonium,” “complete chaos” that reminded him of the 1941 defense of Moscow against the Nazis in World War II.31

For each of their sorties, the MiG-25s were flown by another pilot from Yemen to an Egyptian base and refueled. Vybornov (and, for several of the flights, probably one or more other senior pilots who alternated with him) took over there and accomplished the mission. McFarland confirmed to us that Vybornov spoke of the Foxbats being flown out of Yemen.32 Shalom’s account describes at least one of the Dimona overflights as
originating from Ghardaqa, and following (for deception) a flight path used by civilian aircraft along the Red Sea.

In the 1993 interview, Vybornov said each sortie was made at the express orders of the Soviet defense minister in person. After overflying Israel, the Foxbat landed at a different Egyptian base, from which the camera rolls were flown directly to Moscow.\(^{33}\) It is unlikely that Vybornov or the other Soviet pilots knew the precise nature of the objects they were sent to film, beyond the geographical coordinates: speaking recently with a television researcher, he stated that “much wasn’t told to them, they just received orders.”

This identification of the Dimona overflights as a field trial for the MiG-25 indicates that the timing of the model’s first exhibition, on 9 July, was less than coincidental: the Soviets may have considered that their stunning development had already been exposed to Western intelligence anyway. But there are still a lot of unresolved questions about this astonishing disclosure—not least, what Vybornov’s other 10–13 sorties involved. Also, Vybornov stated that Israel tried but failed to intercept his two MiG-25 flights over Israel in 1967; “he was shot at, but he was lucky.”\(^{34}\) As the Israeli pilots stated that they never got a shot at the intruders, this conforms with Michael Oren’s statement that Israel scrambled fighters and “Hawk missiles were fired, but neither could intercept the MiGs.”\(^{35}\) Egyptian general Sadek also held that Hawks were launched at the intruders.\(^{36}\)

However, Gromyko’s contention that the Hawks “were idle” agrees with the surprising version we were given by the Hawks’ commander, Omri. He asserted that no missiles at all were fired before the war, and that his outfit was not alerted—by its own radar system or otherwise—to any overflights at all. The intruders were, if so, detected only by Israel’s main air defense radar, and the Hawk batteries were not even ordered to attempt an interception—evidently due to the flights’ characteristics. Omri said that the first operational launch of a Hawk by Israel, and the first kill that a missile of this model made anywhere, occurred when his batteries did shoot down, after the war began, a disabled and outdated Israeli Ouragan fighter that strayed toward the reactor—illustrating both the facility’s sensitivity and the missiles’ limitations.\(^{37}\)

This is only one of many discrepancies among the various versions about the Dimona overflights, but it is noteworthy due to the site’s prominence, as a Hawk location, in the orders and maps that were issued
to both Egyptian and Soviet pilots. Indeed, probing the Hawk defenses (and possibly expending some of the missiles) could be one reason why the Soviets found it necessary to commit their most advanced and secret aircraft to this mission; the location of Israel’s reactor was well known, and imaging satellites—which the USSR did have by 1967—probably had already provided a good enough idea of the site’s layout. On the other hand, only an aircraft could provoke the missiles’ launch, and one advantage of the MiG-25’s camera system was the capability to monitor the missiles’ disposition and performance even from a distance, while its altitude guaranteed its immunity from the Hawks. If the missiles were not fired, at least part of the Foxbats’ mission was unaccomplished.

How soon, if at all, did the Israelis identify the Foxbats? At the suggestion of Danny Shapira, the Israeli test pilot who mastered the Iraqi MiG-21, he was put on constant alert in its cockpit following the 26 May overflight, so as to match the Soviet plane’s slight edge over the Mirage in case the intruder returned. According to Shapira, it did not—though Shalom lists another five brief intrusions between the last flight over Dimona and Israel’s opening strike on 5 June (which Shapira missed, as he was still on sky watch in the MiG-21). If this countermeasure was not a desperate last resort or aimed at reassuring other pilots, it might indicate a genuine misidentification out of unfamiliarity with the new Soviet model.

When we presented our MiG-25 hypothesis to a former Israeli intelligence officer who specialized in the Soviet military, his response was: “Of course. Definitely MiG-25s. If they had been MiG-21s, they would have been shot down.” This may have been concluded later, in view of the Foxbats’ activity in the 1970s. The only possible indication that at the time Israel linked the overflights with the Soviets is attributed by Oren to Rabin, who “revealed that strange radio signals had been sent by the MiGs, perhaps to strategic bombers.” But this might also refer to the Tu-16 bombers that Egypt had received from the USSR shortly before the war, and in the operational plan were intended to fire Kennel air-to-surface missiles at Eilat.

Was the United States aware of the overflights’ extraordinary character and their Soviet identity? In Washington, Barbour’s cable of 27 May came as no news in this respect. On the previous morning, the event over Dimona had barely ended when Ambassador Harman was called to the
telephone in the midst of a meeting between Eban and McNamara, with JCS chairman Wheeler in attendance. The Israelis then stated that they now had “knowledge,” rather than evaluation, that “a UAR-Syrian attack was imminent.”

The editors of *Foreign Relations of the United States* saw fit to include among this day’s documents two entirely sanitized papers—one of which is not even identified by sender or recipient, except that it is located in the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library. The other included an assessment by the US military attachés in Tel Aviv explaining why “Israel is approaching a decision in favor of a preemptive attack.” This assessment rested on a still-classified telegram that was sent at 8:01 a.m. EDT (that is, during or immediately after the Dimona overflight, which occurred “at midday” Israel time) from the commander-in-chief, Strike Command—the headquarters set up by McNamara “to respond swiftly and with whatever force necessary to threats against the peace in any part of the world.” It cannot yet be ascertained whether these communications dealt with the Foxbat intrusion, but by 1:30 p.m., at the White House consultation before Eban met Johnson, Wheeler already was speaking about “two overflight incidents.” The Americans evidently had their own data, considered it significant, and acted upon it—in the Soviet context.

Though no such direct evidence has emerged yet, it is therefore reasonable to assume that the US military was aware of the first Foxbat sortie over Dimona on 17 May, too. This flight, and the urgent reports of its sequel on the 26th, did not make the Americans any more receptive to the Israelis’ fear of an imminent Egyptian attack, but it evidently caused concern in Washington about Soviet activity and capabilities.

The sudden appearance of an unfamiliar, and therefore possibly misidentified, Soviet aircraft with awesome performance over the most sensitive target, in a region where war was brewing, offers a new and compelling explanation for why the intelligence-gathering ship USS *Liberty* was ordered urgently into the Med on 23 May, at the request of the National Security Agency (NSA) from Wheeler’s Joint Chiefs of Staff. What has already been exposed about the *Liberty*’s mission definitely puts Soviet activity at the top of its assignments—and also highlights a continuing US effort to obscure this aspect of what became a disaster when Israel attacked the ship on 8 June.
The *Liberty* left its station off West Africa for Rota, Spain, where it was joined by six NSA and military linguists. Until recently, we had only the *Liberty* survivors’ version as to these linguists’ specialties. One of the survivors’ leading spokesmen, James Ennes, named these six experts and described them as “all Arab or Russian linguists.” When in 2001 we submitted a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for documents on the Soviet aspect of the *Liberty*’s mission, the US Navy and the NSA responded with a sheaf of paper, but so much of it was irrelevant or—mostly—sanitized that we were excused from paying for photocopying and postage. The parcel included the NSA’s official history of the affair, from which any mention of the linguists’ expertise was excised. But in a version of the same history that was “approved for release 2 July 2003” and is now posted on the agency’s Web site, the relevant passage was partly restored. It now reads: “Six Arabic [blank] linguists joined . . . for the expected work on UAR and [blank] communications.” Since the report notes, and criticizes, the lack of any Hebrew linguists on board the *Liberty*, the words deleted were clearly not “Hebrew” linguists and “Israeli” communications. Ennes’s statement about the languages and signals the *Liberty* was staffed to monitor is thus borne out: Russian linguists to track Soviet communications. The Soviet element in the ship’s mission was entirely suppressed until recently, and it is still largely but clumsily being withheld.

As to the precise target of this mission, however, Ennes’s version is questionable. “What was the *Liberty* really doing?” Ennes has written. “In 1967, the Soviets were known to have stationed at least five Soviet Tu-95 Bear bombers in Egypt where they were supposedly flown by Arab pilots. But the US suspected that these were actually Soviet bombers under Soviet control using Soviet pilots. *Liberty* was asked to determine who controlled those aircraft. . . . The truth is that our primary target may have had nothing to do with the Six Day War at all. Some argue that the war merely provided a cover to explain our presence in the area while our real purpose was to determine who was piloting the Russian Bears.”

This is the only claim made to date that Tu-95s of any kind were present in Egypt in 1967; no such aircraft were ever recorded as being transferred to Egypt. The contention appeared in the *Liberty* survivors’ literature only in the 1990s, and may reflect a retrospective misconstruction.
of data from the early 1970s, when “the Soviets had a detachment of Tu-16RRs stationed in Egypt . . . [with] full Egyptian markings applied.” The two models are easily distinguishable, and the Tu-16s in question were, in any case, of the reconnaissance version, not bombers.

Tu-95 reconnaissance craft were already tracking Sixth Fleet ships in 1967, but their intercontinental reach let them operate much farther afield than the eastern Med directly from the USSR, without bases in Egypt. The carrier America, for instance, “upon nearing Gibraltar . . . received a visit from Soviet long-range reconnaissance aircraft . . . TU-95 ‘Bears’ on 18 January. Two . . . ‘Phantom’ jets met the ‘Bears’ as they approached and escorted them past the ship.” Such encounters, however, were so routine that they hardly would have necessitated the Liberty’s mission.

Reshetnikov’s command included bombers of both models; the ones designated later for bombing targets in Israel were evidently the longer-range Tu-95s, as he noted that they were capable of making the round trip from their base at Priluki, near Kiev, Ukraine, without refueling. But it seems unlikely that the strategic bombers Rabin referred to, or the “Bears” that Liberty was supposedly sent to track, were Reshetnikov’s bombers making a trial run; in May they had not yet been assigned their targets, and they were never based in Egypt.

Still, the makeup of the ship’s surveillance team definitely indicates a Soviet-oriented mission. Oren, in a recent reassessment of the Liberty incident, offered a more generalized definition but also stressed the Soviet aspect of the ship’s assignment: “Though the exact nature of its mission remains classified, the Liberty was most likely sent to track the movements of Egyptian troops and their Soviet advisors in Sinai—hence the need for Arabic and Russian translators.” But the main innovation was the matchless MiG-25 itself. The riddle may at last have been solved by the exposure of the mysterious and imposing Foxbat’s sudden appearance, and—perhaps—the other, yet unknown, activities of Vybornov’s mission in Egypt. Tu-95 reconnaissance craft not based in Egypt may possibly have been monitoring or directing the Dimona overflights.

The sequence of events around Amer’s demand for clearance to attack Israel in general, and Dimona in particular, now shows up Gromyko’s recollection to be rather creative. Badran arrived in Moscow on the 25th, with the plan already in hand. Grechko’s order to carry out the second sortie over Dimona (as Vybornov specified, it had to be authorized per-
sonally and individually by the minister) was issued no later than the morning of 26 May, while Badran’s talks in Moscow were deadlocked. Several hours after the flight was completed and its report was flown directly to Grechko, Nasser was handed the letter that Kosygin dispatched the same day. The flight may have been mentioned in its text, which has never been published, or added orally by Pozhidayev (who was probably informed directly by Vybornov as well), or communicated through Badran. Nasser’s compliance with the Soviet request not to strike first by bombing Israel may well have been due at least in major part to this token of the Soviets’ continued determination to provoke Israel into a preemptive attack.

Grajewski’s message, depending on the exact time of its receipt, indicated either that this result was probable anyhow, or that it had been finally ensured by this ultimate provocation (an outcome that was in any case confirmed by the Israelis’ subsequent appeals to the United States). The Foxbat mission also demonstrated to Egypt that the Soviets’ commitment was strong enough for them to put into play and reveal their heretofore closely guarded aeronautic trump card—and that this commitment included the central feature of a strike at Israel’s looming nuclear capability, once the Arabs swung into a Soviet-supported counterattack, but not before. Amer, Yaremenko reports, did not “void” the order to bomb Israeli targets, including Dimona; he only postponed—or rather, fixed—its zero hour, which had not yet been inserted anyway, to 7 June. The “Conqueror” plan stayed on track.

Badran did not return at once from Moscow, his mission unfulfilled; he stayed on for more intensive planning and coordination with his counterpart Grechko. They may have utilized the camera roll from Egypt to recheck the Hawk disposition, though in this respect the flight’s success was only partial as no missiles were fired. But whatever tactical intelligence the MiG-25 had gathered, its strategic purpose for the Soviets had been achieved. The talks ended with Grechko’s rousing pledge of support and promise of nuclear cover. It can, for now, only be speculated whether he found out, two days after the flight, that this nuclear guarantee might be invoked: the window of opportunity before Israel assembled a nuclear device, as disclosed by Harel, was about to slam shut.
Poised for a Desant

5 June

Munya Mardor, the head of Israel’s weapons development agency RAFAEL, relates in his memoirs that he was in charge of both the “main project” (the usual Israeli euphemism for all or part of the nuclear program) and the IAF’s home-built air-to-air missile system Shafrir. In the latter capacity, he was called upon in May 1967 to adapt the missile for use by Israel’s captured Iraqi MiG-21, when—as he was told—“it transpired that . . . Egyptian MiG-21s were penetrating our territory for high-altitude photoreconnaissance” but could not be overtaken by the Mirages.

One page before this episode in his book, and without indicating any connection, Mardor reveals that on 18 May—the day after the first overflight of Dimona—he began briefing his subordinates on preparations that had to be made for a possible war “in the coming days. . . . Priorities were set for completion of the weapons which were in the final stages of development and production.” This “manufacturing and assembly” work went on around the clock. On 28 May, Mardor wrote in his diary, “I decided to go over to the assembly hall” managed by Yevgeny Ratner, who is elsewhere identified as heading the “main project.” “The crews were assembling and checking the weapons system, of which they had managed to complete the development and production ahead of the war. . . . [T]heir expressions were serious and introverted, as befitting people who
recognized the great, and perhaps crucial, value of this weapons system which they had managed to bring into operational readiness."¹

Cohen’s history of Israel’s nuclear project leaves little doubt what this “weapons system” was. In his latest study, Cohen puts Mardor’s reminiscences into context: “As claimed in foreign publications, shortly before the Six-Day War Israel had obtained most of the components for nuclear capability, but without possessing the weapons themselves. During the period of high alert before the war, considering the anxieties about a ‘worst case [referring to preparations for an attack with unconventional weapons, and particularly poison gas],’ Israel, by a concentrated effort, improvised a usable ‘weapons system’ out of its capabilities. . . . Foreign sources spoke of two nuclear devices for which a way was found to make them operational.”

Among the four “red lines” Cohen reports as being formulated for the exercise of Israel’s nuclear option, one was the use of nuclear weapons against Israel—which, at the time, could only have been done by the USSR.² Cohen also has cited subsequent reports indicating that the United States believed Israel to have had two atomic bombs, and to have “put nuclear weapons on alert,” during the Six-Day War—though as already mentioned, at least the CIA was not aware of this at the time.³

How much the Soviets knew as to the exact state of Israel’s “main project” is unclear, but countering any Israeli use of such weapons was a prime objective of the Soviet navy’s preparations. Gorshkov’s naval doctrine, as described by two Russian academic experts, was designed to counter precisely such an eventuality:

[Naval] Commander-in-Chief S. Gorshkov is rightly considered as the author of the . . . strategy, [whereby] the Navy had to be able, together with other military forces, by using its military strategic nuclear forces, to destroy the opponent’s surface targets, and destroy or weaken his analogous forces in order to prevent a nuclear strike at the territory of its own country. Experience has shown that the Navy that was created according to this strategy could effectively fulfill its tasks only in nuclear war.

. . . For example, the existence of the Mediterranean Eskadra in 1967 in effect determined the end of the ‘Six-Day’ Arab-Israeli war.⁴
The orders issued to the Soviet submarines in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, as reported by commanders and crewmen, included the contingency of an Israeli nuclear attack. An electrician’s mate on the nuclear sub K-125, then in Alexandria, claimed in 1992 that his captain was instructed: “If Israel drops an atomic bomb on Egypt or Syria—nuclear missiles should be fired on it [Israel] in order to obliterate it.” But when we contacted this former sailor a decade later, he retracted his version, claiming that a newspaper reporter had misunderstood him (she, however, recorded the interview and stands by its accuracy). He professed fear for the safety of his family, despite their present domicile in Israel—fears that, even if unfounded, indicate the extent of the Russian cover-up as impressed on the servicemen involved.  

The account given by Captain Shashkov of nuclear submarine K-172 that he was ordered “to be ready for firing nuclear missiles at the Israeli shore” in response to a “joint Israeli and American desant on the Syrian coast” appears to be—in addition to a case of “mirror-imaging”—also an example of conformity with the official line; Shashkov retired as a respected vice admiral. An Israeli naval landing seems an unlikely cause to spark a nuclear war, particularly in view of Shashkov’s recollection that at the time, the potential for a nuclear exchange reminded him of the Cuban crisis. At any rate, his coded launching order was to come from Moscow, where the severity of Israel’s provocation would be judged, and a nuclear blast would certainly be a more proportionate pretext than any conventional operation. The official Russian military history published in 2000 alludes to an intention to respond in kind if Israel used its assumed capability: to explain the dispatch of nuclear-armed Soviet warships to the Red Sea before the hostilities started, it states “there existed in Moscow a concern that in a turn of events unfavorable for it, Israel could use some kinds of WMD, the existence of which never was denied by official Tel-Aviv.” On 8 June this squadron was at close enough range to arrive “partially for deterrence, to the Red Sea shores of Egypt”—a move triggered, according to this official history, by the Israeli attack on the USS Liberty.  

There is also a report that the flagship of the “combined eskadra” received a special shipment of tactical nuclear weapons in this period. The official history of the Black Sea Fleet confirms that “before the outbreak of hostilities, the Fleet headquarters proposed means for increasing its
battle readiness, including a reinforcement consisting of five warships and three auxiliary vessels. At the same time, a transport was loaded with ammunition for the cruiser Slava’s 155mm guns. The transfer of this ammunition, under the conditions that prevailed at sea in the region of Crete, demanded enormous efforts by the crews of the warship and the transport.”

Citing this statement, an independent historian, Aleksandr Shirokorad, adds that “among the Navy personnel, there was talk that during the crisis, shells with nuclear battle components were delivered to the cruiser Slava. I cannot confirm or deny this information, but tend to support the version that there were such shells. . . . Otherwise, why rush a transport? What, did the cruiser lack its battle complement? Slava was not in the Med for training!” Along with the Slava’s own company, a contingent of naval cadets then training on board the cruiser is credited for the effort of transferring the cargo at sea; these cadets were soon to be put on board smaller ships to serve as a landing force.

On 28 May, however, the only open clash between Israelis and Soviets was diplomatic and rather ludicrous. Among the olive groves in Jerusalem’s Valley of the Cross, sentries at an IDF bivouac stopped a car bearing diplomatic license plates after noticing that the occupants “were filming the IDF concentrations.” The driver turned out to be a Hebrew-speaking second secretary (for which read, intelligence operative) at the Soviet embassy, accompanied by a Russian Orthodox priest, a woman, and two children. When the police were called and attempted to impound their two movie cameras, the woman hid one of them between her legs (the police report, “Espionage Suspect,” does not specify how it was retrieved). The Soviets’ demand to expose the remaining frames so that no incriminating images could be planted was rejected. An embassy official came the next day to get the cameras back, and explained that the diplomat was touring the country with his son, who had just arrived for the school vacation, and was taking souvenir pictures of “beautiful places.” The Israeli Foreign Ministry’s top Soviet hand, Aryeh Ilan, deadpanned the next day to Chuvakhin’s deputy (who professed to know nothing of the matter): “It was a good thing that they encountered authorized people and not an ordinary crowd, as in the latter case this could have become a very ugly incident. I asked him to make sure that the embassy staff refrain from such activity.”

The Israeli apprehension that had already been exacerbated by the
Dimona overflights was further heightened when Jordan acceded, on 30 May, to the Egyptian-Syrian military pact and joint command, and agreed to accept on its soil forces from Soviet-leaning Iraq. The next day, King Hussein explained to the US ambassador that “he felt compelled . . . to buy political and military insurance. . . . He [was] convinced that Nasser’s actions are not, as he had thought, aimed at unseating him and [Saudi Arabian king] Feisal.”\textsuperscript{11} Nasser, however, boasted to Soviet ambassador Pozhidayev: “Egypt has, in effect, conquered Jordan.”\textsuperscript{12}

Although Hussein said that Nasser’s moves represented “no plan, no plot, no Soviet masterminding,” the Egyptian president had told him “that he, Nasser, was quite prepared—in the event the USG [US Government] intervened militarily against him to ask for Soviet assistance”—precisely the pretext that Nasser would indeed invoke on 6 June. Hussein added: “I believe Nasser is now talking to the Soviets, or has already negotiated with them for assistance. . . . Nasser seemed confident that if the USG took ‘aggressive action’ against the UAR, the Soviets would give [him] ‘the required support.’”\textsuperscript{13}

The newly added Jordanian front further fueled the political agitation in Israel, which culminated on 1 June with the creation of a national unity government. In practice, this meant mainly the transfer of the defense portfolio from Eshkol, who was perceived as indecisive, to former chief of staff Moshe Dayan. Ironically, the dashing Dayan would turn out to be the member of the Israeli cabinet most acutely aware of the Soviet menace.

His political ally, Shimon Peres, who had been out of government for several years and was not now returned to any formal position, nonetheless appears to have been informed about the progress of the “main project,” of which he had been a founder. In the mid-1990s, indignantly seeking to rebut the charges made in the memoirs of his perennial rival Rabin that Peres “allegedly went around . . . before the Six-Day War spreading gloom,” Peres made a disclosure that would have been as astonishing as Harel’s were it not retrospective: “My contribution during that dramatic period was something that I still cannot write about openly, for reasons of state security. After Dayan was appointed Defense Minister, I submitted to him a certain proposal which, in my opinion then—and in my opinion today, nearly three decades later—would have deterred the Arabs and prevented the war. My proposal . . . was considered—and rejected.”\textsuperscript{14}

Peres declined to answer a television interviewer’s question whether
he meant a demonstrative nuclear explosion. He did not elaborate, nor did Dayan or Rabin, whether the idea was scrapped for fear of Soviet reprisal.

While Peres’s claim does not mention any concern about a Soviet reaction to his proposed measure, Rabin did state (in retrospect) that the menace of a Soviet nuclear strike was indeed considered by Israeli intelligence—at his behest. As ambassador in Washington, Rabin told a group of congressmen that, on the second day of the war, “he was concerned with what the Soviets would do, and asked intelligence to brief him. They said the Russians could use a nuclear device, and the Israelis had no defense to that. But he did not think they would do it.” This, of course, was after any need to flex Israel’s nuclear muscle had been obviated, as Israel’s existence was no longer perceived to be at risk. Rabin is not known to have referred to Peres’s previous suggestion.

Between 1 and 4 June, would a nuclear display by Israel—as distinct from an atom bomb dropped on an Arab target—have triggered the implementation of the Soviet subs’ orders to respond with missile launches at Israel? Would it have made any difference if the Israeli blast had been set off on Israeli soil or across the Egyptian border, even in empty desert? Would the United States have retaliated for such a Soviet strike with a nuclear counterstrike at the USSR, or at least at its Mediterranean presence, even though Washington had no treaty obligation toward Israel to do so, had opposed Israel’s nuclear armament, and had just warned Israel in the strongest of terms against any opening shot? These are all intriguing but unanswerable questions of hypothetical history, which have also spawned some extravagant and conflicting theories.

Given what we now know, however, about the preparations on both sides of the Cold War divide, and the frame of mind in both superpowers’ leaderships at this stage of the crisis, the eventuality of a Soviet nuclear intervention following an Israeli test or bombing does seem more plausible than a subsequent strike by the United States. Moscow had quite successfully achieved an effective US pledge of neutrality, thus considerably reducing the prospect of a global conflict even in this extreme scenario. If the measure that was proposed by Peres—the pioneer of Israel’s nuclear deterrence—was indeed an atomic demonstration, it might actually have risked provoking the country’s doom, at Soviet rather than Arab hands.
There is as yet no evidence that the Soviets had concrete knowledge of the operationally limited nuclear capability that Israel allegedly attained—at least not within days of its achievement. But there are indications that the Soviets (as well as their Arab allies) either found out or figured out that the Israeli first strike would be unleashed on 5 June. An undocumented statement on the Russian SVR Web site holds that the KGB had prior knowledge of the timing for Israel’s move.\textsuperscript{18} Although this assertion is ambiguous and may be retrospective, Soviet moves on the ground indicate that both sea and air operations were activated during the 48 hours that preceded Israel’s initial air raids.

As the Israeli cabinet’s final decision was taken only the day before the IAF assault, prior Soviet knowledge of the zero hour seemed virtually impossible—until Gluska, in his recent study, established that on 2 June, it was already decided to launch the attack \textit{not before} 5 June, which was in effect a postponement of the attack \textit{until} that date.\textsuperscript{19} This was after Amit, in a lightning visit to Washington, emerged from a talk with McNamara under the impression that the United States would, at worst, acquiesce in an Israeli attack. The defense secretary and others in the US administration later denied making such a promise. McNamara told us: “We feared that if [Israel] pre-empted . . . and . . . then needed US military support, our people would say ‘Dammit, why the hell should we support them, they started the war.’ So we tried to persuade [Israel] and we thought we had persuaded [it] not to pre-empt.”\textsuperscript{20} But the Israeli cabinet acted on Amit’s reading.

In Chapter 5, we presented the evidence that the USSR had a highly placed source with access to information at cabinet level. Former KGB rezident Dedyulya has stated that his ranking source, “N,” was given the specific task of reporting the timing of an Israeli offensive.\textsuperscript{21} This informant might—correctly—have interpreted the 2 June resolution as effectively determining the date of the attack, after allowing time for certain diversionary tactics to be employed such as sending many of the called-up reservists on home leave. But the source evidently did not have access to the smaller circle of the Israeli leadership that was privy to the detailed plan, scope, and timing of the air strike, though both sides were aware that each other’s air bases would be prime targets. Another possibility highlighted by Grajewski’s newly disclosed activity is that the Soviets were deliberately disinfomred by Israel in this matter.
We shall see in the next chapter that the Soviets prepared their diplomatic response on the assumption that an Israeli attack would occur on 5 June. It also appears indisputable that the USSR was geared up in advance for military action in response to an Israeli offensive on that day.

According to the official Russian military history from 2000, the Soviet eskadra in the Med—by then consisting of 40 battle units, including 10 submarines—was put on battle alert on 1 June. Further reinforcements kept on arriving. On 31 May, the Soviets notified the Turkish authorities that 10 more ships were to pass through the Bosporus and Dardanelles from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean during the first week of June, including four destroyers—one of which, the Kildin-class 626, was to appear a week later as the nearest ship to the USS Liberty off El-Arish. The list also included two “hydrographic vessels,” that is, the Soviets’ own intelligence-gathering ships, as well as the armed submarine tender Magomed Gadzhiyev (which was supposed to return through the straits on 6 June), and even an icebreaker. This was evidently the aforementioned “reinforcement” decided upon by the Black Sea Fleet headquarters.

On 4 June, Captain Ivan Kapitanets of the Northern Fleet’s destroyer Nastoychivy had neared Malta, carrying out his original orders to proceed through the Turkish straits into the Black Sea. His ship, along with two others that were put under his command, was then abruptly attached to the “combined flotilla” for an impending operation “to defend Soviet citizens.” As the retired admiral wrote in his memoirs, “we were given an order to bring the ship to full battle alert, for which we were given 12 hours.”

The Soviet military’s Arabic-language interpreters in Egypt were transferred from the embassy in Cairo to Alexandria and informed that they would be posted to the ships of the Black Sea Fleet, which were now cruising off the Israeli shore. “One of the interpreters . . . said he knew for sure that we would be attached to a desant force that would be landing in Haifa or slightly northward.” The interpreters were to handle liaison with Israeli Arabs, “who were longing for us.”

There is some in clarity in the testimonies about the timing of the orders that put the USSR’s strategic bombers on alert. Pyrlin said it was “on the eve of the war or in its first days.” The general in command of these bombers, Reshetnikov, has stated that “when fighting broke out,” the order
came “to prepare a regiment of strike aircraft, [and] arm them with bombs in order to land a blow at Israeli force concentrations and communications centers.” In his 1991 autobiography, Reshetnikov indicated that this order came some time after Israel’s preemptive attack: “Israel invaded Sinai, and Egypt could not defend it. Our oligarchs, after squandering all their store of verbal arguments, decided to activate forceful ones.”

But a detail in Reshetnikov’s story pinpoints the date of the order’s issue before the Israeli attack. “There was serious warning,” the air force general related, “against any losses and casualties, because every loss of any plane could unfold the essence and the meaning of our race [raids], our Soviet aviation.” To prevent formal identification of the Soviet air intervention, “we had to work under the colors of the Egyptian flag” and therefore “all the documents were taken from the pilots and the crew in case some plane is burning in the desert.” The idea was to “let others guess who fell down and why they were there, what happened.” But there was a logistical problem with repainting the planes in Egyptian markings, because “no one knew what these signs should look like”—and, once they found out, it was very difficult to obtain paint from the factories, which were closed for Sunday.

There were no Sundays in the course of the Six-Day War. The paint episode could have occurred only on Sunday, 4 June—or on the preceding Saturday. Indeed, Reshetnikov confirmed that a day before the order came to prepare the aircraft, the pilots were assigned predetermined targets in Israel. “The objects . . . were named to us—that strikes had to be delivered against: they were marked by the geographical terms on the map,” he said in an interview years later. Despite Reshetnikov’s obvious disdain for the USSR’s political leadership, by stating that his orders were received only after the outbreak of war he obeyed the line laid down from Brezhnev’s 20 June speech onward, and conformed with the USSR’s general cover-up of its prior preparations for an attack on Israel.

So—more expectably—did Pyrlin. But his account can now definitely be timed at 3 or 4 June, and it adds that combat alert was ordered for Soviet land forces as well as air forces “in the Transcaucasus, . . . in the Transcaspian, all the districts oriented at the Middle East. It was publicly known that these military districts are responsible for the situation . . . in the Middle East region.” Pyrlin claims “the fact that they were raised to alarm—it was well known, and from that various conclusions could be
Reshetnikov said, 35 years later, that “it was a very unpleasant feeling to operate in such a stealthy way, because we took the crewmen’s papers away and the planes were, in effect, going to go into action under the Egyptian flag. . . . This was an adventurist mission.”

He added the characteristic element that all his instructions were delivered orally, over the phone from Moscow—“to save time over the decoding,” even though the operation was of such proportions that it should have aroused interest in the West. He was to move the regiment of 28–30 strategic bombers from Priluki, near Kiev, to vantage points on the USSR’s southern fringe, “from where they could reach Sinai.”

As “these were heavy aircraft of the Strategic Air Force, which could fly for 5 hours each way without refueling”—evidently, Tu-95s—they would have been within range of Israel from central Ukraine, too. Moving them forward could thus be meant either to reduce flying time or to advertise the preparations to US satellites. But there is no evidence that this signal, if intended, was received.

“The orders came one after another. . . . We did not have the time to paint them all, but we did change the colors on many of the planes,” Reshetnikov related. “We needed time to let it dry . . . but in fact we were putting the colors on and flying straight away, flew immediately, and new planes were ready to take off.”

The nuclear-capable aircraft were armed, to the best of his memory, with conventional high-explosive and fougas (napalm) bombs. When “the first group was [at] the launching airfield,” Reshetnikov was instructed to await further orders.

The Soviet bombers were not to approach Israel unescorted. A retired Soviet air force lieutenant general, Yuri Nastenko, says that his force of MiG-21 fighters had a break from its training routine in 1967. “Ordinarily all maneuvers were held in the fall, but this time it was in the spring. . . . The planes were loaded with full battle gear—extra tanks which we usually did not carry. Apparently in order to prevent the information leaking, we were told we had to fly without being told where.”

Unlike Reshetnikov’s bombers, however, Nastenko’s command was put on full operational alert only on the evening of 5 June, after the “Egyptian air force had suffered a defeat.”
The original plan, then, called for fighter support by, or from, Egypt—one probable aim of Vybornov’s mission. The USSR-based fighters were prepared only as backup, and their belated activation is another testimony to the Soviets’ unpreparedness for the character and effect of Israel’s opening strike. In Egypt, all the Soviet personnel at Cairo West air base—including even duty officers—were sent off the field during the night of 4–5 June. They were ordered back only after Israel finally did unleash its crippling raids against the air bases of its Arab neighbors, on the morning of 5 June. It was the precise hour of attack that contributed to the element of surprise: instead of coming in predictably, “out of the sun” at daybreak, the Israelis waited until the Egyptian dawn patrols had landed and the level of alert was reduced, on the assumption that the expected attack would not occur on that day after all. Ironically, on their way back from the later waves of attack on Egyptian air bases, several Israeli pilots dropped leftover bombs on the Egyptian research reactor at Inshas (despite its defense by SAMs and anti-aircraft cannon), which was not included in their original missions. The damage was external only.

Later that day, Kosygin activated the Moscow–Washington teletype hotline for the first time since it was installed following the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. McNamara told us recently that the teletype machine at the Washington terminal of the line, which was then in the Pentagon, rang at 7:15 a.m.—that is, only about six fateful hours after the Israeli offensive began. The defense secretary hastened to wake up Johnson. After some hesitation by the marine sergeant posted at the White House bedroom door, “the president comes on the line and says, ‘What in the hell are you calling for at this hour?’” McNamara told him. Within fifteen minutes they, along with Rusk, had begun what became a nearly continuous conference in the White House situation room.

In hindsight, there was now a moment of comic relief while Washington officialdom debated how to address the Soviet premier. This was finally settled by asking the Moscow telephone operator, but when, at her advice, the message began “Dear Comrade Kosygin,” “Dobrynin—who had been at the Moscow end of the line—[later] said he had been quite startled. The Russians wondered if the President was making a joke, or making fun of them in some way.”

But at the time the situation appeared dead serious. “The president watched with great care” the hotline messages, according to Johnson’s
adviser McGeorge Bundy. At the outset, the Americans were “mainly concerned with the awful shape we would be in if the Israelis were losing. We didn’t know anything about the situation on the ground . . . . It was in a way reassuring when it became clear that the fighting was the Israelis’ idea and the idea was working.”

As the next chapter will show, this took quite a while to become clear in Moscow, too. The orders for activating the first stage of the desant operation—assembling the landing parties—almost certainly went out before it transpired that the Soviet-Arab plan had gone wrong, and probably before the first Israeli air strikes even began.

While there is as yet no direct evidence that Brezhnev and Grechko were personally involved in the inception of this naval landing, their joint authorship of such a scheme appears very much in character. Consider the following account of such an operation:

Landing from the sea . . . would be an absolute surprise. . . . [A] plan that is deciphered by the opponent, as is well-known, is half-destined to fail. Therefore, the first task was to ensure absolute secrecy. We forbade any correspondence in connection with the operation being prepared. For its development, only a strictly limited circle of people was drafted. . . . In order not to disclose our intentions, this group’s [intelligence gathering] was conducted across a broad front. Work upon the disinformation of the opponent was conducted, suggesting the “desant” would take place [elsewhere].

This description corresponds neatly to the Soviets’ planned Mediterranean operation in 1967: all directives for the landing were delivered orally or in sealed orders, only ship captains were informed until the actual implementation, and total radio silence was observed—not to mention the use of disinformation. But the quotation actually refers to a landing at Nazi-occupied Novorossiysk on the Black Sea during World War II. It is taken from Brezhnev’s memoirs, which describe his service in the capacity of political officer in the Soviet 18th Army as a lifelong defining experience, and take credit for this successful operation together with this army’s commanding officer—Grechko.

These two old comrades-in-arms appear to have reverted in 1967 to the victorious tactic of their joint heroic memories. Brezhnev’s tendency
to see the two conflicts in the same context is further reflected in his use, in his speech on 20 June 1967, of the term “treacherous” to describe Israel’s preemptive attack—an epithet traditionally used in Soviet parlance for the German invasion of the USSR in 1941. A landing operation would in any case not seem far-fetched to the Soviet brass: as late as 1969, such an assault (in this case a paratroop drop, also known in Russian as desant) was proposed by the commander of Soviet Airborne Forces in order to “fix things up” in Beijing following the Soviet-Chinese border clashes.

Likewise, the Soviet-Chinese confrontation also produced evidence that bombing Dimona would not have been unthinkable in Moscow: during the same crisis, “a Soviet second secretary [in Washington] . . . asked a State Department officer point-blank how US would react if the USSR took out Chinese nuclear facilities.”

The Russian military historian Yaremenko confirmed to us that preparations for a landing were begun in June 1967. “In order to influence Israel, the order was given to raise quickly, on board the ships of the squadron in the Mediterranean, units of untrained marines—that is, regular seamen. They were supposed to sail toward Alexandria and make a trial desant in that port. But the order was rescinded almost immediately as unrealistic.”

It has recently been revealed, however, that such a landing did take place in Egypt, not as a “trial” but in order to move the Soviet troops overland to the front. And some of the “untrained marines” were poised, throughout the war, to land directly on the Israeli coast. Yaremenko is unaware of written orders mentioning an Israeli target for the landing. But he added that there was a standing order from the commander of the Soviet navy: “If the Israelis try to blockade the Egyptian or Syrian coast, or to hamper the activity of Soviet vessels bringing arms and matériel to these countries, steps should be taken and arms used if necessary.”

Yuri N. Khripunkov is now the director of a school system and a member of the municipal council in Donetsk, Ukraine. In memoirs he wrote for a local newspaper, followed by interviews with us, which he supported with photographs, he provided the first published evidence that the desant legend was based on historical fact. Khripunkov related how on 5 June his captain, Aleksandr Dyadyun, directed him to raise a 30-man detachment of “volunteers” from among the ship’s company, in order to lead them on a landing mission in Israel. This was over one-
quarter of the frigate’s total complement of 110, but—Khripunkov says—“as we always worked in three alternating watches, the ship could manage even without so many of its men.” He was told that similar landing parties were being assembled on board 30-odd Soviet surface vessels in the Mediterranean, for a total of some 1,000 men. But the SKR-6 was demanded to contribute relatively more than larger ships: another source reports that on the submarine tender *Magomed Gadzhiev*, which normally carried a crew of about 450, the landing party included “every available hand,” including cooks and medics, and numbered 75. On board Khripunkov’s frigate, only one sailor refused to “volunteer”; he was later transferred to another unit but, as far as Yuri Nikolayevich knew, was not otherwise punished. “I was a foolish young man then. Today, I too would probably have refused such a mission.”

The mission for Khripunkov’s platoon was to penetrate Haifa port—the Israeli navy’s main base and command headquarters. The hazards of the operation were obvious. After the frigate approached land until the depth decreased to 15–20 meters, the landing party would head ashore in the ship’s *kater* (cutter, motor launch; Khripunkov scoffed at the question whether they had rubber dinghies). Two rounds might be needed, which would leave the first 15 men alone to face whatever awaited them. The seamen were neither trained nor equipped for a commando raid on land. Their leader was given no maps or specific targets. “What were we supposed to accomplish, with my pistol and the sailors’ AK-47s? Get in there and see, they told us. ‘Throw your RG-42s [depth grenades designed for use against frogmen]. Wipe out the enemy forces.’” Wait for reinforcements, they were told in general terms, “but nothing concrete was said. The air force was going to support us.” Not that Khripunkov and his men expected much from the promised air support. “Who was going to look for the landing force? How could we contact them? We had nothing ready—no radio gear, no codes, no signal rockets, nothing.”

What could the Soviets have expected a landing of such nature and proportions to achieve? All of Israel’s available reserves of able-bodied combat manpower and matériel were mobilized and deployed on three fronts. The economy was paralyzed; high-school students had been recruited to man essential services and assist superannuated reservists in civil-defense duties. A wave of raids on a series of soft targets along the thinly defended but densely populated coast might have had not only a
dire effect on morale and public order; it would have forced a diversion of essential front-line units, especially if the desantniks succeeded, through their interpreters, in arousing unrest among Israeli Arabs. As discussed in a previous chapter, Moscow had assessed the prospects of the impending war as a draw; even such a limited intervention could therefore be expected to tip the balance in favor of the Arab side, gaining the USSR its desired political advantage at minimal cost.

Khripunkov and his men were well aware that they were expendable as part of this cost; they were told, however, that they would be followed by a stronger force. As already mentioned, he knew that in addition to the improvised landing parties “there was also one BDK [large amphibious ship] with about 40 tanks and maybe a battalion of infantry”—though in the event, this force landed elsewhere. But anyway, the landing party was convinced that theirs would be a suicide mission, and not only for them: the scenario that was impressed on them predicted that their action would touch off a global conflict. “Losing 1,000 men,” he remarked to us in retrospect, “was nothing for the USSR. They started counting at five million. Each side wanted to demonstrate its dominant role. . . . The United States sends in the [Sixth] Fleet. We bring in our Black Sea Squadron. They send in spy planes. We start preparing a landing in Israel. The Israeli tanks move through Sinai and are ready to skip over the Suez Canal. What then? We land our force and World War III begins?”

But 5 June ended without the landing parties getting their final order to go in. In Moscow, it had become clear that the plan had worked too well, and the Israeli attack had been much more potent than expected. The question was now whether and how to proceed.
The military moves that the Soviet Union commenced on 4–5 June were begun before Israel had launched its first strike, and certainly before the USSR became fully aware of its effect. This preplanning, and its subsequent disruption, is also evident on the diplomatic level, thanks to documents recently released by the Russians themselves.

Late in the night of 5 June, after the “battle fog” had lifted somewhat to reveal the destruction wreaked on the Arab air forces, Ambassador Chuvakhin handed Prime Minister Eshkol a note from the Soviet government. It expressed the USSR’s indignation at Israel’s “adventurist act,” which “exposed the essence of the policy of the ruling circles in Israel, who are prepared—for the sake of their own narrow interests—to play with the world’s fate.”1 Although the message made no mention of the nuclear issue, this language closely echoed the memorandum composed 18 months earlier, after the Harel-Sneh meeting.

The contents of this Soviet note and the circumstances of its delivery are well documented by Israeli and other sources.2 They would not merit any fresh interest, were it not for the note’s recent publication in the official Russian collection of Soviet Foreign Ministry documents on the Middle Eastern conflict.3 This book, published in 2003, includes relatively few documents dating from the crisis and war of June 1967, but a
closer examination reveals a number of important disclosures—some of them apparently inadvertent.

One of these instances, which pertains to the 5 June note to the Israeli government, offers an extraordinary example of diplomatic practice, or rather malpractice. As reproduced in the new Russian anthology, the note itself is accompanied by the following cover letter.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR expresses its respect for the Embassy of Finland in Moscow, and has the honor of requesting the Embassy not to decline the courtesy of forwarding to its destination the original of the letter from the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, A. N. Kosygin, addressed to the Prime Minister of the State of Israel, Mr. Levi Eshkol, dated 5 June 1967.

The Ministry thanks the Embassy in advance for fulfilling this request, and takes this occasion to reiterate its expression of the highest esteem for the Embassy.

Moscow, < > June 1967

The surprising aspect of this document is that Finland started representing the Soviet Union’s interests in Israel only after Moscow cut off diplomatic relations—which occurred five days later, on 10 June 1967. At our request, Max Jakobson, who was at the time Finland’s permanent representative at the United Nations, obtained this clarification from the Foreign Ministry in Helsinki: “The USSR asked Finland to represent it toward Israel on 10 June. The request was submitted to the Foreign Ministry by the Soviet Ambassador in Helsinki. The positive reply was given late in the evening of 10 June, and, that same evening, a message was sent to the Finnish Embassy in Tel Aviv, instructing it to start functioning in this capacity from 11 June. The messages of 5 and 7 June were not transmitted through Finland; in fact, nothing was sent before 11 June.”

According to article 45 of the Vienna Convention that governs diplomatic protocol, once diplomatic relations were severed, it was not enough for the USSR to designate Finland as its “protecting power” in Israel; Israel’s consent for Finland to represent Soviet interests also had to be obtained before any correspondence via Helsinki could be started. The USSR had a well-deserved reputation for meticulous observance of such diplomatic minutiae, and even if Israel’s approval was a mere formality,
nevertheless it was a time-consuming procedure that had to be accomplished before the Finnish channel could be activated. This occurred only on 11 June, as confirmed in documents that we received from the Foreign Ministry in Helsinki via the Finnish embassy in Tel Aviv, as well as others that we located in Israel’s State Archive.  

Furthermore, even if this formal process had already been completed on 5 June, transmitting the message would have required a further delay. The modus operandi that came into effect after diplomatic relations had been severed is illustrated by the first Soviet communication that was actually passed to Israel via Finland. This is a note from the Soviet Foreign Ministry dated 13 June, which is also included in the new Russian volume. The format here is entirely different: not a note to Israel with a cover letter to the Finns, but a single paper addressed to the “protecting power”:

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR expresses its respect for the Embassy of Finland in Moscow and, by request of the Soviet Government, asks it to bring without delay to the knowledge of the State of Israel the following: . . .  

The head of the Israeli Foreign Ministry’s East European Division, Aryeh Ilan, recorded how this note was delivered:

This morning the Finnish Ambassador called me and asked to transmit a Soviet communication, which was received on 13 June at 01:45 by the Embassy of Finland in Moscow. The communication was translated from Russian into Finnish and from Finnish into English. The Ambassador of Finland dictated to me the following version: . . .  

Assuming that the Finns respected the Soviet request to transmit the message “without delay,” which explains its dictation by telephone, it emerges that due to the double translation, even an urgent message from Moscow to Jerusalem via Helsinki needed at least eight hours to reach its destination. The chronology of events on 5 June, as reviewed below, shows this could not have been contemplated, much less accomplished, on that day even if the “protecting power” arrangement had already been established.

But on 5 June, the procedural groundwork for Finland’s involvement
had not even been begun. This was still the case on 7 June, when yet another note to Israel is also described in the new Russian collection as “sent through the Embassy of Finland in the USSR” (this is the other note that, as Jakobson stated, never passed through Helsinki). 11 Like its predecessor of 5 June, the note of the 7th is also amply recorded elsewhere as having been delivered directly to Israel: It was brought by a Soviet Foreign Ministry courier to Israel’s embassy in Moscow; 12 and, in Israel, by Chuvakhin to the director general of the Foreign Ministry, Aryeh Levavi. 13 Indeed, the main thrust of the 7 June note is a threat to sever diplomatic relations with Israel, which confirms that at the time of writing the USSR recognized these relations as remaining intact.

In fact, on 10 June even the actual Soviet decision to sever diplomatic relations was read personally by Soviet first deputy foreign minister Vasily Kuznetsov to Ambassador Katz, who was invited for the purpose to the Foreign Ministry in Moscow. 14 Remarkably, Kuznetsov’s report of carrying out this task is also included in the same new Russian volume of documents, even though it proves that no Finnish services were required before. 15 Again, the message was transmitted in parallel in Israel also, as Gilboa recorded soon after the events: “One hour later [after its delivery to Katz] Chuvakhin brought the Soviet decision to Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban.” 16 Finland was not involved in this exchange either, and still had no reason to be.

How, then, can the Soviet request for Finland to forward the note of 5 June to Israel be accounted for, since it was diplomatically incorrect and especially since in practice it was never even made to the Finns, much less carried out by them? This glaring discrepancy between historical fact, diplomatic protocol, and archival records provides the first documentary confirmation for the mounting evidence from other sources that well before Israel’s preemptive strike, which was supposedly the reason for Moscow’s decision to sever relations, this Soviet move had already been determined and its implementation prepared—down to the detail of naming Finland as the “protecting power.”

The selection of Finland for this purpose was not self-evident. During a previous rupture of diplomatic relations with Israel, in 1953, the USSR appointed Bulgaria as its protecting power. Deputy Foreign Minister Malik noted at the time that a simultaneous break of relations by “friendly East European countries would not serve the purpose.” 17 The
fact that no Warsaw Pact member state was appointed in 1967 suggests
that the break with Israel was preplanned this time to include the entire
bloc. Conversely, the fact that Romania, the only Warsaw Pact member
that did not ultimately sever relations, was not appointed may confirm
that its decision came as a surprise to Moscow. In any case, the Soviet
move was of such magnitude that it too must have been decided at the
highest level of leadership—the Politburo.

This preplanning is strongly suggested by a minute but telltale fea-
ture in the cover letter to the Finnish embassy, to which the 5 June note
to Israel was attached. The full date of the message to Israel is mentioned
in this cover letter. But the cover letter itself is dated only “<   > June
1967”—that is, the day was left blank. The meticulous reproduction of
this detail by the volume’s editors, headed by Vitaly Naumkin, can only
be commended, as its implications are far-reaching and contradict the of-
ficial Soviet version of events as well as conventional Western historiog-
raphy. It demonstrates clearly that this letter was prepared in advance for
delivery sometime in June, with only the exact day to be filled in when the
letter was to be used, after the procedure of severing diplomatic relations
with Israel was completed—although the note to Israel itself was pre-
pared bearing the date 5 June, for the record. (This, incidentally, is yet an-
other indication that the Israeli attack was predicted to occur on the 5th.)

Could the note to Israel bearing the date 5 June have been prepared
before the events to which it supposedly responded took place? Evidently
so, if these events were expected. The new document collection also of-
fers another example, which illustrates that circulating such papers be-
fore their official date of promulgation was a standard operating proce-
dure, and was exercised on other occasions in the same crisis. On 21 May,
Gromyko instructed Fedorenko at the United Nations how to make use
of “the Soviet Government’s Statement of 23 May”18—a statement that
was issued two days later but which evidently had already been formu-
lated, approved, and distributed.

The “Finnish document” thus shows that the USSR’s premeditated
moves included a break of diplomatic relations with Israel after the latter
was to be provoked into a first strike against Egypt. This may explain why
the 5 June note to Israel condemns only “Israel’s treacherous attack on a
neighboring Arab state—the United Arab Republic,” even though on the
ground, other Arab states were already involved in the war.19
The same is true of the first Soviet message that was sent over the hotline to Washington on 5 June, which was signed by Kosygin as head of government. Not only does it fail to reflect the sense of urgency and looming disaster that does emanate from subsequent Soviet messages during the war; it too speaks only of “military clashes between Israel and the United Arab Republic,” even though by the time it was sent reports from the Soviet ambassadors in Syria and Jordan must have reached Moscow. Media reports from Israel were not revealing much, due to its “battle fog” policy of releasing no information on the progress of the war for the first 24 hours, and Ambassador Chuvakhin inquired in the morning at the Foreign Ministry: “Where is the war?” But in Egypt, as a Soviet diplomat recalls: “One hour later [after the Israeli bombing] we already knew in effect what was happening. A group of Soviet specialists, who were working at the biggest base, Cairo West, arrived at the Embassy. . . . On the question ‘what has happened?’ the highest ranking officer blurted out: ‘Egypt does not have an air force any more; the Cairo West base does not exist, either.”

This might well have been General Vybornov, judging by his traumatic memories from watching the Israeli raid. But the Soviets were updated in the other countries that Israel attacked, too. In the course of that morning, the president of Iraq had already informed the Soviet ambassador in Baghdad that Syria and Jordan were attacked as well as Egypt, and in Amman, the Soviet ambassador took part in a meeting of the chiefs of diplomatic missions, which was convened in the morning by King Hussein.

Compare this with a telegram sent by Gromyko to the Soviet ambassadors in Mongolia, North Korea, and North Vietnam on 13 June 1967:

When, as a result of the treacherous aggression by Israel, military actions developed, the Soviet Union resolutely supported the UAR and other Arab countries that were the subject of attack. On the day military actions began, the Soviet Government published a statement in which it qualified Israeli actions as aggression, resolutely condemned Israel and demanded of it, as a first urgent measure, to liquidate the military conflict, to stop immediately and unconditionally military operations against the UAR, Syria, Jordan and other Arab States, and to withdraw
its forces behind the armistice line. The same goal was sought by . . . Kosygin’s message to . . . Eshkol, which was sent on the same day.”

By writing that Kosygin’s message to Eshkol had “the same goal” as the government communiqué, Gromyko discreetly sidestepped the fact that Kosygin’s actual text named only the UAR as the victim of Israeli attack. Gromyko’s own mention of “Syria, Jordan, and other Arab states” was made with the benefit of hindsight. So too was Brezhnev’s speech on 20 June, in which he spoke of an Israeli attack on several Arab states.

The appearance of Egypt alone in the first Soviet documents, to be replaced later by a list of Arab countries, is accounted for by the Soviet premeditation of the crisis as described in the previous chapters. The phrasing of the protest to Eshkol, the cover letter to the embassy of Finland, and probably also the momentous decision to activate the hotline, as well as the first message to be sent over it, were prepared according to a war plan that envisaged only, or mainly, an Israeli first strike at Egypt.

Naumkin’s collection includes additional documents that bespeak Soviet preplanning for the war well ahead of its outbreak. A footnote to a dispatch from Fedorenko, in New York, on 5 June quotes a previous communication from the foreign minister: “On 5 June 1967, Comrade Gromyko issued a directive to inform him whether the Soviet representative had reached agreement with the representatives of the UAR and Syria to act according to [the] presented plan.” Russian grammar lacks both an indefinite and a definite article, but since Fedorenko’s report refers to events that took place early in the morning US time, he could hardly have been informed of such a plan after the outbreak of war; hence, Gromyko evidently referred to a specific action plan that had been prepared before the war, to be activated once it began.

In addressing the United States, the Soviet leadership did not intend to stress the urgency of a cease-fire before the Israeli attack had been stemmed and reversed, according to the “Conqueror” plan. As Pyrlin later attested, “no one expected that the war would go [on] for only the six days and would end up so tragically for Egypt.” If the Soviet Union’s response to Israel’s first strike would begin by severing diplomatic relations, the procedural delay in forwarding its protest note to Israel until the process of appointing Finland was completed would serve the pur-
pose of gaining time for a counterattack before a cease-fire froze the status quo. The note to Israel would, pro forma, bear the date when hostilities began, but the cover letter to Finland would be dated whenever the formalities creating this channel were completed—perhaps a day or two later. This appears to be the only plausible explanation for the unused cover letter’s presence in the Foreign Ministry file, and for its undated form.

On the propaganda front too, according to the Russian orientalist Alexei Vasilyev, during the first two days of the war the Soviet press published reports that were written before the fighting started.29 The resulting phenomenon was noted with surprise on 5 June by the director of intelligence and research at the State Department in Washington:

The two commentaries on Moscow radio (one in English at 12:00Z [local time] and one in Arabic two hours later) were unusual; the Soviet media normally clam up in a situation like this and then begin commenting only after some of the dust has settled. It may be that the two broadcasts were merely following the pre-established line with appropriate amendment for the fact of hostilities. But if so it would appear that the policy levels in Moscow made no move to turn off the propaganda spigot for six hours after they had the first word of hostilities (in Moscow the news of the fighting came during business hours).

Thus, the Soviet propaganda—if only by a decision to do nothing different—has been allowed to continue its previous tack.30

A similar and celebrated use of prefabricated news items that reflected planned operations rather than actual reality famously occurred when Radio Cairo reported Tel Aviv burning. While this instance could be attributed to wishful thinking, a communiqué from the Egyptian Supreme Command that its armor had penetrated into Israeli territory after fierce fighting in which it had beaten off Israeli attacks and “annihilated the enemy force” was very much in keeping with “Conqueror,” if not with the situation on the ground.31 A less-noticed report on Radio Damascus clearly stemmed from the Syrian operational blueprint, Operation Victor: the state radio broadcast on 6 June that Akko (Acre, north of Haifa), which was designated as the rendezvous with the landing forces, had been taken by Syrian troops.32
The actual events on the morning of 5 June obviated the plan that the news items were designed to reflect. With Egypt decisively routed before the ground war began, a demand to stop hostilities was already included in the Soviet government’s statement by the time it was issued the same evening (the statement that Gromyko cited in his aforementioned circular).

This statement does mention the other Arab states as having been attacked by Israel. The draft of this document was composed by Foreign Ministry staffers after the war broke out, and the version that was sent “upstairs” for approval included “severe words . . . about American actions, that as a matter of fact were pushing Israel to start military actions.” These words were omitted from the version that was ultimately issued, but apparently only after the Soviet media had broadcast them, as the State Department monitors mentioned that “Moscow’s radio has blamed the US for egging Israel on to start the fighting.” Thus it appears that the Soviet Foreign Ministry underlings were still operating under the previous directives, even though the Politburo was already aware that these were no longer relevant.

The Israeli attack caused an emergency convening of the Politburo, and it would not have been impossible for the cover letter to the Finns to be written that day at the Foreign Ministry if the diplomatic groundwork was already in place. But if this Soviet diplomatic démarche had been decided on only after the USSR was utterly surprised by the nature, speed, and effect of Israel’s first strike, it would have been clearly impossible to go through all the procedural steps listed above in time to have the Finns deliver any message the same day—and such dispatch was already necessitated by the state of affairs on the battlefield.

The cover letter to the Finnish embassy therefore could not have been initiated on 5 June; furthermore, if it had been hurriedly prepared for delivery on the same day, it would have borne the same date. As an open form, prepared for use at a yet undetermined time, it must have been prepared earlier.

In 1990, Parker was told in Moscow that “the Soviets had been prepared to cut relations with Israel since 1966.” Indeed, the threat of such a step was repeatedly brandished by Moscow throughout the year that preceded the war. A Politburo decision that included severance of relations with Israel in its policy planning, and also the choice of Finland as the USSR’s representative, might have been taken at any time during
this period. The Politburo would have instructed the Foreign Ministry to submit a draft of this procedure for discussion and a vote.

But even after the Politburo resolution was taken, no one in the Foreign Ministry would have prepared a letter to the Finnish embassy on his own initiative; the directive to implement the decision also had to come from the top—from the Politburo to Minister Gromyko, to be passed down to the actual writer of the document. As attested by a former senior Foreign Ministry official, Gromyko (who himself was only a nonvoting member of the Politburo) would never make any move on his own, without the blessing of the party’s highest ruling body: “Gromyko did not resolve a single tiny question: He would not fulfill a decision or make up his mind without getting the approval of the Politburo first.”

Such a decision to go ahead with a measure that already had been approved in principle could have been taken at one of the last Politburo meetings before the war broke out, or by a telephone poll of the members, as was frequently done: on 31 May Brezhnev and Kosygin were inspecting the Northern Fleet, and afterward Brezhnev spent the first days of June, until the Middle Eastern war broke out, at his dacha outside Moscow.

The Israeli strike on Egyptian airfields started at 7:45 a.m. Israel time, which was 9:45 a.m. in Moscow. The Politburo convened at around noon, so the decision to proceed with the previously adopted resolution to activate the hotline could have been taken there and then. Most probably it was taken soon after the meeting began, because shortly after its outset the senior and trusted translator Victor Sukhodrev was summoned by a phone call from Gromyko to come to the new government communications center, which housed the Moscow end of the hotline to Washington. Kosygin had made a prior visit to the new communications center to ensure that the line was in working order, and noted: “It is possible that any day now, this channel might be needed for an important government message.”

So by about noon Moscow time, when the Politburo gathered in the Kremlin, the extent of Israel’s crucial blow to Arab air forces was at least partly known. About 2 p.m. Moscow time, Kosygin, KGB chief Andropov, and Gromyko went down to the hotline terminal, in the basement of the Council of Ministers building, with the Politburo’s approved message to Johnson. Sukhodrev’s impression was of “burning urgency,” but there was nevertheless a delay of almost two hours until the telex message was
actually transmitted: it is recorded as being sent from Moscow at approximately 4 p.m. local time. All three leaders waited for Johnson’s answer to be received, decoded, and typed. “Kosygin put the paper into his briefcase,” Sukhodrev related, “and all three went back to the Politburo, which was sitting upstairs and awaiting the reply.”

By this time it was evident that the preplanned military intervention against Israel on behalf of Egypt, in its original form, would achieve little—while still risking a clash with the United States, despite the State Department’s public declaration of US neutrality “in thought, word, and deed.” Severing relations with Israel became unnecessary for the time being, the date was never inserted into the cover letter to Finland, and the note itself was delivered directly to Israel in its originally prepared language. Still, the Politburo dithered whether *some* military action must and could be taken in favor of the Arabs—if only for the sake of Soviet credibility. No order went out for the poised forces to stand down.
Debates, Delays, and Ditherings

6 – 8 June

On 7 June, [West German Soviet-affairs specialists] argued that they still saw some danger of a direct Soviet intervention . . . [but] reiterated that the speed of our reactions and moves had thrown the USSR somewhat off balance.

— Dispatch from the Israeli Embassy, Bonn

During the crisis and war of 1967, a staffer of the Israeli embassy in West Germany, Nitzan Hadas, held regular meetings with officials of the Foreign Ministry in Bonn. Hadas’s dispatches indicate that the Germans’ perception of the Soviet role differed substantially from those that were held by other Western European, as well as American, diplomatic observers—or at least those that they shared with the Israelis. In view of the facts that are now being exposed, the German assessments—which described Soviet policy as far more aggressive than the others did—were astonishingly accurate. The East German Stasi is known to have infiltrated the highest levels of West German government; it seems as if this penetration was mutual, even though the Bonn officials told Hadas that their estimates were theoretical and often varied from their own intelligence reports. The forecast that Hadas heard on 6 June from Dr. Alfred Blumenfeld, the head of the Soviet affairs unit, and his deputy Christel Steffler was among the most precise assessments of Soviet intentions that were made anywhere at the time, and now seems almost clairvoyant—although it came one day behind the actual Soviet moves.¹

If Israel dealt the Egyptians a total defeat (Hadas reported), the Germans said they foresaw “a direct Soviet intervention—in the worst case, by ground forces. They fear mainly that the Soviet Air Force might be sent into action on the Egyptians’ side, and that tactical missiles might be
used. . . . [T]hey do not rule out that the professional coordination was
done in the Grechko-Badran talks, on the content of which they do not
yet have confirmed reports. Interestingly, Blumenfeld ‘suggested’ to us
to try and rout the Egyptians as soon as possible, so as to preclude this
practical option for the Soviets time-wise. . . . They consider that the de-
terrent value of the Sixth Fleet has decreased in respect of the Soviets’ re-
inforced naval presence in the Mediterranean, also because of the United
States’ declared policy in the last two days and its political activity be-
forehand, and according to assessments here the Soviets are prepared to
take a ‘calculated risk’ of confrontation with the United States in the
Middle East.”

The Germans saw a connection between Soviet threats to Israel and,
possibly, to West Germany, particularly West Berlin. Hadas reported that,
on instructions from Jerusalem, he encouraged them to press the Ameri-
cans to abandon their declared “neutrality,” which the Germans de-
scribed as “a heaven-sent gift” for the Soviets. The USSR would, “in the
long term, take advantage of the war in order to turn the Soviet presence
into a permanent grip, taking advantage of the United States’ entangle-
ment in Vietnam.”2

This “heaven-sent gift” had granted the Soviet navy, in effect, uncon-
tested control of the eastern Mediterranean, as the Sixth Fleet had virtu-
ally relinquished its presence in the combat zone. It withdrew even far-
ther in response to a chorus of Arab accusations, led by Egypt, that
American (and British) planes had taken part in Israel’s air strike.

Ironically, the shoe could have been on the other foot. A year earlier,
a US official negotiating the sale of Skyhawk planes to Israel, Robert
Komer (for whom this was a diversion from his main business as John-
son’s point man in Saigon), “recommended” that “a group of Israeli pi-
lots be sent to Vietnam, and proposed a ‘deal’: If [Israel] sent the pilots,
the Americans would provide them with planes, and after their tour of
duty they would be able to bring the planes to Israel.” A report on this to
Eshkol added dryly: “Our external and domestic difficulties in this matter
were explained to him.”3

A few weeks earlier, Walt Rostow recorded in greater detail Ambas-
sador Harman’s reply when asked “why Israel found it so difficult to help
us on Vietnam. Internally, he said Israel’s coalition government depends
in part on one left-wing anti-Communist party (Mapam), which the Prime
Minister must handle delicately. Externally, he cited relations with the USSR as Israel’s biggest problem outside the Middle East. The Soviets have left the Israelis in no doubt that they are watching very carefully Israel’s position on Vietnam.”4 So no exchange of combat pilots or sorties ensued, and in the Mediterranean the Americans even turned down Israeli requests for direct liaison with the Sixth Fleet—a decision that was about to prove disastrous.

When the Arabs’ accusation that US planes and pilots were fighting on the Israeli side was echoed in the Soviet media, Johnson protested to Kosygin over the hotline (the salutation “Comrade” had by now been abandoned): “I was puzzled, Mr. Chairman, by what has been said by the Soviet Press and Radio. . . . It does not help to charge the United States as a participant in aggression, especially when our only role has been to press for restraint at every step of the way. . . . Since you know where our carriers are, I hope you can put Cairo right on this matter and help us eliminate that kind of needless inflammation.”5

“You know where our carriers are” was an intentional barb. Soviet ships had been tailing the Sixth Fleet so closely that its commander, Vice Admiral Martin, “admitted the nuisance value of Soviet surveillance and harassment” by signaling, in English and Russian, to a Soviet destroyer:

> Your actions for the past five days have interfered with our operations. By positioning your ship in the midst of our formation and shadowing our every move you are denying us the freedom of movement on the high seas that has been traditionally recognized by seafaring nations for centuries. In a few minutes the task force will commence maneuvering at high speeds and various courses. Your present position will be dangerous to your ship as well as the ships of this force. I request you clear our formation without delay and discontinue your interference and unsafe practices.6

Quite a mouthful to flash in Morse code; it was doubtless received as a compliment by the Soviet skipper. It was the United States, however, that responded to the Soviet nuisance, and then to the Arab charges of complicity with Israel, by pulling back in order to demonstrate its neutrality. The US Navy barred its carrier-based aircraft from approaching closer than 100 miles to the Egyptian, Syrian, and Israeli coasts; the Sixth
Fleet’s two carrier groups, which since 2 June had “remained at least 200 miles from Egypt, Syria, and Israel,” were ordered to move westward “on a training exercise,” and by 7 June they were 400 miles away.

The US ships did not, however, shake off the Soviet surveillance. In one of the first books to appear about the Six-Day War, Randolph S. Churchill and his son Winston Churchill III reported, for instance, that, on 8 June, “two Soviet warships, a destroyer and a small patrol craft, began to harass a carrier task force of the US Sixth Fleet. Possibly the Russians were bringing pressure on the Americans to abandon the tracking of a Soviet submarine they suspected was in the area.” But for once this shadowing by the Soviets served the Americans’ purpose.

Presumably following Johnson’s protest, Vice Admiral Sysoyev, the commander of the Soviet navy’s “combined eskadra” in the Mediterranean, was called from the bridge of his flagship Slava to the radio shack. As he recalled, “I was contacted by Admiral Nikolai Smirnov, the Chief of Naval Operations, who asked me: ‘Viktor Sergeyevich, can you report to me whether US aviation is taking part in the strikes on Egypt?’ I replied that such a question could not be answered without making some inquiries. Smirnov then informed me as follows: ‘In 30 minutes I have to receive your answer to my question, and this reply must be absolutely reliable.’ . . . I understood that the next turn of events depended on my answer. Time was catastrophically short. I therefore decided to call all my subordinate ship and detachment commanders to the microphones, and demanded that they submit the required reports. Once I had let them speak through the mikes, without observing secrecy, . . . within 30 minutes I received all the necessary data. I passed on to Smirnov my conclusion that US aviation was taking no part in the strikes on Egypt.” The Soviet media dropped the accusations, but did not retract or deny them. The Soviets’ compliance on this particular issue typified the quandary that the Kremlin now faced.

In the White House, McNamara recalled to us, “Johnson and I were wondering. . . . What will the Soviet Union do, with Egypt—their client—being severely weakened?” The Politburo, in a marathon session, was pondering the same question, and for the first few days it appears to have been hobbled by conflicting reports as well as opinions. Soviet personnel on the ground were horrified by the devastation wreaked on the Arab air forces, and soon after on the Egyptian army in Sinai. But the Egyptian
leadership, increasingly embittered that the Soviets had deprived them of their best chance by holding them back from striking first, now sought at least to salvage the promised Soviet intervention after an Israeli attack. This meant trying to convince the Soviets that all was not lost—and that the United States was directly involved. But the USSR, while willing to intervene against Israel so long as the risk of real US involvement was low, recoiled at the prospect of head-on confrontation with the still-superior power of the Sixth Fleet, not to mention an intercontinental nuclear exchange.

In Cuba after the war, Kosygin (according to a CIA cable), “informed [Fidel] Castro that the USSR had been prepared to aid [Egypt] in the struggle against Israel,” but Amer “told the USSR that [Egypt] intended to stop fighting within several days.” From Cairo, however, the CIA reported soon that Amer and his faction “had rather been intent on preventing total Soviet domination of Egypt.” Given Amer’s close relationship with Grechko, this (if true) would reflect the depth of the Egyptian marshal’s resentment at first being restrained and then being denied the aid he was promised in exchange. But both versions appear to have skipped a stage: Amer did not tell the Soviets that in effect he was giving up until late on the war’s second day. The reports that Moscow was given previously, and the possibility that it still might intervene, were reflected by Chuvakhin when he told the West German ambassador in Tel Aviv, Rolf Pauls, “in [an] unusually serious vein,” as Pauls related to his American counterpart: “If now Israelis become quite drunk with success and pursue their aggression further the future of this little country will be a very sad one.”

Speaking before the Central Committee on 20 June, Brezhnev laid down this version: “In the first two days, the Arab forces’ combat capability and morale proved too feeble. . . . [But] it must be said that the Arab leaders did not immediately appreciate in full the gravity of the situation. . . . On 6 June, at 8 a.m., the Soviet ambassador was summoned to Nasser, who referred to the hostilities quite optimistically: . . . ‘The situation at the fronts is not as bad as Western propaganda is trying to depict. . . . [T]he Israeli forces have been repulsed from the Gaza Strip, [although] after pitched battles they did manage to take part of El-Arish.’”

Nasser, Brezhnev said, had accused the United States of planning for Israel to capture some Arab territory, in order to extract concessions after
a cease-fire. But the Egyptian president declared that his country “was resolved to fight so long as a single Israeli soldier stood on Arab soil”—that is, the Soviet intervention was still needed and was not doomed to fail. Brezhnev went on: “He asked that Moscow be told (I am still quoting from the transcript, comrades) that the Arabs were standing fast, and that he—Nasser personally—would do everything possible to enlist the entire Arab world against the Americans.”

Nasser did try. His enlistment efforts included a telephone call to King Hussein of Jordan that, famously, was intercepted by Israel and, among other tidbits, exposed the lie about US intervention—which was clearly designed to force the Soviets’ hand into fulfilling their part of the deal. “Internationalizing the conflict” also was, according to Russian accounts, the purpose of Nasser’s decision to close the Suez Canal long before the first Israeli soldier jumped into its waters.

Egypt’s media put the demand for Soviet intervention more bluntly. At Novosty’s Cairo bureau, Yegorin recalls, “I could obtain only official communiqués. On the first day, they were reassuring.” But he received a phone call from Musa Sabri, the “right-wing” editor-in-chief of Al-Akhbar, who shouted: “Where is your assistance? You are again leaving us to face the enemy alone! You are chatterboxes, not comrades!” Furious demonstrations in front of the Soviet embassy, demanding immediate aid, were shown to be less than spontaneous when a single phone call to Heikal sufficed to end the protests. This was after a Soviet resupply airlift began, and Pozhidayev pointed out to Nasser “the sky full of Antonov [military] transport planes hastily painted with Aeroflot markings.”

Brezhnev told the Central Committee that Amer about-faced and issued his desperate call for a cease-fire only late on 6 June. “At 18 hours, Marshal Amer sent an urgent message to the Soviet government from President Nasser and the UAR government, saying: ‘The situation is very dangerous and really critical, and cannot go on like this any longer than tonight.’ Six hours later, Amer again told the Soviet ambassador on Nasser’s behalf that the situation was so serious that ‘a cease-fire must be obtained by 5 o’clock in the morning.’”

Returning home at 6 a.m. from a sleepless night, Deputy Foreign Minister Semyonov noted in his diary: “Last night was the climactic point of the Middle Eastern crisis, reminiscent of the Cuban one. Until 3 a.m., I attended the Politburo session, then went to the Ministry. . . . SOS sig-
nals were coming in from Cairo. It seemed that the will to resist was lost there." It was only at this stage that the USSR changed the instructions for its UN representative. According to the not unfriendly account of India’s then-delegate at the United Nations, on 5 June the Security Council’s deliberations were complicated “by the Soviet demands that [it] should condemn Israel’s aggression” as a condition for any cease-fire. “On the morning of June 6, the Soviet still seemed to demand condemnation of Israel. . . . Late that afternoon, the Egyptians informed the Soviet Union that they would accept a ceasefire unless they received immediate military assistance. It was clear, however, that such assistance could not be given.” Fedorenko went along with a unanimous decision calling for a cease-fire and an end to all military activities. Indian ambassador Arthur Lall noted: “It is interesting that the USSR did not at this stage seek specifically for Council condemnation of Israel, as previously requested. Now the Soviet delegate brought to the question of withdrawal a concentrated sense of great urgency.” As Brezhnev explained:

In this situation the only right thing to do was to employ all political means in order to extricate the UAR from this drubbing. . . . Our activity in favor of the UAR in this critical situation was aimed at halting the aggressor while the Arab countries still retained a significant part of their fighting forces; at preventing the Israeli forces from capturing Cairo and Damascus; and above all, at keeping the progressive regime in the UAR from being toppled, which would have touched off—as we are certain—a chain reaction in other Arab countries.

Brezhnev, like Kosygin, was compressing the developments in retrospect: On the night of 6 June, Israeli forces had not yet begun to advance into Syria. But, as he admitted,

This was the most critical moment for the UAR in the course of the hostilities. When we received the alarm from Cairo that reflected the dramatic situation on the Egyptian-Israeli front, we—the members of the Politburo—held a meeting at 1 a.m. We considered various alternatives how it might be possible to help the UAR military forces, which were being trounced. It was out of the question to transport somehow, in the few hours
that were left, reasonable quantities of weapons, tanks and planes, in order to substantially reinforce the collapsing Egyptian front, to stop the Israeli forces’ advance toward the Suez Canal, and to provide air cover for the UAR’s capital and other cities. It had to be taken into account that the Egyptian leadership had effectively lost control over its forces. These were in a state of chaos and helplessness. Many airports, where our planes perhaps could have landed, were destroyed.23

“Our planes” could be stretched to mean resupply flights alone, but “air cover” was the closest that Brezhnev came to admitting that a direct aerial intervention was contemplated. Although the Politburo had approved the overall plan and had even put it in motion, dispute set in at this point whether to let it go ahead under the circumstances created by Israel’s air strike.

Aleksandr Khaldeyev, who at the time was a journalist and writer in Baku, capital of the Azerbaijan SSR, reports hearing from members of the Communist elite there of rumors from Moscow that at least twice there were pitched debates in the Politburo whether to go ahead with the naval landing.24 At least one of these occasions was confirmed to us at first hand by Yegorychev: “I happened to overhear such a heated discussion when I phoned Brezhnev. Kosygin was giving a speech in a meeting of a [small group] there, and categorically stated that we had no right to intervene in this war and should not do so. . . . I know Kosygin opposed the use of direct force in this conflict.” He is certain that Kosygin’s threatening message to Johnson on 10 June conflicted with the premier’s own opinion, and must have been imposed on him by the Politburo.25

The Soviet military and intelligence chiefs, who had elaborated the original plan and overseen its preparation, reportedly pressed for its full implementation. In later denying any Soviet intent to intervene in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, former KGB rezident in Cairo Vadim Kirpichenko said: “This was not . . . 1967 . . . when we were insisting and we were prepared for some decisive actions.”26 Pyrlin stated specifically: “As far as the invasion readiness goes, yes, the order was given but there was no order to bomb or to attack Israel—Grechko would not be able to issue such an order without a Politburo decision. . . . In 1967 . . . he [Grechko] was not able to issue the order without Brezhnev’s decision”—equating the Politburo with the general secretary.27
Another account describes Andropov, along with Grechko, “pressing for the immediate dispatch of Soviet forces to the Middle East. They were supported by Yegorychev, who suggested a landing on the isthmus of Sinai, to start a march on Tel Aviv”; Yegorychev now denies making any such recommendation. Dobrynin maintained to us that “there was no . . . intention on the part of the Soviet government [to intervene]. There were rumors, but there could be any kind of rumors. But there was no real intention on the part of the government. This I know for sure.” Still, he admitted, “[Generals] have their own considerations. . . . They plan all kinds of variations that may or may not be realized.” From the sidelines, Khrushchev, who felt in retrospect that the Soviets had been wrong to support Nasser’s designs on Israel, also considered it a mistake to leave him in the lurch.

The orders, or lack of them, that emerged from the Politburo’s deliberations kept most of the massed Soviet power on tenterhooks—and did send some of it into action. In Soviet and then Russian publications, the Six-Day War is routinely listed among the conflicts in which the USSR played a combat role. Yegorin’s formulation is typical: “On 5 June, an absolutely new stage began for the presence of our military specialists in Egypt: direct participation of our people and hardware in the hostilities, which later would become known as ‘fulfillment of internationalist duty.’”

Yuri Nastenko and his USSR-based MiG-21s were apparently mobilized once it became clear that no air support could be flown out of Egyptian bases. He recalls that the MiG-21s of his regiment were armed with air-to-air missiles “and other armament,” equipped with auxiliary fuel tanks to extend their range, and flown on the morning of 6 June from Vaziani in Georgia to Yerevan West in Armenia, the air base nearest the war zone. From a briefing the pilots were given by the commanders of the military district and of their air force corps, Nastenko “as an experienced person . . . understood that this was going to be something extraordinary.”

We knew what was going on in the Middle East; we knew that there had been an aggression. In principle, none of us had assumed that we would take part in these battles to such an extent . . . None of us had imagined that our help would be
required, that such assistance would be granted at the level of our government. . . . The military district commander told us that a war had begun, and that on the orders of the defense minister, “you are assigned to extend internationalist aid,” as it was then called, to the Egyptian Army, whose air force had been dealt a defeat. It was also said that only volunteers would fly, but no one was found who would say “I won’t go.” It should be remembered that in those times this amounted to convicting oneself.\textsuperscript{32}

The crews were scrambled several times over the following three days. “The command was working on the assumption that we would land at Syrian bases, and thus would have to overfly a neutral country such as Turkey,” Nastenko wrote in a memoir. He added in an interview: “Unfortunately, the Turkish authorities refused and faced us with the task of breaking through. So we practiced combat defense, with a reinforcement regiment added to protect the main force as it went through.”\textsuperscript{33}

Of this at least the United States received a tip, despite Soviet efforts to conceal the planes’ destination. On 8 June, the US ambassador in Turkey reported that he had been contacted, late the previous night, by a senior official in the Turkish Foreign Office, Ilter Turkmen (later foreign minister). Turkmen informed him that on 6 June, “Iraqi government through [the] Turkish Ambassador in Baghdad had requested [the government of Turkey] to grant overflight rights to MiG-21s which Iraq was receiving from USSR. [The] Iraqis cited US-UK intervention in Middle East as reason for obtaining aircraft but were vague about numbers involved or timetable for delivery. Turkmen said [Turkey] had not been approached by USSR re MiGs. Turks were replying . . . [that] they would be unable to grant request because of Security Council cease-fire resolution and questions regarding Turkish security. Turkmen requested this information be held very closely.”\textsuperscript{34}

The Turks—probably noting the Iraqi reference to “US-UK intervention”—had concluded that the proposed aircraft passage was connected with the Arab-Israeli war; Israel had indeed bombed the nearest Iraqi air bases. The report from Turkey may be connected with a still-classified paper that Walt Rostow forwarded to Johnson a few hours later, noting: “It looks as though Kosygin may have contemplated on June 6
sending additional aircraft to Egypt—but he is obviously reluctant and trying to use a cease-fire to avoid that move.”

Given the disclosures as to the positions taken by the Politburo members, this reflects a total misunderstanding of the Soviet system by the White House: Kosygin had been signing the hotline messages, but he certainly would not have been the one to “contemplate” such a move.

Whether the Soviets were actually reluctant to face a clash with NATO member Turkey, or concluded that their MiG-21s could no longer land safely in, let alone operate from, the bombed-out Syrian or Egyptian bases, the squadrons in Armenia never received final clearance to force their way south. Lacking fighter cover, Reshetnikov’s bomber pilots were left waiting in their cockpits. As he related, “in Moscow, they were very agitated and they kept coming down on us. General Staff in Moscow badgered me all the time, but they were almost certainly being pestered from higher up, the Central Committee or even higher—in my opinion, no lower than the Politburo. Conflicting orders kept emanating from there. . . . We were kept constantly posted with intelligence data every morning, and sometimes at midday and in the evening too.”

The bombers’ assignments were not canceled, but final orders for takeoff never came.

Professor Zeev Katz of the Hebrew University interviewed two immigrants to Israel in the early 1990s, former Soviet paratroopers who reported that their units also spent several days in transport aircraft on the runways, prepared for a drop in the Middle East. As Nastenko put it, “unfortunately no need arose for such decisive action.”

Nonetheless, some Soviet combat pilots apparently did go into action on the Egyptian front—those who were already in Egypt. In April 1967, 15 latest-model Soviet Su-7 fighter-bombers were delivered to Egypt, but “the Egyptian pilots did not have time to master them.” On the first day of the war, Amer had ordered these planes to be deployed, if necessary with their Russian instructors. Israeli journalist-historian Shabtai Teveth relates that the tank column in which he was embedded was attacked by these aircraft at dawn “on the second day of the war,” in the Gaza Strip.

“Two Egyptian jet bombers, Sukhoi/7s, appeared overhead and began a bombing run towards the fuelling center, where dozens of tanks were being refueled. . . . Above the Sukhoi/7s appeared two [Israeli] Mirages. Within a split second the two Egyptian jets had vanished, leaving trails of fire and smoke.” If these were Soviet pilots flying the newly delivered
planes, they may have been observing instructions to avoid the risk of getting shot down, as the capture of a downed pilot could reveal his real identity. According to Soviet journalist Yegorin, in Cairo “rumors even had it that some planes had managed to take off.” At the press center, “some of the Westerners claimed that the pilots of these Egyptian planes spoke among them in Russian, and only few of those present denied it.”

USS Liberty survivor Richard S. “Rocky” Sturman adds a fascinating bit of hearsay that he picked up while discussing the ship’s Soviet-oriented mission: “An interesting turn to this information was a conversation with a coworker (of Russian nationality, who was a lieutenant in their Army) who said to me ‘Yes, you’re correct!’ after I told him of the Russian pilot story. It seems my coworker, in 1969, was sitting around with his military buddies doing what all military personnel do when gathered and swapping stories—drinking. After many glasses of refreshment, his Air Force friend, Igor Shelagov, admitted flying Egyptian planes during the Six-Day War. He did swear all his friends to secrecy, though.”

At this point, Brezhnev’s main problem was that the Egyptians were even slower than the Soviets in shifting gears from the original plan, delaying the cease-fire. In his 20 June speech, he charged that while Cairo had asked Moscow to obtain a cease-fire forthwith and ensure its enforcement, Egypt itself delayed its own statement of consent to stop the fighting. “These vacillations continued till 1 o’clock in the morning of 9 June, when the UAR’s representative at the United Nations at last declared officially that his government agreed to a cease fire, on condition that the other side complied with this requirement too.”

By that time, Israeli forces had reached the Suez Canal; the Egyptians regrouped behind it, supported by Soviet naval units at its northern entrance. “When the cannonade erupted across the Suez Canal,” the KGB’s man in Washington, Kalugin, was attending a reception at the home of an American journalist. He was surprised when Rusk suddenly appeared. “The host had apparently prewarned him of my presence. Holding a glass in one hand and embracing me with the other, he addressed the journalists: ‘We and the Soviet Union do not intend to fight in the Middle East, do we?’ He turned to me with a questioning look, and I nodded affirmatively.” The secretary then departed. Asked by the journalists for his reading of Rusk’s message, Kalugin preferred to interpret it as reassur-
ance rather than warning, and “explained that this gesture attested to the US government’s desire not to permit any expansion of the conflict, and especially any intervention by the superpowers.” But it was precisely at this point that Soviet ground forces did join the fray.

In May 2003, there appeared in the unlikely forum of the Belarusian Defense Ministry newspaper the first direct confirmation that a Soviet marine landing did take place in the 1967 war, and either was intended as, or became, a combat engagement. Moreover, this is the first testimony that integral Soviet ground units (as distinct from individual advisers) took an active part in the war.

Victor Stepanovich Shevchenko was in ’67 the commanding officer of a marine artillery company armed with multiple and mobile Katyusha rocket launchers (updated models of the World War II “Stalin organs”). He related how his battery was crossing the Suez Canal when it was attacked by Israeli aircraft, losing 17 men killed and others injured, including himself. The number of fatalities is half the total of Soviet personnel killed in the Six-Day War—35, as given in Russian publications, where they are described as “mainly victims of the IAF’s air strikes on Egyptian and Syrian military targets.” The interview was short on specifics, as it was aimed mainly at honoring the dead and surviving heroes of what Shevchenko called “a war that was unknown to the general public, and which still is unknown to its full extent.” The exact location, date, and time of the engagement were not given, though the description indicates that the Soviets were trying to cross the canal eastward into Sinai, against the stream of Egyptian forces attempting to withdraw—which would put the date between 6 and 8 June. It might correspond with the Israeli account that, on 8 June, “Two battalions of Egyptian artillery which opened fire from the far side of the Canal” at the first Israeli force to arrive there “were hit by an Israeli air strike and destroyed.” The Israelis, of course, could not know who was firing the incoming shells.

We were naturally intrigued by this striking corroboration of our thesis that the USSR not only prepared but implemented an intervention. As Victor Stepanovich said, this indeed was and remains an unknown war. So we asked the interviewer for Shevchenko’s contact information to request operational particulars. The answer was that “VS” (who is still in uniform as a military academy instructor) “for obvious reasons cannot communicate with you.” At least in Minsk, the decades-long cover-up con-
tinues; its breach, in an official publication, was quickly plugged when the article disappeared from the Defense Ministry organ’s Web site.

A larger landing force may have been on the way; on 8 June, briefing an emissary from the White House, General Yariv said, “[We] knew that [a Soviet] ship had left Russian port in last few days which was loaded with 70 tanks and anti-aircraft matériel,” but he attributed this to a Soviet resupply of Egypt. Meanwhile, the rest of the Soviet landing force prepared in the Med remained at the ready, and was even reinforced. Kapitanets relates that “on June 7, after reaching the Soviet anchorage at Anti-Kythira, I received my detailed mission from Vice-Admiral V. Sysoyev on board the cruiser Slava.” He was ordered to take on board 100 cadets and set course for a rendezvous with Syrian ships in the region of Latakia. Shevchenko’s account suggests that the landing of marine forces in a friendly port to proceed overland to the front (rather than protecting the evacuation of Soviet citizens) may have been the actual purpose of Kapitanets’s putative desant—if it was indeed intended for Latakia. A Syrian destination for the Soviet naval move was first included in Brezhnev’s speech of 20 June 1967, which appears to have outlined the party’s future doctrine regarding the USSR’s role in the war. Kapitanets rose to become Admiral of the Fleet and a candidate member of the Central Committee, a position in which he was undoubtedly apprised of—and committed to—the official line, whereas Khripunkov attained only the rank of captain first class before retiring.

On board Khripunkov’s frigate, the first two days of suspenseful wait were used for some much-needed training of the landing party. “As an officer, I knew how to use small arms, but the sailors had not fired more than five bullets in target practice, and never had thrown a grenade.” The bulk of the “combined eskadra” kept within striking distance, and 300 miles closer to the battle zone than the carrier groups of the Sixth Fleet—though Khripunkov does recall sighting some US and other NATO ships. “We were moving constantly, sailing from the region north of Alexandria and the Suez Canal toward Cyprus and Crete, keeping 50 to 100 miles from the Israeli coast.” The zero hour for landing was repeatedly postponed, but the order was not rescinded. The head of Israeli signal intelligence in 1967, Brigadier General (retired) Yoel Ben-Porat, told us that his unit tracked radio messages from 43 Soviet vessels in the eastern Mediterranean, but was unable to crack their code.
This number may have included submarines, which—as attested by Shashkov—had to receive radio messages from headquarters at pre-arranged intervals. In the first days of the war, some of the subs were sent in closer to the Israeli coast than the Soviet surface craft. On the night of 5–6 June, nuclear sub K-52 was positioned in the area off Tel Aviv, where it remained till the end of the war. At midnight, nuclear sub K-131 was ordered to proceed from the Adriatic Sea toward Israel and to prepare a strike on coastal targets. Admiral Gennadiy Zakharov (then a submarine captain) relates in his memoirs that on the night of 5 June, he too moved into a position “off the Israeli coast. Our mission was to bombard Israel’s refineries and oil reservoirs.” As the latter were located in the Haifa region, operations such as Zakharov’s may have been planned in parallel with establishing beachheads in Israel, in support of the landings, or may have replaced these landings under the circumstances that developed.

The submarines may account for a report that some brushes did occur between Soviet and Israeli naval forces. The Russian military historian Yaremenko told us that “there were minor incidents between Soviet ships and Israel patrol craft, which fortunately ended peacefully”—an assertion unconfirmed as yet by any other source regarding surface ships. Rear Admiral (retired) Zeev Almog, a former commander of the Israeli navy who was a submarine captain during the 1967 war, has denied to us that there was any engagement between Israeli and Soviet naval units. However, Rear Admiral (retired) Shlomo Erel, who commanded the navy in 1967, recalls a still-mysterious incident on 8 June in which the Israeli destroyer Haifa engaged a submarine 15 miles off the naval base of Atlit. “It was attacked with depth charges, . . . oil slicks and debris were spotted, and the engagement was broken off.” This was originally considered to have been one of three “amateurishly operated” Egyptian subs, which were thought to have withdrawn to Alexandria after being engaged and damaged off the Israeli coast. But Erel stated that “later, when we calculated the speed [that the submarine would have had to travel] between the time it was attacked and its arrival in Alexandria, we reckoned it as 13.5 knots—impossible for the model that the Egyptians then had.” If the calculations were correct, Erel said, and there was a sub there at all, it might have been “Russian or American,” but the matter was not investigated further. The location, at least, corresponds
with Zakharov’s submarine, which had on the night of 5 June taken up a position south of Haifa—that is, about off Atlit. Zakharov did not mention such an incident in his memoir, writing only that he waited for the signal to execute his mission, but it did not arrive “and the war ended.”

At Israel’s naval headquarters, Erel had to cope simultaneously with the engagement off Atlit and another maritime incident. As he admitted to us, the distraction helped little to prevent the error that resulted in Israel’s attack on the single US Navy vessel that remained in the war zone—the World War II freighter converted into an intelligence-gathering ship, USS *Liberty*. 
The continuing debate over Israel’s motive in attacking the USS Liberty (AGTR-5) signal-intelligence-gathering ship has tended to obscure the Soviet context that recurs throughout this affair. One reason is that the ship’s survivors, in their vocal campaign to prove that Israel alone was deliberately responsible, have stressed the Israeli angle. To the extent that the superpower relationship has been discussed in this context, it was mainly to point out that the initial American response to the attack on the Liberty was to scramble Sixth Fleet carrier aircraft, and that only a hotline exchange between Johnson and Kosygin defused what was hitherto considered the closest approach to a US-Soviet clash in the entire course of the Six-Day War.\(^1\) But in all other respects, the highly selective content and release of official US documentation on the affair in general and the Soviet aspect in particular has downplayed the USSR’s role.

We emphatically do not claim that the USSR carried out the attack that crippled the Liberty. This would not have been entirely unthinkable; barely half a year later, a Soviet naval vessel did open fire on the Liberty’s sister ship, the USS Pueblo, killing one crewman and injuring three others, to assist in its capture by North Korea.\(^2\) But in the Liberty affair it was clearly Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats that did the shooting. Still, the circumstances are covered with Soviet fingerprints, many of which have long since been noted separately but have not been given appropriate at-
tention as a whole. The reexamination of these clues, along with new evidence, may open up new avenues for inquiry into the background for the Israeli attack. As that purpose is beyond the scope of this book, this chapter leaves more questions open than those that are directly related to the Soviet role in the war. Such disclosures from US and Israeli records as have been elicited by the Liberty controversy, however, do provide some otherwise rare evidence and insights about the extent and character of Soviet involvement.

Earlier we pointed out the centrality of the Soviet aspect in the Liberty’s mission, which either was originally omitted, or was subsequently excised, from all documents released so far by the US authorities. The ship’s presence in the Mediterranean became known to the Soviets, at the latest, after its passage through the Straits of Gibraltar on 2 June. The Liberty then reported overtaking, and exchanging identity signals with, a convoy of three Soviet ships. Regarding two of them at least (Semyon Dezhnev and Andrei Vilkitsky) the names were garbled in the Liberty’s dispatches, despite the Russian linguists on board. The description of these ships as “of unidentified type” is remarkable for an intelligence outfit. Both ships are listed in standard Western, as well as Russian, reference works as “oceanographic research” vessels of the then-new Nikolai Zubov class. Others of the same class are listed explicitly as “intelligence-gathering ships,” like the Liberty itself, and one wonders what other purpose these craft, which were “designed for polar operations,” might have been sent for into the Mediterranean at this particular timing.3

At any rate, all Soviet ship captains were under instructions to gather and “immediately report” intelligence on any foreign “naval force” they encountered.4 The Liberty, evidently aware of this standard Soviet practice, and of the Soviets’ likely eavesdropping to its own signals, did note: “Not known if ships were attempting to shadow [us] or not. Unodir [Unless otherwise directed] no additional reports will be submitted with respect to these contacts.” After this sighting (but long before reaching the eastern Med), AGTR-5 notified that its routine signals “may be occasionally delayed to avoid transmitting at times which would have deleterious effect on primary mission.”5 The Soviets thus had at least a week’s notice of Liberty’s presence, and ample time to detect its signal frequencies.

This element is significant in view of the assertion by radioman second class and leading watch supervisor on the Liberty Rocky Sturman
that, during and immediately after the attack on 8 June, the ship’s “opera-
tional radio frequencies, along with the international distress frequen-
cies, were radio-jammed to prevent our ... sending a distress call for help.” Sturman notes that “to scan for and locate our encrypted and un-
encrypted radio transmissions” was “a procedure [which], considering
the equipment of that era, took quite some time.” Since Israeli aircraft
had made only brief passes over the Liberty, Sturman asks: “How would
the IDF know what range of frequencies to initiate their radio-jamming
on if they had not been using, prior to attacking, sophisticated RDF (Radio
Direction-Finding) equipment? The planes could not have found the five
frequencies of the ship in the few minutes when the attack began.”

Like other Liberty survivors, Sturman assumes Israeli premeditation for the as-
sault, so he concludes that “logically this search must have been made by
shore-based Israeli radio installations before the attack.”

But the Liberty had arrived at its “station” off the Sinai shore only
shortly before the attack, and therefore this frequency search could at
least as plausibly have been done by Soviet sigint vessels, of which the
“combined eskadra” routinely included two or three before the crisis
erupted. By 8 June they had been vastly reinforced; besides the convoy
entering through Gibraltar, the list of Soviet ships passing through the
Turkish straits also indicates another “hydrographic vessel,” Magnit, as
entering the Med on 5 June.9 The official history of the Black Sea Fleet
mentions that “near the Middle Eastern shore of the Mediterranean, an
intelligence ship was monitoring the aerial and marine situation.” Admiral Erel also recalls knowing, as “a fact of life,” about two Soviet spy
ships lurking “at a respectable distance” off the Israeli coast for some
time before the war.11 A Soviet “merchant ship” was close enough to Liberty at the time of the attack to be sighted, at a range that permitted iden-
tifying its name, Proletarsk, at 4:28 a.m. the next day—that is, less than
14 hours after the attack ended. Liberty had moved for only part of the in-
terval, steaming at just 10 knots.12

Going back to the hours preceding the attack, Israeli alert was al-
ready high, as the IDF had reported sighting submarines or other hostile
vessels close offshore. The Liberty also recorded a “contact X,” possibly
with a submarine, leading after ward to all manner of speculation as to
the sub’s identity and intentions.13 Reports came in on 7–8 June about
an Egyptian navy vessel shelling El-Arish, and a huge explosion there ex-
acerbated these fears. An early explanation that Israel provided for the attack on the *Liberty* was that it suspected an Egyptian naval invasion, which showed up as “a large number of blips” on its radar screens. But, as described to Randolph and Winston Churchill, these turned out to have been only “echoes from unusual cloud formations.” The claim that a naval attack was suspected, like others that appeared in the first published books on the war, disappeared from all subsequent Israeli accounts of the *Liberty* incident. If there was any substance to this claim, the ships were more likely to be Soviet than Egyptian.

The prevailing Israeli account since then has been that one of the torpedo boats sent to check out the *Liberty* twice computed its speed (based on radar readings) at 28 to 30 knots, which automatically classified it as hostile. The CIA concluded a few days after the incident that “it is most bizarre that a qualified naval commander would twice compute *Liberty*’s speed to be 30 knots or that the IDF would authorize an attack solely on the basis of an unidentified high-speed contact.” At the time of this radar reading, however, the Israeli torpedo boats were not in visual contact with the target, which was 22 miles away, and they called in air support because they could not overtake the ship.

The *Liberty*’s maximum speed was 18 knots, and much debate has focused on the plausibility of a 50 percent error in the radar operator’s computation. But little attention has been devoted to the possibility of mistaken identity. Could the high-speed radar contact have been generated by something other than the *Liberty*? If so, could it have been anything but a Soviet warship?

All US ships except the *Liberty* had been withdrawn from the eastern Mediterranean. Given all the evidence we have seen of numerous Soviet ships in the immediate vicinity, it is remarkable that no report released so far in the *Liberty* context, either from the AGTR-5 itself or from the Israeli military, has mentioned any radar contact at all with Soviet (or other) surface warships—while, as mentioned before, Ben-Porat’s sigint outfit tracked radio signals from at least 43 of them. In April 1967, Egypt was supplied by the USSR with two old but freshly refitted destroyers of the *Skoryy* class, a type capable of 30–35 knots. They are reported as being given the same names and hull numbers as older and slower Egyptian craft that were still in service, “to confuse the Israelis, and along with them all of the Western world.” So soon after their delivery, these ships
are virtually certain to have had Soviet advisers still on board; Khripunkov has told us that in October 1967 (when his frigate was stationed in Port Said), it was the Soviet advisers on the Egyptian Ossa missile boats who carried out “every stage of sinking the Israeli destroyer Eilat except actually pushing the button to fire the missiles”—and these Soviet-made boats had been delivered to Egypt much longer before. At any rate, the Kildin-class Soviet destroyer 626, which was the first ship to reach the stricken Liberty, and therefore was presumably the closest at the time of the attack, definitely had a maximum speed of 38 knots.¹⁹

Indeed, descriptions of the background for the Liberty attack indicate an Israeli awareness of this Soviet presence that was far more acute than admitted in most general accounts of the war. Another Israeli explanation for the attack claimed that following the “reports of a naval bombardment on El-Arish,” Rabin was “concerned that the shelling was a prelude to an amphibious landing that could outflank advancing Israeli troops.”²⁰ El-Arish was exactly where Israel itself had planned a marine landing three days earlier (another example of “mirror-image” thinking, this time by the Israelis).

Udi Erel, an officer on one of the torpedo boats (and son of the admiral), confirmed to us that upon glimpsing a red stripe of the Liberty’s limp US flag, the Israeli attackers immediately concluded that the ship was Soviet²¹—even though an all-red flag in this region could as easily have been Turkish, Moroccan, or even Albanian. Another account attributes the identification of the ship as Soviet to one of the attacking planes’ pilots making out the ship’s hull letters AGTR, and mistaking the G for a C. Since most of the other characters exist in Cyrillic too, the Israelis briefly assumed the inscription was in Russian—which, again, would be far from the most obvious conclusion, had there not been prior awareness of a Soviet naval presence. According to Oren’s study of the incident, “Egyptian naval ships . . . usually displayed Arabic letters and numbers only. The fact that the ship had Western markings led Rabin to fear that it was Soviet, and he immediately called off the jets. . . . It was now 2:20 in the afternoon; . . . it would take . . . until 3:30 p.m., to establish the vessel’s identity.”²²

Rabin’s memoirs (which mistakenly date the entire incident on 7 June) record that in the IDF’s Tel Aviv headquarters, the report whereby
a Soviet spy ship had been hit “sent our anxiety as far up as the barometer could go.”

I reported to Prime Minister Eshkol and Defense Minister Dayan. I convened a consultation of senior generals from the General Staff. We had to prepare . . . for what, actually? . . . For a massive Soviet intervention in the fighting? . . .

The number of Soviet ships in the Mediterranean exceeded 70. Now, with both the Egyptian Army and the Jordanian Army whipped and the war decided on both fronts—would the Soviets take advantage of the ship incident and enter the war, in order to tip it in the Arabs’ favor?

As we deliberated, another report came in: The ship is American. . . . It is unpleasant to admit this, but there were two conflicting sensations: deep sorrow at hurting friends, and a sense of relief. . . . The awful danger of a sharp Soviet reprisal had vanished.23

Well, not quite vanished, as it would transpire two days later. But if Israel’s political and military leaders had no hard intelligence about the Soviets’ presence in the Liberty’s vicinity and of their intervention plans, the Israelis’ intuition was remarkably perceptive.

Beyond the possibility of mere Israeli confusion of the Liberty with a Soviet ship or ships, there beckons a seductive but unsubstantiated scenario, in which the Soviets deliberately lured the Israelis into attacking the US ship, which they had been tracking and which they now knew to be unprotected following the Sixth Fleet’s withdrawal. KGB literature features some noteworthy instances in which the Liberty’s role is grotesquely inflated. While this is in itself no proof that such charges were made by way of apology for Soviet initiation of the attack, as in other cases it points to an interesting direction for inquiry.

The official Russian military history published in 2000 claims that Israel attacked the ship deliberately to conceal its preparations to use nuclear and chemical weapons, whose existence had never been denied officially by Tel Aviv, and that this triggered the dispatch of a Soviet naval squadron armed with nuclear weapons, “partially for deterrence, to the Red Sea shores of Egypt.”24 Given the previously cited references to nu-
clear deployment at earlier dates, the Liberty incident may in this case have been offered in retrospect as the pretext for a move that had other motivations. By 27 July 1967 in Pravda (and in a subsequent book), Cairo correspondent and KGB operative Yevgeny Primakov charged that the Liberty was sacrificed to mask US-Israeli collusion in the war, part of which was conducted by the ship itself in disrupting and “cooking” Egyptian signals.  

Another former KGB operative in Cairo, Lev Bausin, wrote recently: “At the outbreak of hostilities, the Liberty was off the Egyptian coast. Part of its crew, with special equipment, landed on shore, and the other part remained on board. Their common purpose was interception and decoding of both Egyptian and Israeli radio messages, as well as transmitting, in Arabic, false orders for a retreat to the commanders of Egyptian units who were trying to organize a defense of Sinai. Of course, the Egyptians’ secrets that were intercepted and deciphered were transmitted to the CIA and thence to the Israeli command.”

But on 5 June, the Liberty was three days’ sailing from her intended station off Sinai, and if she could have carried out such a disinformation mission as described by Bausin from where she was, her risky approach to the war zone would be unnecessary. By the time she did arrive off El-Arish, the fate of the Egyptian army in Sinai was already sealed. As Sturman pointed out to us in denying the “landing-party” version, there was no time to implement such a foray, even if it had been contemplated; the Israeli attack began shortly after the ship’s arrival at its destination. If the Liberty had put a party ashore, it would have been stranded there.

On the other hand, Bausin—writing in 2001, based on what he evidently gathered at KGB headquarters in June 1967—endorsed some of the accusations made by the Liberty’s survivors. Of course, he added an anti-US twist: “The crew also included Hebrew experts who conducted radio espionage against Israel. The Liberty was sunk [sic] by Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats. . . . Certain researchers have concluded that the Americans also used this ship to obtain information that Israel was violating a previous agreement with the United States, by independently expanding and extending the hostilities. Israel decided to liquidate the source of this counterproductive source of information.”

As we saw in Chapter 13, the NSA disposed of the allegation that there were Hebrew linguists on the Liberty, because its official history of
the affair criticized their absence. According to its survivors, the ship had actually begun to accomplish its original, Soviet-oriented mission just before the Israeli attack, as James Ennes relates.

We had taken aboard several technicians and linguists sent by the National Security Agency especially for this mission. They were trained in Russian and Arab languages; not a Hebrew linguist among them. . . . [T]heir primary interest was not the Israelis or even the Arab side of this war. During the morning and early afternoon of June 8, these several technicians sat . . . looking for Russian language broadcasts from within Egypt. In the radio intercept spaces, our intercept operators were getting lucky too. “We got em, We got em,” one of the men yelled as he raced across the crowded room to tell Chief Smith that they had identified Soviet pilots talking to Moscow in the Russian language from the [Tu-95] bombers that were supposedly owned and controlled by Egypt.

Now there was proof that these were not Egyptian airplanes at all. That was a ruse. These were Soviet long range bombers stationed dangerously close to Europe, America, and the free world. An important part of Liberty’s mission, perhaps the most important part, had been accomplished.29

The dubious veracity of the “long-range bomber” version has already been discussed at length. Reshetnikov’s Tu-95s, had they taken off for their assigned missions against Israel, would have operated from bases in the USSR, rather than Egypt. The Egyptian-based Tu-16s were by 8 June a heap of bombed-out junk. As already noted, the presence of a Tu-95 reconnaissance or control aircraft might have been more likely. But there is no reason to dismiss the essence of Ennes’s claim: the Liberty may have overheard Soviet pilots flying Su-7s or other fighters out of partly repaired Egyptian fields, or the first of the resupply and evacuation flights that had already commenced. Depending on the exact date of Shevchenko’s abortive canal crossing, it may also have been monitored.

The content, or at least the implementation and character of these intercepts were certainly recorded and presumably reported by the Liberty in retrospect, if not before it was disabled by the Israeli attack; at least one Russian linguist survived. This data might shed important light on the
Soviet role at this stage of the Six-Day War. But as already noted, the National Security Agency sanitized any possible mention of a Soviet aspect from the documents it provided in response to our FOIA request. Since even the thick wad of paper we received could not possibly have been all the documentation of the Liberty affair, we assume the NSA honestly sent us papers that did mention the Soviet aspect that was the specific subject of our request—but that this aspect was still being kept under wraps at the time (in 2001). We have already shown that the Soviet angle of the affair is still being suppressed, even though since our request other material pertaining to the Liberty incident has been declassified and released.

Until this issue is clarified, there remains an ironic possibility that the Israeli attack actually did deprive the United States—and perhaps Israel—of a warning about the Soviet landing plans, which still were pending on 8 June and would finally be activated two days later. McNamara dismissed our suggestion to this effect—but still refuses to discuss the Liberty incident. 30

If the US military had previously forsaken the Liberty alone in a war zone, after the Israeli attack it responded with extreme concern to the resulting risk of a security breach—in the Soviet context. On 13 June, the CIA reported in a chronology of the affair: “Two Soviet ships have trailed the Liberty, which proceeds under escort to Malta.” 31

The evidence about these Soviet ships is conflicting, but in any case it illustrates the complete monopoly that the Soviet navy enjoyed in the eastern Med—and shows that the Soviets were well aware of the attack. Ennes relates:

Soviet guided-missile destroyer 626/4 arrived after midnight . . .
to send a flashing-light message in English:
Do you need help, asked the Russian.
No, Thank you, the conning officer replied.
I will stand by in case you need me, the Russian answered.
Thus the Soviet skipper celebrated his achievement discreetly by remaining near Liberty to wait with her for the arrival of American ships. 32

Russian naval writer Nikolai Cherkashin commented on this account by saying: “No Russian ship was close to the USS Liberty that night.” Interviewed for an article in Pravda about the affair, he went on to say: “Yes,
we know the number. The matter of the fact is it is still a secret to whom it belonged. The 626/4 destroyer wasn’t at that time in the eastern part of Mediterranean. I tried to find some veterans of the Soviet Navy who had been there in the summer of 1967, but in vain. Also, nothing is mentioned in the archives.”

The interviewer concluded: “Was there any Soviet destroyer at all, or it was just a myth? . . . Cherkashin thinks that it is impossible to find a 100% answer to the question, as too much time has passed since the tragedy.”

Well, as this book shows, there are plenty of such veterans around, the US archives do contain something on this, a destroyer numbered 626 did cross from the Black Sea into the eastern Med a few days before the Liberty incident, and the NSA history mentions precisely the same ship—but with a different timetable: “A Soviet guided-missile destroyer (DDG 626/4) of the Kildin class remained in the vicinity of the Liberty between 1320 and 1600 hours on the 9th.” This appears to conflict with Ennes’s mention of the destroyer’s approach at midnight, but the term “remained” suggests that 626/4 approached the Liberty before 1300, which was perhaps mentioned in the still-sanitized parts of this history.

It can only be speculated whether this was downplayed in order to obscure the fact that the Soviet ship reached the Liberty before any US force had arrived to assist her, leading to such comments as the following, by Paul Findley, then a US Congressman: “Not until dawn of the next day would the Liberty see a U.S. plane or ship. The only friendly visit was from a small Soviet warship. Its offer of help was declined, but the Soviets said they would stand by in case need should arise.” Findley’s anti-Israeli bias apparently got the better of him here, as the US military did not consider the Soviets’ intentions friendly by any means: “Mounting concern over the possible loss of sensitive documents drifting out of the Liberty’s ruptured Research Department’s operations space prompted NAVEUR [US Naval Forces, Europe] to direct Sixth Fleet on 9 June to ‘do whatever is feasible to keep any Soviet ships out of Liberty’s wake . . . to reduce possibility of compromise, noting that a compromise could have both political and technical aspects.”

One can only wonder what the Soviets fished out before the US rescue ships arrived and “trailed in Liberty’s wake constantly to recover papers adrift. The first night, the [US Navy tugboat] Papago picked up one classified item 10 miles behind Liberty.”
It also is an open question how, if the 626/4 approached Liberty at midnight, it could tell that the ship was damaged, possibly in need of help, and at risk of going down—unless the Soviets had been monitoring its signals all along. This may have been done by the Proletarsk, which is evidently the other Soviet ship referred to in the CIA report (the NSA history, in its unsanitized parts, makes no mention of it).

Kapitanets appeared to confirm the “Soviet destroyer story” when we asked him whether it was his destroyer, Nastoychivý, which offered help to the stricken USS Liberty. The admiral did not deny the story, but maintained it was another ship: “No. I was then some fifty miles north of the Liberty.” Before, when asked by Cherkashin about the USS Liberty and a Soviet ship, Kapitanets claimed that “he had known nothing about the event; it was a revelation for him.”

The location that Kapitanets mentioned to us not only points to his being aware of the Liberty’s whereabouts; it also puts his own position, with his landing force of cadets, off Tel Aviv rather than the Syrian port of Latakia, where he was purportedly assigned to land them. But within 48 hours, Syria was indeed to take center stage in the Soviets’ concerns and operational plans.
Offense Becomes Deterrence

10 June

One of the grounds offered for Israel’s allegedly intentional attack on the Liberty has been an attempt to prevent the exposure of the IDF’s plans to attack and capture the Syrian stronghold on the Golan Heights. The idea, according to this theory, was to secure US acquiescence by creating the appearance of Israeli self-defense rather than a premeditated aggression. However, on the Syrian, unlike the Egyptian, front Israel had indeed been attacked first by Syrian aircraft, artillery, and even a ground incursion. Israel’s land counterattack on the heights did begin on 9 June, the day after the Liberty incident, according to an operational plan that was issued on the 8th, but the IAF had already focused its action on Syria before the Liberty was attacked. Conversely, the ground attack was further delayed even after the US listening post had been disabled. Syria was already suing for a cease-fire, and how the damage to relations with the United States from attacking a US ship would be offset by the supposed delay in Israel’s compliance was never explained. Even the proponents of this theory concede that the delay was “by remarkable coincidence, if not by design” and that no facts have yet been provided to “back up their speculative stories.”

In contrast, multiple testimonies from within the Israeli leadership assert that the decision to refrain from taking the Golan Heights was made early on 8 June, and again late in the evening, mainly due to fear of a So-
viet intervention. Once the order was given, the USSR did make its first open threat of direct military action. This marked the change of Moscow’s plan from a move that was secretly designed for implementation—an option that by 9 June was no longer viable—into an overt gesture aimed mainly at deterrence, which did achieve some effect.

More than the motives for Israel’s about-face, the Syrian role in the war—and the USSR’s input thereto—have remained among the most enigmatic aspects of the conflict. One reason for this may be Moscow’s total failure in getting the Syrians to pull their weight in the joint battle plan. Egypt too was badly beaten, but Syria had not been restrained from a first strike that might have been effective, was not the immediate victim of Israel’s preemption, and even gained an extra numerical advantage when Israel had to divert some of its limited forces facing the Golan to deal with Jordan’s less expected offensive—and yet Damascus failed to deliver on nearly all of its commitments to Cairo and Moscow alike.

Captured Syrian documents and interrogation reports of Syrian POWs indicate that detailed orders for the implementation of Operation Victor were issued to the field units on 2 June. By 4 June, a Syrian force of some seven brigades was drawn up at the front line with Israel, and in addition to the order cited in a previous chapter to remove the antitank obstacles along the border, a general blackout along the front indicated a combat alert. Unlike the Egyptian theater, the joint plan did not call for the Syrians to absorb an initial Israeli land attack before launching their own offensive; it was, however, scheduled for 6 June, evidently in order to pin down Israeli forces while Egypt stemmed an initial Israeli advance into Sinai.

The first waves of Israeli air raids on the morning of 5 June were concentrated exclusively on Egypt. Once the Syrians were notified of the Israeli strike, they did use this respite to launch some bombing sorties. About a dozen MiG-17s attacked targets in northern Israel, most of which they evidently misidentified. They came in at low altitude and not all were detected, but several were shot down. MiG-21s patrolling near the border failed to protect them, or—at midday—to prevent the IAF from moving the focus of its own effort to Syria’s air bases, destroying the bulk of its aircraft.

The early air raids turned out to be the last Syrian offensive operation with any semblance of purpose, and even a laudatory biography of Hafez
al-Assad admits that this was little more than an “ineffectual sortie over Israel.” The Soviet-trained air force commander and defense minister, by this time a contender for supreme power in Damascus, was “caught off balance,” and after his force was “crippled” he became “virtually passive,” taking “time to recover from the shock.” As a result “Syria responded with ‘surprising apathy’.” Close to noon on 5 June, Jordan’s initiation of hostilities against Israel obliged the IDF Northern Command to divert some of its already sparse forces to the northern part of the West Bank. Syria, on the other hand, temporized on the urgent demand of the newly created Eastern Front Command to dispatch a brigade to take the place of Jordanian forces, which in turn had been sent south to link up with a supposed Egyptian drive across the Negev. Syria’s numerical advantage against Israel’s available forces was thus increased, and an implementation of “Victor” at this stage might ostensibly have been hard for Israel to contain.

But as subsequent developments demonstrated, “the Syrian Army was not capable of mobile combat.” Assad’s biographer, Patrick Seale, attributed this to the Syrians having been “trained only for positional defense.” But there appear to have been other causes at work also. Deep-seated suspicion between the Syrians and their former UAR partners in Egypt, as well as their outright hostility toward Jordan, left the joint command mainly on paper. More important, rivalries between the Baath Party factions, and among the leading members of the group in power, made for divided loyalties among the various military formations and turned the relocation of any major outfit into a political risk; sectarian strife actually broke out within military units at the front. Within days, there were massive desertions, and entire units failed to obey marching orders, while others did put up fierce resistance at a number of locations.

The failure to prevent, or at least to predict, this collapse must have been chalked up in part to the Soviet advisers, who were stationed from the Syrian General Staff down to field units at the company level. Their blueprints for “Victor” turned out to be as unrealistic as their assessments that the Golan fortifications had been rendered impregnable. As a recent Russian history points out, the Soviets’ overvaluation of Syrian capability may have been due partly to ideological inflation. Syria “was then the only Arab regime with an overt leftist, pro-Soviet stance, which was ready to build socialism according to the Soviet recipe.” Unlike Egypt,
Syria remained close to Moscow up to, and even after, the collapse of the USSR. This may be one reason why both in Soviet times and down to the present, the Russian documents and testimonies that have emerged regarding the Syrian arena are infinitesimal compared with other aspects of the 1967 crisis, and the decisions behind the actual moves on the ground remain susceptible to conflicting interpretations.

In one of the few accounts by Soviet veterans, the military interpreter Igor Golovko related: “Early on the morning of 5 June, I reported for my shift as the duty assistant at the ‘Red House,’ the residence of the chief Soviet adviser in Damascus. Suddenly, an adviser broke in to ask ‘what is going on at the front?’ . . . We answered serenely that everything was as usual. ‘No,’ he shouted, ‘Don’t you know that a war has broken out?’ Slowly, from the remarks of our advisers who were working at the Syrian General Staff, the situation began to clear up for us.” But Golovko recalls that even the chief military adviser had much difficulty in obtaining hard information, and he was put to work translating the reports broadcast by the Syrian media.10

Syrian propaganda continued to call for all-out war on Israel and to report conquests, including the projected meeting points with a landing force from the Mediterranean. But the Syrians actually requested UN observers to arrange a mutual cessation of hostilities, and Israel signaled that it would accept. Nonetheless, the main operational activity undertaken by Syria on 5 June began late in the day and continued until the morning of 9 June: an intense shelling of Israeli settlements and military bases along the frontier.

Accounts differ as to the Syrians’ subsequent moves: Dayan wrote (possibly to justify his reluctance to attack Syria) that during the night of 5 June, the Syrian government decided—despite entreaties from Cairo—to call off Operation Victor, which was scheduled to start the next day. It was replaced with a much less ambitious plan (“Jihad”) calling only for small-scale attacks along the border but an overall switch to defensive positions.11 Other sources assert that this formal change was made only late on 6 June, after “Victor’s” main thrust—the armored penetration north of Lake Kinneret—was ordered but failed to materialize. Its provisions for crossing the Jordan River turned out to be completely unsuited to conditions on the ground, and major components of the two divisions slated to implement it never went into action. According to this version,
the minor probes against Israeli border positions that did occur on 6 June were meant as diversions for the main effort.\textsuperscript{12}

At any rate, the Soviet advisers with the Syrian forces remained in place and took part in those operations that the Syrians did undertake. In the morning of 6 June, when a Syrian infantry company with four tanks attempted an advance on Kibbutz Dan (at Israel’s northeastern tip), the small IDF force at the Tel Dan outpost could hear Russian-language communications on the attacking force’s radio system.\textsuperscript{13} After this attack and another one farther south were beaten off, the Syrians limited their action to the artillery barrage begun the day before. This was one of the areas in which Soviet advice had a clear impact. Among other instances, in the closing days of May, a Soviet officer oversaw the positioning of 29 brand-new Czechoslovak-made 130-millimeter cannon.\textsuperscript{14} Given the short space of time until these guns opened fire, they were undoubtedly still supervised, if not actually operated, by Soviet personnel.

Most of the casualties from this shelling were soldiers caught in the open; the settlers had mostly taken to safety in bomb shelters, but the physical structures above ground were destroyed in a string of border communities at the foot of the heights. The effectiveness of this Soviet-guided shelling finally boomeranged on the Syrians and their patrons: it was the settler lobby that, in large part, created irresistible pressure on Eshkol (himself a member of a kibbutz within range of the Syrian guns) and his cabinet to rid their communities of the Syrian menace once and for all—ultimately overcoming the reservations of Dayan and others, who feared both immediate Soviet action and protracted warfare with Syria.

The IDF operational blueprint to capture the Golan Heights was issued on the morning of 8 June, with zero hour set for 10 a.m. The air force did bring its full impact to bear on Syria, but the ground offensive was blocked by Dayan, who held out against any but a token advance across the Syrian border.\textsuperscript{15} In addition to the settlers, Dayan faced fierce demands from a majority in the cabinet led by his longtime rival Yigal Allon (also a war hero and member of a northern kibbutz), and the general in charge of the Northern Command, David Elazar, who by now was able to recall the forces he had committed to the Jordanian front.

Still, Dayan remained adamant at a cabinet meeting late the same evening, citing among other considerations the precedent of the Soviet threat in 1956. “I therefore opposed opening a second front with Syria. . . .
I feared the Soviets’ response to such an action. Syria is the Soviet Union’s darling, and it might come to its aid.” According to Ezer Weizmann, then the IDF chief of operations, there was “a great apprehension lest, following Egypt’s crushing defeat, Syria’s standing in the Soviets’ view had been enhanced to such a degree of importance, that they would not be willing to countenance its defeat and despite all their apprehensions, would commit forces to a real war in the Middle East. Dayan and others were gripped by this apprehension.”

The Israeli leadership turned in for the night on 8 June after the cabinet had adjourned without any decision to proceed with an advance on Syria. Dayan changed his mind only early the next morning, after the Soviets—following Nasser’s change of line—had opted for a cease-fire and Damascus had followed suit. Dayan related years later that he ordered the assault on Syria only after seeing Israel complete its victory over Egypt without the Soviets intervening. Like Moscow’s allies, he saw the USSR’s failure to rescue Nasser as a sign of weakness. It was thus precisely the Soviets’ failure to intervene on any major scale in Egypt’s favor that reduced Dayan’s fear that they might do so for the Syrians. He was also apprised of a major Syrian pullback from the heights, which was both accelerated and ravaged by the Israeli air attacks. The order to take the Golan was put into practice that morning—by four Israeli brigades, barely one-third of the “concentrations” reported in mid-May. It was completed, with some reinforcements, before the cease-fire took effect the next evening.

This delay meant that in Moscow, response to Israel’s move would be conditioned not only by the continuing deliberations in the Politburo, but also by the impact of Syria’s impending defeat on a convocation of leaders from the Socialist bloc. They included the Polish and East German bosses, who less than two months before had heard Brezhnev’s boasts about a blow to US interests in the Mediterranean, but instead had just witnessed a debacle being dealt to a Soviet ally without any visible retaliation. The satellite leaders were certainly aware of the difference between the recognized Soviet sphere of influence and disputed regional arenas, both in terms of Soviet capability and of Western readiness to intervene. Still, they were concerned that Moscow’s perceived fecklessness while an even closer ideological vassal than Egypt was defeated and perhaps overthrown might weaken their own regimes.
Early on 10 June, with Israeli forces still encountering stiff though sporadic resistance on the Golan Heights, it was Syria that resorted to disinformation by reporting that the IDF had already taken the regional capital of Quneitra, hours before this actually occurred. Whether or not Moscow had more accurate information, the Soviet media echoed the report, and the USSR’s response indicated extreme concern. This was perhaps partly out of fear that a base of pre-positioned Soviet matériel near Damascus, about which Israeli signal intelligence had picked up information, might be captured. In Bonn, Hadas’s German interlocutors had earlier mentioned reports that a Soviet array of short- and intermediate-range nuclear-capable missiles had been deployed in Syria, though they held that it was aimed at Turkey. This, they estimated, was “one of the reasons for the Soviets’ sensitivity to Syrian-Israeli tension.”

Golovko relates that the purported approach of Israeli forces to Damascus caused panicked burning of documents at the Red House. He and other interpreters were then sent to do the same at the Soviet embassy. “I was surprised to find the entire area of the diplomatic mission full of women and children, Soviet citizens who had been gathered here from all over Syria, and were camped under trees like Gypsies.” The Soviet military advisers in the field had, then, not been recalled to headquarters even when the noncombatants—perhaps including some of the more senior advisers’ own dependents—were gathered there and deemed to need protection. “At one stage,” Golovko relates, “it was even contemplated to issue us assault rifles so that we might defend ourselves in case an enemy desant was landed.”

In fact, it was the Soviet desant that was at last activated. As Brezhnev later related, “on 10 June we received a message from the Syrian foreign minister whereby Israeli armor, with heavy air support, was breaking through toward Damascus. The Syrian government asked us to take all possible measures within the next two or three hours, otherwise it would be too late. This was the second critical juncture in the Middle Eastern crisis. On the spot, we took the appropriate new measures. All the Soviet warships in the Mediterranean, including missile-launching ships, were ordered to turn toward the Syrian coast, escorted by several submarines.”

The description of the Soviet flotilla’s objective as the Syrian coast was thus laid down as the official line for future accounts—as reflected
by Kapitanets. The closest point to Israel on the Syrian coast, however, was separated from Israel and the Golan theater by the entire length of Lebanon, and the eskadra’s appearance there could have little impact on the fighting. Moreover, as Khripunkov recounts, the order that was actually received and immediately implemented by his own frigate on 10 June was to set course for its original target at Haifa, and to carry out the landing that had been on hold for five days.25

Brezhnev went on to say: “At midday on 10 June, a message was transmitted to Israel in which the government of the USSR declared the severance of diplomatic relations. . . . [T]he message said that if Israel did not cease hostilities forthwith, the USSR along with other peace-seeking nations would impose sanctions on Israel, with all the consequent results.”26

A Soviet Foreign Ministry insider has since reported that “at the Politburo meeting, it was Gromyko who at the last moment proposed the break [of diplomatic relations] so as to avoid getting embroiled in the large-scale military adventure that our ‘hawks’ were insisting on. . . . This [break with Israel] was a bone that was thrown to our ‘hawks.’ Gromyko was afraid that we would get into a clash with the United States.”27 “Hawks” presumably refers to Andropov and Grechko, the latter described by Yegorychev as “a rough soldier [soldafon], no politician.”28

At the Communist leaders’ meeting, however—and in subsequent Soviet literature, following the line set out by Brezhnev on 20 June—the diplomatic break was evidently presented and perceived as a prelude, rather than a substitute, for military action.29 Thus, Russian rear admiral Vladimir Vasyukov recently wrote: “The presence of real military strength in the region permitted the USSR on 10 June 1967 (after diplomatic relations were broken with Israel) to place the world on notice over the direct communications line with Washington that if Tel Aviv did not cease military operations, the Soviet Union ‘would not stop at the use of measures of a military nature.’”30

This apparently reflects the authorized version as inculcated in the Soviet military, but it reverses the sequence of events as described by conventional Western historiography. The latter holds that the USSR severed diplomatic relations with Israel on 10 June only after it had failed to intervene on behalf of Syria—either as a token gesture toward its Arab clients or in response to pressure from the leaders of Communist regimes.31 It now emerges, however, that in Soviet thinking, the break of diplomatic
relations was to precede military action, as was originally intended to be done on 5 June with regard to Egypt. Soviet diplomats were instructed accordingly: at the United Nations, Ambassador Jakobson of Finland noticed that “from 5 June, the Soviets behaved as if the relations with Israel were already severed.”

Indeed, when this diplomatic break was actually implemented on 10 June, it evidently was understood by at least one Warsaw Pact member as a precursor to military action. In this case, the Soviet move unnerved a Communist ally instead of reassuring it. Romania evidently considered the Soviet move dangerous enough to invoke a secret agreement that Bucharest had made with the United States. Foreign Minister Corneliu Manescu concluded this agreement with Secretary of State Dean Rusk in 1963, to prevent Romania’s entanglement in any new version of the Cuban missile crisis, as Rusk later retold to his aide, Raymond Garthoff:

In Bucharest, the leadership decided . . . that it would seek to disengage itself from any automatic involvement if their superpower alliance leader, the Soviet Union, again assumed such risks. . . . The Romanian government wanted the United States to understand that Romania would remain neutral in any conflict generated by such actions as the Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba, and sought assurances that in the event of hostilities arising from such a situation, the United States would not strike Romania on the mistaken assumption that it would be allied with the Soviet Union in such a war.

In view of this agreement, the interpretation of the diplomatic-relations break with Israel as a portent of overt military action at last provides a plausible explanation for Romania’s dramatic disavowal of Warsaw Pact policy by leaving its own relations with Israel intact. As already mentioned, the prior selection of Finland rather than Romania as the USSR’s “protecting power” in Israel indicates that the Romanians’ move came as a surprise to Moscow. Romania’s equation of the Middle Eastern crisis with the Cuban one, in terms of its potential to ignite a global conflict, was of course prompted by the Soviets themselves, when they activated the Washington hotline for the first time since its installation after the Cuban crisis.

At 4 p.m. Moscow time, two hours after the diplomatic rupture was
announced to Ambassador Katz, Kosygin’s climactic missive was transmitted over the hotline. As Brezhnev retold it, “at the same time that the Soviet government presented Israel with a practical ultimatum, a message was also sent to President Johnson.”

This official notice was preceded by informal feelers. The KGB’s Washington operative Sedov was instructed to invite his State Department contact Garthoff for lunch. Due to the time difference, by the time Garthoff submitted an urgent report on Sedov’s message, it was already outdated, but it reflected the mood in the Kremlin that morning, Moscow time:

Sedov expressed very great concern over possible Israeli intentions to take Damascus. He stressed that Syria was the Soviets’ closest friend in the Near East, and that if the Israelis continued to ignore the cease-fire the Soviet Union would have to intervene directly. Moreover, he stressed, this was a position agreed upon by the other Socialist states. . . . He stated that there were 400 Soviet advisers with the Syrian Army, and that they had now been authorized to take part in the fighting. He sought to elicit the American reaction if the Soviet Union sent troops to Syria. . . . If Soviet troops were sent, they would engage strictly in defensive operations to prevent the fall of Damascus.

Sedov may merely have been brandishing the commitment of Soviet personnel as a tripwire that the Israelis should be cautioned not to cross. But as Soviet advisers had taken part in the Syrian offensive, such as it was, they must have been caught up in the Syrians’ chaotic retreat and sporadic resistance.

Given the extent of Syrian casualties, it would be surprising if the Soviets suffered none. In Israel, rumors circulated for years that several Soviet officers had been taken prisoner in the Six-Day War. A report by the Associated Press on 12 June 1967 attributed this assertion to “military circles in Tel Aviv,” who specified that two days earlier, Israeli forces had captured “five Soviet officers attached as advisers to a Syrian artillery unit.” AP added, however, that an Israeli military spokesman afterward “denied the capture of the Soviet officers.” Israel’s northern-front commander, David Elazar, dismissed these reports on the last day of the war as rumors based on “Jewish wishful thinking.” Israeli missions over-
seas were asked about this, and Foreign Ministry deputy director-general Yosef Tekoa instructed them on 21 June to respond that three Polish engineers had indeed been detained in Sinai (and then released into the custody of their country’s embassy), but Israel was holding no Soviet prisoners of war. By the time he wrote, this was at least technically true: According to the rumors, the POWs were handed over to the Soviet embassy and left the country on 18 June, on board the Soviet ship that was sent to pick up the embassy staff and equipment following the severance of diplomatic relations (the cargo also included several sackfuls of Soviet medals, which World War II veterans of the Red Army living in Israel had returned in an organized protest at the Soviet provocation of the war). The POW rumors even spoke of the Soviets being taken on a tour of Israel, including Kibbutz Beit Hashita, where they were guided in Russian by a member who had immigrated from the USSR. Years later, she was said to have received regards from one of the former POWs via her brother, an ex-KGB officer, when he too moved to Israel.

Other versions, however, claimed that the POWs were held for a longer time: in 1970, the Copley News Service reported that the Soviets were being bartered for Jews who sought to leave the USSR, at an “exchange rate” of 10 families for every “technician.” Neither Israel nor the USSR would confirm or deny this. On other occasions, Israeli officialdom followed the line laid down by Tekoa, and the capture of any Soviets was flatly denied—most recently to us, by two former Mossad chiefs wearing broad grins.

But it appears that the cover-up of the Soviet role in the war was and is not limited to the former USSR, as archival evidence has now verified the POW story. A document recently found in a Vienna archive relates how a Soviet diplomat in Tel Aviv, in a farewell chat with his Austrian counterpart, stated that the USSR’s outrage at Israel’s aggression was exacerbated by the temerity to capture Soviet officers.

The reaction that Sedov “elicited” from Garthoff was rather hesitant; Soviet intervention in Syria would be “unfortunate and dangerous.” Unaware of the Soviet landing parties still poised in the Med, Garthoff assumed that Sedov referred to flying in troops over “Greece, Turkey or Iran,” which as US allies would withhold permission. When Sedov “smiled and said they probably wouldn’t bother to ask” for permission (which was probably where things stood on 10 June for Nastenko’s fighter squadrons),
the American “remarked . . . that this would be very grave.” He was evidently not authorized to threaten US counteraction.\footnote{42} By the time Garthoff even met Sedov, however, and certainly before his report reached the White House situation room (if it ever did), Moscow was no longer waiting for a US response through diplomatic channels. Dayan’s fear that “Syria was vital for the Soviet Union, and . . . it might throw all its weight into Syria’s defense” had already been borne out.\footnote{43} Shortly after 8 a.m. in Washington, Kosygin weighed in with the sternest warning yet over the hotline: Israeli forces were “conducting an offensive toward Damascus.”

A very crucial moment has now arrived which forces us, if military actions are not stopped in the next few hours, to adopt an independent decision. We are ready to do this. However, these actions may bring us into a clash which will lead to a grave catastrophe. . . . We propose that you demand from Israel that it unconditionally cease military action. . . . We purpose [sic] to warn Israel that if this is not fulfilled, necessary actions will be taken, including military.”\footnote{44}

This hasty translation was read to President Johnson and his seven aides present. Thompson was asked to double-check whether the original Russian text indeed threatened military action by the USSR. It did.

Of course, informing the United States about the USSR’s readiness to use force had now changed the nature of this threat substantially. With Egypt decisively routed, Israel engaged and winning on only one front, and its air force in total command of the region’s skies, the original objectives of the joint Soviet-Arab plan were now unattainable. Beyond a demonstration of backbone for the benefit of its uneasy satellites by virtue of the threat itself, the only possible effect of a Soviet intervention might be to trigger a superpower confrontation, which the Soviets were willing to risk but did not desire. Whereas the secret preparations were aimed at an actual offensive, the advertisement of the threat on 10 June turned it into a primarily deterrent move—that is, obtaining the Soviets’ demand was now the preferred outcome rather than fulfilling the threat.

This permitted Dobrynin, in an interview, to insist that the USSR never meant to intervene militarily and never even threatened to do so.
He claimed not to have been privy to Kosygin’s message of 10 June, but still maintained:

I don’t see any direct military intervention here. That’s your interpretation and it doesn’t arise directly from Kosygin’s text. . . . That’s diplomatic language, which is used to permit certain variations and leave room for future negotiation. . . . He might have wanted to leave some uncertainty, that’s what you call diplomacy.

Q. It says “including military.”

A. “Necessary measures” might be various. It doesn’t go into detail. Don’t read into it what it doesn’t say. What’s more, the course of events showed there was no military action on our part.45

Dobrynin responded angrily when we confronted him with Garthoff’s report, belittling Sedov as just one of many embassy staffers. “I know he wasn’t authorized to ask this question. If he did so in a conversation, it was only that—a talk between two diplomats trying to get something out of each other. It’s difficult for me to comment on something I didn’t authorize him to speak about.”46

The Americans, at any rate, took the phrase “including military” at face value. “In effect,” says McNamara, “it said: ‘Mr. President, if you want war, you’ll get war.’ That’s how tense the situation was. . . . We did not have any specific intelligence on [a Soviet plan to intervene]. But we were fearful that Syria might call on the Soviets for support to attack Israel, and Israel’s very existence would be at stake.”47

The Americans no longer had a manned embassy in Damascus or—incredibly—any independent assessment of the Israeli objectives on the Golan Heights. At the White House, Thompson “was impressed how much greater Soviet sensibility there was to the plight of the Syrians than to that of the Egyptians. At the time, the Syrians were the apple of the Russians’ eye.”48 As Thompson recorded for the National Security Council history file, “the feeling of those in the Situation Room was that the Israelis were probably” advancing on Damascus, as Kosygin charged.49 This was the case despite a dispatch from Ambassador Barbour, on 8 June, in which he warned: “USSR might take more direct action against Israel if [its army] now proceeds completely [to] destroy Syrian armed forces causing [the] Soviet-supported regime there to fall.” But he also reported that
in conversations with other diplomats “we have already taken steps to
calm what I believe is exaggerated impression of Israeli military ambi-
tions. We have [the] impression [that] 25 kilometers will be [Israel's] max-
imum penetration [of] Syria.”

Barbour’s secret dispatch was “passed to secretary of state and White
House” immediately but, like other prior intimations of a Soviet inter-
vention this one, too, does not appear to have been relayed to the situa-
tion room. In the president’s team, according to McGeorge Bundy, “there
was considerable discussion about what, in fact, the Soviets would be
able to do to the Israelis if they did try to carry out their threat.” In retro-
spect, Bundy advised against overdramatizing the situation on 10 June:
“The Russians’ possibilities were not really that impressive. At no time
was a conflagration immediately in prospect.” This, however, is not the
sense reflected by other participants in the consultation. When CIA di-
rector Richard Helms was called in for his evaluation, he could offer no
independent estimate of the Soviets’ capability or intentions; the best he
could do was to try and reach “friendly powers” that still had diplomatic
missions in Syria. According to Helms’s own top-secret contribution to
the NSC history dossier, conversation in the situation room “was in the
lowest voices he had ever heard. . . . The atmosphere was tense.”

Actually, the Israelis had already scaled down their aims, due to their
own perception (mainly Dayan’s) of the Soviet menace—even before
Kosygin’s latest threat was received in Washington and relayed to them.
Weizmann relates that Dayan ordered him and his deputy “to draw the
line where we stop in the Golan.’ Here too, after the breakthrough, there
was no end to possibilities, all the way to Damascus. But clearly, the Rus-
sians and their threats were on the horizon, and these threats were get-
ing greater and stronger.” Dayan prevailed upon them to settle for the
shallowest advance that would ensure the Israelis a continuous road be-
hind the cease-fire line. But at midday on 10 June, the Israelis were still
dragging their feet on the time for the cease-fire, in order to reach and
stabilize this line. Kosygin’s threat thus seemed very much in effect.

After Kosygin’s menacing message was received, Undersecretary of
State Nicholas Katzenbach was dispatched from the situation room to “call
in the Israeli ambassador and put pressure on the Israelis to accept a
cease-fire.” The Israelis, presumably informed of the Soviet threat,
soon did—after achieving their scaled-down objectives on the Golan. The
situation room team learned of this by watching the televised proceedings of the Security Council.55

Meanwhile, there had been two more hotline exchanges with Kosygin, in which he reiterated the urgency of halting Israel’s advance, but did not repeat the threat of military action. After the initial Soviet warning, McNamara, though he now claims he was unaware of the Soviet threat’s naval nature, suggested to his colleagues a precisely appropriate response. The main body of the Sixth Fleet was still remote from the combat zone; a carrier group had been diverted eastward to assist the *Liberty*, but it then escorted the stricken ship back west to Malta. On 10 June, says McNamara, the fleet was still “steaming west, toward Gibraltar, on a training exercise.”56

According to Helms’s memoir, while President Johnson briefly left the situation room after breakfast, the secretary of defense “asked whether we should turn the Sixth Fleet around to sail toward the Eastern Mediterranean. Thompson and Helms agreed. Helms pointed out that Soviet submarines monitoring the fleet’s operations would report immediately to Moscow.” This would, of course, now be precisely the point of the exercise. “The president was informed and agreed to send the fleet eastward.”57 “President Johnson and I,” says McNamara, “decided to turn the fleet around and send it back toward Israel, not to join with Israel in an attack on Syria—not at all—but to be close enough to Israel so, if the Soviets supported a Syrian attack on Israel, we could come to Israel’s defense with the fleet.”58

Khripunkov’s frigate had approached to within 20 miles—less than an hour’s sailing—of Haifa when it was ordered to abort the landing. According to the version that filtered down to its crew, “Brezhnev and the president got on the phones and realized that half an hour after we landed the world would be in ruins. And that was that.”59 The interpreters waiting in Alexandria were also taken off alert.60 It is unlikely ever to be determined whether the Kremlin was advised first of the US naval move or of Israel’s acceptance of 6:30 p.m. local time for the cease-fire to take effect. In his memoirs, Khrushchev acknowledges that the “McNamara Doctrine” of flexible response was vindicated in 1967.61 A close military adviser to Andropov at the time, future marshal Nikolai V. Ogarkov, confided in 1991: “Thank God that under the [Soviet] feudal regime, we only had Afghanistan. There might have been Poland, the Middle East,
and ... frightening to contemplate, nuclear war. ... Even such things were discussed.”

As Golovko noted in Damascus, “the leadership decided to evacuate us, and this took place early in the morning of 11 June. Nobody knew yet that the enemy had halted hostilities and had stopped 50km from Damascus. On 12 June, we reached Aleppo, Syria’s second city in the northern part of the country.” Aleppo is not on the route from Damascus to Latakia, and this move hardly confirms any prior plan to evacuate Soviet citizens through the latter port as claimed by Kapitanets. A history of Soviet intelligence radio operators states that a total of 177 “specialists and family members” were bused out of Damascus. This clearly represented only part of the Soviet personnel in Syria, and according to Golovko, even these evacuees were soon sent back: “Twenty-four hours later the interpreters, along with a small group of experts, returned to Damascus.” The USSR began to pick up the pieces from what had become a major fiasco.
RESTORING DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS with Israel was one of the final acts performed by the USSR before it ceased to exist at the end of 1991; Brezhnev’s former speechwriter Aleksandr Bovin became the last Soviet ambassador to present his credentials in a foreign country. This was a condition for Soviet co-sponsorship of an Arab-Israeli peace process—the Madrid Conference. It illustrated the magnitude of the error that, as latter-day Soviet spokesmen admitted with increasing candor, Moscow committed by breaking off its official ties. The Soviets lost not only any standing as brokers, but also any measure of direct influence on the Israeli side. No informal feelers—which began with a secret meeting between Semyonov and Tekoa at the United Nations, a year after the war—could come close to repairing this damage.

As a result, the immense investment that the Soviet Union sank into rebuilding Arab military strength in order to reverse the 1967 fiasco was ultimately wasted in terms of lasting political influence, except for the hard-line regimes of the “refusal front,” including Syria. In Egypt, Soviet weaponry, expertise, and direct military involvement were welcome so long as the immediate need was to overcome Israel’s operational advantage and to score at least a symbolic success in winning back Egyptian soil. In a sequel to this study, we have demonstrated that Egypt’s purported break with Moscow and its “expulsion” of Soviet “advisers” in July
1972, due to the USSR’s supposed refusal to back an all-out war on Is-
rael, were largely misleading if not intentionally designed as a deception
stratagem. ¹ Soviet-Egyptian collaboration continued up to and during the
offensive of October 1973 across the Suez Canal, but faded when the mili-
tary achievement had to be translated into political negotiation of a peace
deal, and only the United States could deliver Israeli compliance.

In the immediate wake of the Six-Day War, however, this eventual ef-
fect was still far over the horizon. In Israel, the diplomatic rupture faced
the Soviets most urgently with damage control requirements in such areas
as intelligence, for which the infrastructure housed by the embassies of
the USSR and its satellites was obliterated at a stroke. Some stopgap was
provided by the “Red” Russian Orthodox Church mission, of which a se-
ries of incidents before the war had already shown up much of the per-
sonnel as KGB operatives. Within a year, Israel’s security services warned
(perhaps somewhat hypersensitively) that the mission’s priests were col-
lecting and smuggling out “open publications pertaining to Israeli gov-
ernment policy, not necessarily in respect of religious matters. . . . [W]e
are of the opinion that the mission is increasingly becoming a substitute
for the diplomatic representation at least in regard of observation assign-
ments, and is using both overt and clandestine means for this purpose.”²

Soon, the need to augment this capability demanded insinuation of
new undercover agents—such as the aforementioned Mukasei couple—
and even some compromises with the increasingly harsh domestic im-
lications of the clash with Israel. “In connection with the Israeli aggres-
sion against Arab countries, following a submission by the KGB that was
approved by the [CPSU] Central Committee in June 1967, the departure
of Soviet citizens of Jewish nationality for permanent residence in Israel
was stopped.”³ Persecution of “Zionist activity”—that is, of overt Jewish
identification—was stepped up to levels that had not been approached
since the death of Stalin. The veiled equation of Israel with Nazi Germany
by means of code words like “treacherous attack” gave way to explicit
comparisons in the official press.⁴ This tendency reached comical propor-
tions when editors were reprimanded for featuring photos of a medallion
struck in West Germany with Dayan’s portrait, or even of a Danish actress
wearing his trademark eyepatch.⁵ But exactly one year later, Andropov and
Gromyko proposed, and the Central Committee resolved, to “resume the
emigration . . . in a number limited to 1,500 persons this year.” While
one rationale given for this was to counteract Western accusations of anti-Semitism, the move was explicitly aimed at enabling the KGB “to continue the use of this channel for operative purposes”—infiltration of recruited agents.⁶

In mid-June 1967, the most pressing political challenge for Brezhnev and his associates who had elaborated the war strategy was to assuage concerns and rebut accusations among the USSR’s embittered and disturbed clients worldwide. As the CIA reported, “Since the Middle East crisis the Castro regime has been very critical of the USSR for not supporting its friends, . . . having backed down from its commitments to aid its allies whenever Soviet action might result in a direct confrontation with the United States. The Cuban leaders [fear] the USSR will not come to the aid of Cuba in case of an attack.” Kosygin hastened to Havana to placate these anxieties by offering the dubious pretext that “the USSR had been prepared to aid [Egypt] in the struggle against Israel,” and this had been prevented only by Amer’s message “that [Egypt] intended to stop fighting within several days.”⁷ The Kremlin’s preoccupation with the repercussions of its Middle Eastern setback overshadowed Kosygin’s summit with President Johnson in Glassboro, New Jersey, on his way to Cuba: the Soviet premier repeatedly frustrated the US president, who recalled, “Each time I mentioned missiles, Kosygin talked about Arabs and Israelis.”⁸

Recriminations were also rife in the CPSU’s own rank-and-file⁹ and even within the Soviet leadership. This necessitated, first of all, excising the element of Soviet initiative from the public record of the Arab defeat. The Politburo adopted limits of disclosure and guidelines for future party doctrine, and by 13 June the foreign minister had circulated their main features to Soviet diplomatic missions.¹⁰ Brezhnev’s speech to the Central Committee a week later developed the key elements of the official narrative in detail. His offhand confirmation of a Politburo decision to warn Egypt and Syria about Israeli aggressive intent against them left a telltale clue to be discovered 35 years later. But the speech remained secret; speaking with a member of the Polish Politburo on 24 June, Brezhnev blamed “many mistakes, both political and military” on the part of “Arab friends,” as well as a veiled reference to “treason,” for “the very complicated situation” in the Middle East, while crediting the Soviet Union’s influence only for the fact that “the fight was interrupted.”¹¹
Still, as Ukrainian Communist Party leader Pyotr Shelest noted in his diary, “everyone is in a kind of depressed state. . . . [T]here was confusion, apprehension, and uncertainty.” At the Central Committee session, Yegorychev “infringed on the General Secretary’s personal jurisdiction . . . by asking whether the defeat of the USSR’s Arab allies did not cast doubt on its capability to defend its own territory.” Soviet embarrassment over the failure to rescue Egypt was still sore enough in November 1970 for the ousted Khrushchev to exploit it to end an investigation against him by the Central Committee’s Control Board. After hours of harsh questioning, the transcript shows how Khrushchev changed the subject abruptly:

**Khrushchev:** As a man and member of the Party, how could we—with all our power—permit Egypt to suffer such a rout? . . . I’m frequently asked about the Israeli aggression, and I answer that I don’t know everything since I’m retired.

**Chairman:** That ends the conversation.

But in June 1967, Brezhnev moved swiftly to reestablish his authority: Yegorychev was deposed, while Andropov and Grechko were promoted to candidate membership in the Politburo. Contrary to some published accounts, although Brezhnev effected a “changing of the guard” in the Soviet diplomatic team, especially in Middle Eastern capitals, the ambassadors who had handled the crisis were not punished or demoted. Chuvakhin was actually rewarded with an adviser’s sinecure at ministerial-rank pay, and was charged by Brezhnev with compiling a detailed report on the crisis, which included recommendations for the next conflict. The assumption that Pozhidayev was sacked after the war, when he was replaced by Sergei Vinogradov, disregarded the fact that Vinogradov was actually appointed in May. At that time, there were rumors in Moscow about dissatisfaction with Pozhidayev’s performance, but as he was considerably outranked by Vinogradov after the latter’s 13-year tenure in Paris, this nomination in itself may just as plausibly have exemplified the heightened importance ascribed to the Cairo post in the run-up to the crisis.

In sum, the policy that had in effect already been implemented since the closing days of the war was officially confirmed: The Soviet Union would not cut its Middle Eastern losses, but would redouble its wager. In an analysis of the postwar developments that runs counter to most con-
conventional Western accounts, David Kimche describes the ensuing stages of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a continuing Soviet initiative, “Brezhnev’s War.” Whereas for Nasser “the Six-Day War had become a national disaster which had to be overcome, for Brezhnev it was a personal humiliation which had to be avenged.” As the skeptical Shelest put it at the time: “Everything had been staked on [Nasser], as the leader of the ‘progressive Arab world,’ and this ‘leader’ was now on the brink of an abyss. Political influence was lost . . . The army was demoralized, and had lost its fighting capability. Most of the military equipment had been captured by Israel. We apparently will have to start everything from scratch: policy, tactics, diplomacy, arms.”

The ideological rationale was quickly provided: the Central Committee classified the Middle Eastern crisis as “a confrontation between progressive Arab regimes and the vanguard of world imperialism, Israel,” and ruled out any accommodation in this “clash of ideologies.” It was cast especially by the Soviet military as a theater for the “liberating mission of the Armed Forces” according to the “Grechko Doctrine,” which was then being formulated: “In its foreign policy activity the Soviet state actively and purposefully opposes the export of counterrevolution and the policy of oppression, supports the national liberation struggle, and resolutely resists imperialist aggression in whatever distant region of our planet it may appear.”

Even before the Central Committee meeting, on 17 June, Brezhnev informed Shelest (a Politburo member) by telephone call to Kiev that it had been decided to send the Supreme Soviet president Podgorny urgently to Cairo, as “the situation has to be saved; everything must be done to shore up support for and trust in Nasser.” Podgorny flew to Cairo along the same route as the transport aircraft that now intensified the resupply airlift, which—as already mentioned—was begun in the course of the war. The official Russian history puts it, however, “within a few days of the war’s end,” when “massive transfers of arms, equipment and instructors began to Egypt and Syria. Extraordinary economic aid was allotted. As early as 14 June, ‘for moral support,’ a squadron of Tu-16 bombers landed in Egypt, followed by an airlift to the UAR of other Soviet arms and matériel.” This effort was barely concealed and emerged within several days in the media of Yugoslavia, where the Soviet aircraft refueled en route, and where Podgorny too stopped over for talks with Tito.
Vybornov recalls that “Podgorny came to visit us”; the former ace now presumably was charged with organizing a different “Soviet air intervention” than his original mission envisaged. Podgorny was accompanied, among others, by the future KGB rezident in Egypt, Vadim A. Kirpichenko. According to the latter’s firsthand account, the Soviet visitors in Cairo promised Nasser “much more active assistance in organizing Egypt’s air defense, renewing the kollektiv of Soviet military advisers, and reinforcing our presence in the Mediterranean.”

Simultaneously with Podgorny’s delegation, “a large group of Soviet military experts reached Cairo, headed by Chief of Staff Marshal M. V. Zakharov. After analyzing the lessons of the war, this group launched the re-arming of the Egyptian Army.” Yegorin relates that “the equipment from the USSR was no longer directed to training bases, but went directly to the surviving Egyptian units.”

There were strings attached: the Soviets were no longer willing to risk noncompliance by their allies. “In October or November 1967,” recalls a former nomenklatura member from Vilnius, “a Lieutenant General lectured at an extraordinary, closed session of the partaktiv at the auditorium of the Lithuanian CP’s Central Committee. He said that up to the Six-Day War, Nasser had not allowed Soviet experts into his army, preferring to send his own officers to study at Soviet military academies. But now the Egyptians had been persuaded to post an expert at each battalion; no expert, no arms. Moscow, however, set its target at deploying advisers down to company level, because ‘that way we can exert complete control over the Egyptian Army.’” As Yegorin recalls, “together with the technical matériel, our officers were sent to these units as advisers (mustasharun), who were intended to improve the fighting morale and combat capability of the Egyptians opposite the enemy dug in on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal.” One of the senior Soviet interpreters posted to Egypt reports that Nasser was compelled to accept advisers even down to the squad level. The Egyptian president’s desperation was such, at this stage, that in the talks with Podgorny he offered to withdraw from the nonaligned movement and to join the Socialist bloc, as “only a friendship with the Soviet Union will rescue the Arabs.”

It was precisely the 1967 Arab defeat that permitted the USSR to establish permanent naval bases in Syria and Egypt—an important strategic objective for the Soviets, who utilized these facilities for intensified
competition with the US Sixth Fleet. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the Soviet navy’s Fifth Eskadra took over the front line at the northern end of the Suez Canal until Egyptian defenses could be reorganized. Khripunkov was promoted and made gunnery officer of a three-ship Soviet flotilla stationed at Port Said. “The Israelis had taken part of Port Fuad, in Sinai. . . . So there were the Israeli forces on one side, and on the other—astern of us—were ours, that is the Arabs’, and I was in the middle. Every morning at 0345 I would go out on the bridge, the sailors would load the cannon and train them onto the Israeli trenches. . . . [W]e were 2–3 kilometers from the Israeli-occupied territory, and I could see them.”

It was in Port Said, Khripunkov recalls, that he “witnessed the Israeli navy’s tragedy”: Soviet advisers “did all but press the button” when Soviet-supplied missile boats of the Egyptian navy sank the destroyer Eilat off the Sinai coast on 21 October.

But the Soviets were also drawn into Nasser’s strategy once the Egyptian military was sufficiently rehabilitated to resume offensive action. Yegorin includes the subsequent “artillery duels on the Canal front” among the combat operations in which Soviet servicemen played a direct role. The shelling that began in August 1968 over the Suez Canal was in fact commanded, on the Egyptian side, by Soviet advisers. According to V. P. Klimentov, then a military interpreter: “On August 14 . . . I was ordered to go with an artillery-detachment commander to a lookout post on the roof of the Suez Canal Administration building in Ismailia” to observe the Israeli emplacements. “‘We’ll show them soon enough,’ said the officer—an Armenian by extraction. . . . [A] few days later the Egyptian artillery struck forcefully and accurately.” When in March 1969 the Egyptians launched the “third stage of Nasser’s strategy” with “Soviet-style artillery barrages,” air operations, and commando raids across the canal, “there were already, on the canal banks, some casualties among Soviet military personnel.”

The USSR’s increasing involvement was most dramatically exemplified by the dispatch of integral Soviet combat units to shore up Egypt’s defenses, mainly against Israeli air power. In 1970, at the height of the Egyptian-Israeli War of Attrition, this Soviet expeditionary force—consisting mainly of an entire SAM division and MiG-21 fighter squadrons—numbered some 20,000 personnel at any given time. A total of 50,000 passed through Egypt before these formations (but not
the advisers) were mostly withdrawn in 1972. In 1971, Soviet MiG-25s, by now already somewhat familiar to the West but still invulnerable to IAF interceptors or missiles, were again posted in Egypt. This time too, they were flown by Soviet pilots on photoreconnaissance sorties over Sinai and Israel proper, as part of Egypt’s preparations for retaking its lost territory. Training for this purpose was overseen by Soviet advisers both before and after their supposed “expulsion” in July 1972, when the Foxbat squadron was among the integral units that were actually withdrawn. By then, the Soviet units had gone into combat on several occasions, suffered casualties, and to a large extent forced Israel to accept a cease-fire in August 1970—which the Soviets and Egyptians violated with impunity by advancing the SAM array up to the Suez Canal bank, creating the prerequisite for the cross-canal offensive.

Although this was the largest Soviet military intervention outside the Warsaw Pact until Afghanistan, its undisputed undertaking by Moscow has been disregarded by the conventional approach, whereby in 1967 the Soviet Union was incapable of or unwilling to risk direct involvement in the Middle Eastern conflict. In a study of this Soviet deployment (code-named “Kavkaz”), we have already disputed the accepted assumption that it resulted from the IAF’s “depth bombings” in Egypt in January 1970, as it was not only prepared but actually commenced earlier.34

Soviet testimonies show that the initial dispatch of Soviet formations—as distinct from individual advisers—began immediately after, and as an outcome of, the 1967 war. In a June 1967 session of the Ukrainian CP Central Committee, Shelest recorded, “we took up the question of aerial defense in Ukraine,” and General A. I. Pokryshkin reported on the “grim” state of the republic’s anti-aircraft array. “It is simply criminal that . . . in our republic, many vital objects are vulnerable, unprotected, and undefended, while at the same time equipment and crews are being sent down, and combat aircraft and SAM batteries are being dispatched to ‘cover’ Cairo. This very disturbing and important question,” Shelest wrote, “I took up with L. Brezhnev.” The general secretary heard him out “in Olympian serenity” and replied: “Don’t interfere in this issue. There is an overall plan and we are following it.”35

The anxiety caused at home by the failure of Soviet hardware in the Middle East was apparently widespread in the military. Nastenko—who would soon “volunteer” to command a MiG-21 squadron in Egypt—
relates that “frenetic construction of aircraft shelters began in the frontier commands of Egypt and even the USSR. . . . Everyone was waiting for what was to come next.” The economic cost of Moscow’s vastly expanded presence in Egypt was also feared; as Shelest noted, “This is not going to come cheaply for our people and state.” Washington had hopes of exploiting the effects on Soviet consumers (rather than on their domestic defenses), as an aid to restraining the reconsolidation of the USSR’s influence in Egypt. A joint panel from the CIA, the State Department, and the US Information Agency presented a paper on “propaganda issues” to White House adviser McGeorge Bundy, on 15 June, that proposed: “For the Soviet Union, hammer home the point that the Soviet military investment . . . has cost the individual Soviet and Czech citizen consumer goods, automobiles, refrigerators etc. A new military buildup would delay Soviet and Communist economic progress.” Actually, the increase in defense spending trickled down to quite a number of Soviet consumers, particularly the servicemen themselves. Out of their pay in Egypt, officers “could save enough for a Soviet-made car in 7–8 months”—even a Moskvich 412, “the dernier cri of Soviet fashion.”

From this questionable interpretation of Soviet decision making, the joint propaganda panel went on to make a cardinal error in forecasting: “The Soviets, disappointed with Nasser’s performance, may wish to make Algeria their major tool for their troublemaking in the area.” In fact, Algerian president Houari Boumedienne was already being seen in Moscow as a hindrance to the main Russian effort in Egypt. The panel recommended that the United States should “be careful about our Soviet relations and not force the Soviets into a corner. We must not fall into the Soviet trap which seeks to tie us with Israel. We must not gloat over Soviet discomforture [sic].” To “prevent a new military buildup in the area,” this inter-service group suggested “not to focus for the time being on the Soviet military resupply. This is not yet of alarming proportions and to focus on it would be wrong since a number of Arab countries would look to the USSR as its [sic] benefactor. It could get the Soviets off the hook.”

It was in fact the United States that got off the hook thanks to the temporary elimination of the Soviet-backed threat to Israel. Washington returned to its preoccupation with Vietnam, and it took a change of ad-
administration, as well as a serious challenge to Israel’s US-supplied hardware by the Soviet expeditionary force in Egypt, to reactivate American initiative in the region.

One of the USSR’s main war aims, preventing Israel’s nuclear armament, had clearly not been achieved. Though now regarded as an established fact, it would remain a prime concern for Soviet strategy, which held that “so long as the adversary nation or alliance, which launched the war, has not been deprived of the capability to produce nuclear weapons and the means for their delivery . . . the enemy will be able to resist and cause casualties.” Assuming, however, that the Soviets also learned about Israel’s reported assembly of some nuclear device on the eve of the war, its failure to display this capability—as Peres hinted that he advised—may have detracted from the weapons’ deterrent effect even once Israel’s delivery systems reportedly became operational.

One result of the 1967 defeat was to move the goalposts of declared Soviet aspirations: the demand for restoration of occupied territories now referred primarily to those that Israel captured in the Six-Day War. Although the demand for a return to the 1947 partition lines was never officially dropped, its implementation was shelved indefinitely. Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with their sizable Palestinian populations, made it possible to reconcile this with another significant shift in Soviet policy. The Palestinian organizations, which had played only a minor irritant role in the Soviet moves leading up to the 1967 crisis, were now certified as ideologically progressive national-liberation forces, and were adopted as Soviet protégés, instruments, and beneficiaries of arms and training. As latecomers to this arena, the Soviets availed themselves of Romania’s connections with the PLO’s new leader, Yasser Arafat (thus, incidentally, dispelling any suspicion that Romania had shunned the Warsaw Pact’s diplomatic break with Israel out of some pro-Israeli bias).

Still, by February 1968 the CIA reported: “The Soviets made it very clear that Israel is here to stay and they will not . . . facilitate its destruction.” As Gromyko later confirmed, maintaining Israel’s presence was more beneficial to Soviet interests than eliminating it: “As long as hostility dominates in the Middle East we are needed there. . . . If . . . we behave wisely then again we will be very much needed.”

Soviet support for Arab war plans was therefore now limited to re-
versing the Six-Day War humiliation. The CIA cable, recently declassified in a heavily censored form, spoke of “the first information received regarding Soviet plans to participate in a limited Arab offensive against Israel. . . . The Soviets will actively aid the Arabs in gaining back the territory lost in the June 1967 war.” Based on the 1967 experience, it could be assumed that such an eventuality would not suffice for Israel to invoke the doomsday option. While Soviet diplomats at the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna complained of “Egyptian pressure about atomic weapons, on the grounds that Israel has acquired them,” the risk of an Israeli nuclear strike does not appear to have been a major consideration in the joint Soviet-Egyptian planning of the cross-canal offensive. Indeed, when surprised and initially beaten back by the Soviet-supported Egyptian and Syrian attack in 1973, Israel is widely held to have readied a nuclear response, but refrained from exercising it, as the perceived existential threat to its pre-1967 heartland subsided.

This limit on Israel’s readiness to use its nuclear option left considerable scope for Moscow to continue wielding its own nuclear deterrent against Israel in dimensions other than the latter’s very existence. On 26 June 1967 (as a British “friend” reported, in strict confidence, to Israel’s ambassador in London), “a military attaché . . . who is well versed in weapons and missiles, reported spotting, on a road leading north from Cairo, 26 Soviet surface-to-surface missiles, of a very large type capable of carrying any kind of warhead.” In August 1970, a Soviet diplomat could still warn an Israeli colleague that “so far, the fighting in the Middle East was only with conventional weapons. If Israel does not withdraw, and imposes another war on Egypt, this might be an atomic war.” Eventually, a Soviet nuclear threat (real, perceived, or inflated by the United States) was as effective in halting Israel’s counteroffensive in 1973 as it had been in 1956. At the time, this threat was attributed mainly to Soviet Scud missiles based in Egypt (which were fired once, with conventional warheads, at Israeli forces). Recent Russian reports have, however, also connected “special” weapons with a force of four MiG-25s that returned to Egypt in the course of the Yom Kippur War, and which was also prepared to launch standoff missiles at the Foxbats’ old target, the Dimona reactor.

The cumulative impact on Israel’s security concepts lasted longer than the actual Soviet threat. In 1981, long after peace with Egypt and the
latter’s move into the US sphere had vastly reduced the Soviet presence and capability in the region, former prime minister Rabin stated, in a closed lecture at Israel’s National Security College, that he “still feared direct Soviet military involvement in Arab-Israeli wars, and even envisioned, under certain geopolitical circumstances, a possible Soviet landing on the shores of Israel.”51
NOTES

CHAPTER 1: HISTORIOGRAPHY AS INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM
1. Aleksandr Gorokhovski, “Desant na Haifu” [A landing in Haifa], Fakty i kom-
   mentarii (Kiev), 12 August 1999.

CHAPTER 2: THREAT OR BLUSTER
1. Memorandum of Conversation, “The Hotline Exchanges,” Ambassador
   Llewellyn E. Thompson and Mr. Nathaniel Davis, 4 November 1968. National
   Security File, NSC Histories, container 19, v. 7, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential
   Library, Austin, Texas (henceforth cited as LBJ).
2. Kosygin to Johnson, 10 June 1967, Russian and English versions, Middle East
   Crisis, v. 7, appendices G–H, LBJ.
3. For a detailed and fully sourced critical discussion of this conventional ap-
   proach and present-day Russian efforts to preserve it, see Ginor, “Cover-up.”
   The following citations are examples from leading studies in the field.
4. Examples of these three approaches can be found in, respectively, Parker, Poli-
5. On the USSR’s desires, e.g.: “There is adequate documentation to state that
   the Soviets did not want the war, nor did they think that their acts would
   cause one.” Shimon Shamir, “Mekorah shel hahaslama bemai 1967: Taanat
   ‘haiyum hayisreeli’” [The origin of escalation in May 1967: The claim of an


9. E.g., *Kommersant Vlast*, “Poslevoennye voyny.”


CHAPTER 3: ANTECEDENTS AND MOTIVATIONS


2. Aryeh Ilan, Director, East European Dept., Foreign Ministry, to Yosef Tekoa, Deputy Director General, 3 June 1967, ISA, div. HZ, box 4083, file 2; Mlechin, *MID*, 194—96.


7. Bezymensky, *Valenberg*, 143; Sudoplatov lists several agents that were infiltrated into Jewish underground organizations, *Special Tasks*, 292—93.


17. Zolotaryov, *Rossiya*, 174. One battalion of the 202nd had been dropped east of the Mitla Pass in Sinai; by the date in question, the rest of the brigade had linked up with it overland.
18. Dayan, *Yoman*, 90, 96. He states that the source of the hits on the Israeli column is not entirely clear. In total, four MiG-15s were shot down over Sinai (200). Dayan adds that Israel expected pilots from Poland or Czechoslovakia rather than the USSR to be the likeliest practical fulfillment of Soviet threats to send volunteers for the Arab side (34).
19. “At dawn on October 30, in MiG-15 II’s, they managed to intercept four British Canberra surveillance planes, and to shoot down one of them, and on 2–3 November managed to shoot down several British planes.” Zolotaryov, *Rossiya*, 174. British reports confirmed part of these claims (the Canberra was damaged, but managed to return to base).
29. Aryeh Ilan, Director, East European Dept., Foreign Ministry, to Ehud Avriel, Ambassador in Rome, 16 August 1967, ISA, div. HZ, box 4048, file 27. Ilan
was responding to a report by Avriel on a talk with Sneh, in which the Communist leader evidently quoted Soviet statements to the same effect.


34. Vladimir B. Rezun, affidavit to authors, Bristol (UK), 13 January 2001. See also Ben-Tzur, *Baath Party,* 25.


38. “Roundup of gossip and attitudes in the UN,” Walt Rostow to President, Top Secret, 8 June 1967, National Security File, NSC Histories “Middle East Crisis,” v. 4, tabs 128–30. The name and position of the Soviet source were sanitized in the declassified version of this document (emphasis added).


41. Aryeh Ilan, Director, East European Dept., Foreign Ministry, to Yosef Tekoa, Deputy Director General, 3 June 1967, ISA, div. HZ, box 4083, file 2.

42. Ginor, “Cover-up”; Ginor, “Russians.”

43. E.g., Parker, *Politics,* 12.

### Chapter 4: The Nuclear Context

Epigraph: Quoted in an undated, unsigned Israel Foreign Ministry internal document. The date of de Jong’s “famous speech” is given as 12 June 1970, place and occasion not stated; ISA, div. HZ, box 4605, file 2.

1. In time, “Dimona” became synonymous with the nuclear facility, and the name is henceforth used in this sense.


6. Ibid., 75–76.
10. Cohen, *Bomb*, 259, 410n.4. Writing in the mid-1990s, Cohen pointed out that before his own work only two studies, both Israeli, had raised the question “on the role of nuclear weapons in the Six-Day War” (Aronson and Brosh, *Politics and Strategy*; Levite and Landau, *Beeinei haarvim*). Both dealt with the topic only on the Israeli-Egyptian level. Of these scholars, Aronson, in a subsequent development of his thesis, posited that the nuclear issue was an indirect cause of the war: “The outbreak of the Six-Day War was largely due to the loss of Arab control over an escalating conflict emanating from their fear of Israel’s nuclear action” (Aronson, *Israel’s Nuclear Programme*, 3, and back cover summary). Levite and Landau concluded tentatively: “It may be that a political-military move, motivated by the Arabs’ fear of Israel’s intention to obtain nuclear weapons, and by their aspiration to thwart it, was one of the motives for the Egyptian move in May–June 1967” (Levite and Landau, *Beeinei haarvim*, 42). In a subsequent English version, Levite and Landau phrased their conclusion: “It is . . . plausible to speculate that part of the logic guiding Nasser’s actions in May of 1967 may well have been . . . to stop the Israeli nuclear program” (Levite and Landau, “Arab Perceptions,” 48). As late as 2001, Oren dismissed this notion, stating that “my own research, based on dozens of Arabic sources, has shown no evidence whatsoever to support the theory” (Oren, *Six Days*, 348n.30, citing and rebutting Aronson and Brosh, *Politics and Strategy*, and Hersh, *Samson Option*).
12. Aronson did speculate that “on the eve of the Six-Day War, the Egyptians may have been misled into believing that the Soviets would support some limited action in favor of the Syrians, which would include the destruction of Dimona” (Aronson, *Neshek garini*, v. 2, 69; this is a later version of *Politics and Strategy*). He noted, however, that “the Soviet role is . . . not fully clear, nor fully documented” (Aronson, *Israel’s Nuclear Programme*, 3).
13. Grinevsky, *Stsenarii*, 111–12 (emphasis added). He also mentions that only “much later, at the end of ‘80s, appeared publications that make clear that for Israel too the situation around Dimona constituted one of the main motivations for the 1967 war.” The publications named (112n.1) are Haber, *Today*, and Cohen, *Bomb*. 
15. Vasilyev, *Ot messianstva k pragmatizmu*, 47.
16. Dayan (*Avnei derekh*, 317–20, 474) confirms that the Soviet threat had a decisive effect on Israel’s decision to withdraw from Sinai, even though the IDF and particularly the Israeli Air Force considered that “the Soviet threat was mere intimidation and should not make us weak-kneed.”
23. In this context, Velie’s source said: “None of us want to produce non-conventional weapons. But if pressed for our survival we will go for unconventional weapons systems.” Velie, *Countdown*, 211. The entire chapter devoted to Israel’s nuclear program in Velie’s book is a typical example of the nuggets that can be mined from the massive literature of “quickie” publications that were turned out by many of the correspondents who covered the 1967 war: they often reflect versions of the events and policy statements that were candidly disclosed by officers and officials in the afterglow of the June victory, but later became unmentionable or were superseded by official versions.
24. Naumkin, *Blizhnevostochnyy konflikt*, v. 1, #84, 306. Memo from Middle East Department in advance of Shepilov’s visit to Egypt, 18 July 1955; the decision is justified as “enhancing technical cooperation and reinforcing our position in this country.” The Israeli-American agreement was signed 12 July (Cohen, *Bomb*, 360n.11).
26. In this context, the Israeli diplomatic cables used the code word Samson (for the biblical hero who “slew more at his death than in his life”), which was later adopted for Israel’s own nuclear project: “In the Samson matter, [Walt Rostow] informed me that they found out the source of the report was in Jordan” ([Ambassador in Washington Avraham] Harman to [Moshe] Bitan, Foreign Ministry, Jerusalem, cable no. 233, 22 May 1967, and no. 257, 23 May 1967, ISA, div. HZ, box 4078, file 4). The point was emphasized several times to the United States (report of a meeting with [CIA Tel Aviv station chief] John Hadden, 25 May 1967, top secret, kindly provided to us by Meir Amit; “Memorandum from the Secretary of State for the President: Your Conversation with the Israeli Foreign Minister,” 26 May 1967, secret, *FRUS*, v. 19, #71,
A Soviet-made decontamination chamber and related items were captured by Israel in Sinai during the June war, and were originally described as “equipment for protection against nuclear, bacteriological, and chemical warfare.” The nuclear element, however, was quickly dropped from Israeli accounts. So were early press reports about “quantities of chemicals believed to be ingredients for the manufacture of poison gas in mobile laboratories” (Middle East Record, 1967, 233). By the time the first books on the war were published, the nuclear element had disappeared entirely (Stevenson, Israeli Victory, 108, gives the fullest account of this matter). The Israeli apprehension about Egypt’s intent to use chemical weapons was also downplayed in subsequent publications. The possibly defensive purpose of this Soviet equipment, or even the supply of offensive chemical weaponry as a counter to perceived Israeli capability, may be connected to information supplied to Soviet intelligence by Professor Marcus Klingberg, the deputy director of the top-secret Biological Institute at Nes Ziona, whom the Soviets recruited in 1957. Klingberg recently related that after a hiatus in his meetings with a handler in the Soviet embassy, the latter contacted him again before the Six-Day War. (Yossi Melman, “100% Yisraeli” [One hundred percent Israeli], Haaretz weekly supplement, 12 May 2006, 14; Ilana Dayan, interview with Klingberg, Fact, Channel 2 Television, Israel, 8 and 15 February 2003.) After his arrest in 1983, Klingberg was referred to by the Soviets as “our agent” and given high priority in spy-exchange attempts made through East Germany, even before his arrest was made public in Israel in 1991 (Soviet message translated in Stasi file MfS Sc/M 347, top secret, [undated] 1989, kindly provided by Stefan Meining, Munich). In January 1966, the Soviet cultural attaché in Israel requested access to the Biological Institute, and was given a guided tour—not by Klingberg (correspondence of Viktor Ilyushin with Sima Rappoport, 6 January–15 February 1966, ISA, div. HZ, box 4051, file 10). Soviet-made gas masks were also supplied to Syria “a few days before the war”; Hameiri, Mishnei evrei harama, 66.

29. Michel Bar-Zohar, Spies, 183–87; Harel, Rigul, 169–75. Fuchs, a German-born scientist who worked in the US and British nuclear-weapons projects from 1941, was convicted in 1950 of passing secret information to the Soviets.
30. Dedyulya, “Na zemle obetovannoy” [In the promised land], in Karpov, Vneshnyaya razvedka, 209.
gress, and passing it to Israel, which gave it to the United States. Although his new disclosure dates the start of his work with Soviet intelligence after his immigration to Israel the following year, it does cast in a new light his previously incredible story that a female employee in the Polish ruling party gave him the top-secret document out of personal affection. In an interesting aside on the Soviet-Egyptian relationship, Grajewski recalled that during the mid-1960s (he could not remember the precise date), the Shin Bet gave him a transcript of a meeting between Nasser and “Soviet generals” to pass on to Moscow, in order to establish Grajewski’s own credibility as a source “with friends in the Prime Minister’s Office.”

32. Valery Yaremenko, “Yadernaya voyna na Blizhnem Vostoke byla by na pol’zu SSSR” [Nuclear war in the Middle East could have been beneficial for the USSR], Vremya Novostei (Moscow), 5 June 2002. Yaremenko is on the staff of the Russian Defense Ministry’s Institute of Military History, and previously served in the Middle East as a Soviet military interpreter—among other postings, with the Soviet SAM batteries stationed around Iraq’s nuclear reactor, where he witnessed the Israeli air raid in 1981.

Chapter 5: The Spymaster and the Communist


2. Since the Russian language lacks the phoneme and letter “H,” and in transcribing foreign terms usually replaces it with “G,” Gariel is the Russian transliteration of the Hebrew Har’el. Though the most accurate transliteration of the name is Isar Har’el, the more familiar English form Isser Harel is used here, except when it appears otherwise in direct quotations.

3. As Avner Cohen pointed out in his definitive history of Israel’s nuclear program (Bomb, 243), “only on two occasions during 1960–1967 did Israel’s nuclear weapons development become a major issue in Egyptian-Israeli relations, with references to the possibility that it might lead to an Arab-Israeli war. On both occasions the impetus came from outside, as if imposed on Nasser.” Cohen’s suggestion of an “outside impetus” now appears to be borne out.

4. Harel, Rigul, 122, 135, 169–75; Bar-Zohar, Spies, 183–87, 204. Bar-Zohar’s accounts of the Beer and Sitte affairs are virtually identical with corresponding parts of Harel’s own book; Dr. Bar-Zohar told us (21 August 2004) that his biography was based on interviews with Harel, in which the latter read from prepared notes. These apparently were also used for Harel’s own book, which was published 15 years later.

5. Harel, Rigul, 189.

6. Ibid., 181–92. Harel’s favorable chapter on Sneh is conspicuously absent from Bar-Zohar’s book, which appeared in the year of Sneh’s death. This seems to indicate that the chapter was originated later than the notes on which the rest of Harel’s book was based. Dr. Bar-Zohar recalled to us that at the time of his interviews with Harel in the late 1960s, the latter still expressed “a negative attitude” toward Sneh.
7. A fellow Zionist leader, Zerah Warhaftig, attested to Sneh’s biographer that Sneh escaped during a forced march through a town shortly after the capture of his unit, which would have been somewhat easier than from a prison camp. Shealtiel, *Tamid bemered*, v. 1, 89.

8. Harel’s subordinate at the time, Raphael Eitan (now a cabinet minister), recently confirmed that Sneh was one of the political leaders whom he tracked on Harel’s orders. Ronen Bergman, “Ish hamivtzaim” [The operative], *Yediot Ahronot* (Tel Aviv), 7 Yamim supplement, 3 March 2006, 26.


10. Kostyrchenko, *Taynaya politika Stalina*, 418n.96, 735, quoting two documents from RGASPI.

11. Harel, *Rigul*, 93–168. The connections that Beer developed in Europe thanks to his senior position in the Israeli Defense Ministry were also used by the Soviets for espionage against NATO countries, especially West Germany.


14. Naumkin, *Blizhnevostochnyy konflikt*, v. 2, #204, 455–58. Other instances are from 1950 (ibid., v. 1, #71, 127), and from 1954 (v. 1, #150, 243).


18. For a full discussion of Moscow’s role in the Israeli party’s split, see Lahav, *Brit Hamoatzot*.


20. See Chapter 10. Sneh “utilized his good connections with Eshkol, on one hand, and Soviet ambassador Dmitri Chuvakhin on the other to try and bring about an Israeli-Soviet dialogue that might stop the slide toward war. It was following these contacts that Eshkol proposed to Chuvakhin, in mid-May, that he visit our northern frontier and see with his own eyes that the rumors about ‘aggressive Israeli troop concentrations on the Syrian border’ were indeed unfounded.” Tzaban in Sneh, *Aharit kereshit*, 300. We have found no other reference to such mediation by Sneh.

21. When a TASS reporter who was formerly posted in Israel—and had been exposed by Harel’s security services as a KGB operative—asked an Israeli diplomat at UN headquarters, “How is Moshe Sneh?” the reply was, “Moshe Sneh is a Communist, but just as the Soviet Communists are Soviet patriots, Sneh is an Israeli patriot.” “Conversation with TASS reporter [Sergei] Losev,” Moshe Leshem to Foreign Ministry Director-General, 12 January 1969, ISA, div. HZ, box 4221, file 9; Harel, *Rigul*, 106, 124–25. Losev went on to become director-general of TASS and a member of the CPSU Central Committee.

22. The single accessible file bearing Harel’s name in the archives of the Prime Minister’s Bureau for the period in question contains only his expense-account reports; ISA, div. G, box 6304, file 1081.


26. In an interview with the authors (2 May 2005), Amit declined to discuss Harel or his activities.


28. Ibid., 138.

29. Peres has apparently misdated this incident. He says it was on Passover eve, 11 April 1960, but the presidential inauguration of Leopold Senghor of Senegal, which Peres reports he was attending when recalled to Israel, took place only on 5 September of that year. Also, on the corresponding date in April, Gromyko was in Moscow for a meeting of the CPSU leadership; he did visit the United States, with Khrushchev, for the UN General Assembly in September. Most important, the assertion that Peres attributes to Harel about a Soviet spy satellite could not have been correct at any time while Harel was still in office as Mossad chief: the USSR’s first photoreconnaissance satellite, Zenit (Cosmos-20), was launched into orbit only on 19 December 1963. Drogovoz, *Raketnye voiska SSSR*, 294.

30. Harel’s dispute with Peres had by this time also become a turf war over technology acquisition and security responsibility for the nuclear program: “In 1957, shortly after France agreed to sell Israel a nuclear reactor, then–Defense Ministry Director General Shimon Peres established the Office for Special Missions, whose job was to secure the reactor. . . . Peres, the rival of Isser Harel, who was then in charge of Israel’s intelligence services, wanted to establish his own private intelligence organization.” (Ronen Bergman and Gil Meltzer, “Mashtik kol” [The silencer], *Yedioth Ahronot* [Tel Aviv], 7 Yamim Supplement, 6 August 2004. Peres’s unit was later renamed the Scientific Liaison Bureau [SLB, or Lakam]. Its establishment in 1960, and its being “anathema” to Peres’s “bitter enemy” Harel, is described in Black and Morris, *Israel’s Secret Wars*, 417–18. See also Thomas, *Gideon’s Warriors*, 86.) Another possible motivation for Harel, who had been excluded from securing the nuclear program, may thus have been to take advantage of Peres’s departure from his powerful Defense Ministry position in order to saddle the rival outfit with responsibility for a major leak, and thus to achieve his aim of getting it disbanded.


32. Ronen Bergman, “Haim kakh hehmatznu shalom im Nasser?” [Is this how we missed a peace with Nasser?], Ynet (*Yedioth Ahronot* news Web site, Tel Aviv), 2 June 2005, http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3093037,00.html. The reference to Dimona appeared in this online preview of a feature in *Yedioth’s* weekly supplement, but was not included in the printed feature.

34. Ivan Dedyulya, “Na zemle obetovannoy,” in Karpov, Vneshnyaya razvedka, 209, 229. “N” is not the initial of a specific name, but the Russian equivalent of “X.”
36. Israeli double agent Grajewski speculated that the Russian allegations might refer to him, but he confirmed that “there were other agents,” and his position at the time (head of foreign-language broadcasting at Israel Radio) was hardly senior enough to fit the description. Yossi Melman, “Haish shelanu ba-KGB” [Our man in the KGB], Haaretz weekly supplement, 22 September 2006, 68, http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/765485.html.
40. The change of power in Israel is still considered by some to have been the last, missed opportunity for joint US-USSR action to change Israel’s nuclear posture. Walsh, “Russian and American Nonproliferation Policy,” 14 n.19.
41. Department of State Memorandum of Conversation, “Israel’s Nuclear Weapon and Strategic Missile Policy,” 29 July 1969, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (henceforth cited as NARA), NSC Country Files, ME_ISRAEL 60x605 (emphasis in the original).
42. Ibid. (emphasis added). Rabin reported this conversation, but with no mention of the “advertisement” issue, in his memoir Pinkas sherut, 251.
43. Hersh, Samson Option, 176–77. The report is unattributed.
44. Ibid., 220.
46. Mlechin, Mossad, 7–9. However, a former Syrian intelligence officer recently related that in the late 1980s “we received from the KGB pictures of the Dimona reactor from the inside.” Yossi Melman, “Bati mertzoni hahofshi” [I came of my free will], Haaretz, 11 April 2004, http://www.haaretz.co.il/ hasite/objects/pages/PrintArt.jhtml?itemNo=4144436.
47. Aronson, Neshek garini, v. 2, 29–30, citing document at LBJ, National Security Files, Committee on Nuclear Proliferation, box 1–2, problem 2, item 1.
CHAPTER 6: A NUCLEAR UMBRELLA FOR EGYPT


2. Ibid., 489.
4. Troyanovsky, Cherez gody, 236. Intelligence Duel: Russia-Germany, a recent Russian TV documentary broadcast on RTR-Planeta on 22 August 2005, reported that from the East German side only three top leaders were party to the plan.
11. Ibid., #217, 487.
12. Shalom, Bein Dimona lewashington, 311n.60.
13. Hersh (Samson Option, 135–39) reports that following their summit in June 1964, Johnson and Eshkol agreed that “the United States would become Israel’s supplier of arms as long as Israel did not produce nuclear weapons” (emphasis added).
14. This warning by the Soviets, of which we have found no other mention, may have reflected genuine Soviet apprehension about Chinese competition for Arab favor by means of nuclear proliferation, which the USSR opposed. However, a report commissioned by the Foreign Ministry’s deputy director-general Yosef Tekoa in June 1966—possibly following such Soviet warnings—found no evidence of actual or potential Chinese military aid for any Arab country (but only for the PLO), much less a nuclear option. Memorandum from David Sultan, Research Department, to Deputy Director General, “Chinese Presence in the Middle East,” 19 June 1966, ISA, div. HZ, box 4097, file 2.
15. This was the single case in which we encountered mention of Chinese competition in the Middle East as a major motivation for Soviet action in this period, and the subject has received scant historiographic attention. An exception is Alberto Tonini, “Breaking Eggs in the US-Soviet Basket: Egypt, Israel, and the Six-Day War,” paper presented at a conference on NATO, the Warsaw Pact, and the Rise of Détente, Dobbiaco, Italy, 2002; publication forthcoming.
25. Khrushchev’s speech of 9 July 1960 is quoted and analyzed in Fursenko and Naftali, Adskaya igra, 49ff.
27. Yehuda Tagar, Israel Embassy, London, to Middle Eastern Department, Foreign Ministry, Jerusalem, 11 May 1966. The official quoted is [Sir Alan?] Goodison, Deputy Director, Middle East, Foreign Office. A copy of the Telegraph report is attached; ISA, div. HZ, box 4049, file 5.
28. Israelyan, Kremlin, 192.
30. Valery Yaremenko, “Yadernaya voyna na Blizhnem Vostoke byla bya by na pol’zu SSSR” [Nuclear war in the Middle East could have been beneficial for the USSR], Vremya Novostei (Moscow), 5 June 2002.
33. Cohen, Bomb, 261n.10, 410, citing Memorandum of Conversation, the White House, 23 February 1966, NSF, UAR, Box 159, LBJ.
39. Gluska, Eshkol, 74–75; includes the tanks originally intended for supply via
    Germany, which the Soviets reported to Egypt; Naumkin, Blizhnevostochnny
    konflikt, v. 2, #205, 458.
40. Eshkol’s archive, file on meetings with chief-of-staff, cited in Gluska, Eshkol,
    228, 477n.44.
41. Ben-Tzur, Gormim Sovietim, 34n.20.

CHAPTER 7: CONVERGING TIMELINES

Epigraph: ISA, div. HZ, box 4049, file 5.
1. Ben-Tzur, Gormim Sovietim, and Schwarz, Sovetskii Soyuz, asserted that this
coup was the beginning of the countdown to the 1967 war. While Ben-Tzur’s
study was published only in Hebrew and drew little direct attention outside
Israel, its thesis has been endorsed by such leading Israeli actors at the time
as Meir Amit, then director of the Mossad, who cited it both at the 25th an-
niversary conference and in an interview with us on 9 August 2002.
2. Ben-Tzur, Gormim Sovietim, 26–60.
4. Ibid., 26–27.
5. Schwarz, Sovetskii Soyuz, 15.
6. Gluska, Eshkol, 297–98. The cabinet session was declared a “Ministerial Com-
mittee on Foreign Affairs and Security,” making its deliberations classified.
7. Zeynalov, Nezabyvaemye vstrechi, 27.
8. Bovin, XX vek, 134.
9. Dobrynin, Sugubo doveritel’no, 134. Dobrynin mistakenly dates the congress
in May.
11. Ibid., 86; Gilboa, Shesh shanim, 83.
12. Al-Gumhuriya (Cairo), 12 March 1966, cited in Hatzav (IDF intelligence
monitoring digest), 18 March 1966, 112/586.011; Levite and Landau, Israel’s
Nuclear Image, 64n.9.
13. Telegram 2379, from Ambassador Lucius D. Battle, to Secretary of State, 19
March 1966, “copy in sanitized form,” LBJ Library, NSF, UAR File, containers
#159–61, item 20, cited in Aronson and Brosh, Politics and Strategy, 96,
323n.28.
15. Ibid., #219, 490–91.
16. For the document composed on 7 March, ibid., #218, 489–90.
19. Ibid., #219, 490–91.
20. Ibid., #220, 495–96.
21. Y[osef] Govrin, Israel Embassy, Moscow, to Director, East European depart-
ment, Foreign Ministry, Jerusalem, 4 May 1966, ISA, div. HZ, box 4049, file
5. Govrin cites “a colleague from the US Embassy in Moscow”; “my impression was that he learned this from State Department reports.”


24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.


28. Undated document entitled “Kosygin’s remarks on 17,” ISA, div. HZ, box 4049, file 5. Nasser’s statements had already been the subject of an Israeli cabinet discussion on 15 May. The transcript of this meeting has not yet been declassified, but a “top secret” excerpt in the Prime Minister’s Office archive includes a suggestion by Mapam minister Mordechai Bentov that Israel challenge Nasser to make good on his offer of regional nuclear demilitarization. However, he suggested waiting until “we know the tone of the Nasser-Kosygin joint communiqué”; ISA, div. A, box 7228, file 7.


31. Yael Levin, Research Department, to Israel Ambassador, Ottawa, 22 May 1966, ISA, div. HZ, box 4049, file 5 (emphasis in the original).


39. Gideon Remez, personal experience as one of the paratroopers, then stationed at sector headquarters, in this company.

40. Memorandum of Conversation, *FRUS*, v. 18, #294, http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xviii/zd.html. Zaki Shalom (*Bein Dimona lewashington*, 211) notes that “surprisingly, Dobrynin sounded relatively complacent.” Shalom refers mainly to the subject of “long-range missiles,” which however is only briefly mentioned in this document as simply “missiles” and on which Dobrynin evaded any substantive comment; the bulk of the talk with Rusk dealt with nuclear weapons.


42. Pazner, Foreign Ministry, Jerusalem, to M[ordechai] Gazit, West European De-
partment, 3 June 1966, top secret, quoting the first secretary of the French embassy in Israel, ISA, div. HZ, box 4049, file 5. Barkovsky had served in Damascus since 1961. Previously, he had spent nine years in Egypt, where he was posted only one year after joining the Soviet Foreign Service, which seems to point at an intelligence background. Naumkin, *Blizhnevestochny konflikt*, v. 2, 667. Speaking with Parker in 1990, Barkovsky said he could not “provide details about [Ambassador Dmitri] Pozhidayev’s démarche in Cairo [the warning about Israeli troop concentrations in May 1967] or the source of his [Pozhidayev’s] report, . . . [as] he did not know the origin of the report” (which would seem to militate against a Syrian origin). Parker, *Politics*, 22, 24.

43. AEC external relations manager Shmuel Bendor to Tekoa, 6 June 1966, secret, ISA, div. HZ, box 4049, file 5.

44. Unsigned top-secret memo, “New York, 1 June 1966,” with cover note from Avigur to Eshkol on same date (or 7 June, handwriting unclear), ISA, div. A, box 7228, file 7. Avigur was director of Nativ, the clandestine agency for liaison with Soviet Jewry, which was directly responsible to the prime minister. The memo might have been written by Nativ’s then-representative in the United States and Avigur’s successor, Nehemia Levanon, although the latter was based in Washington, and there is no similar reference in his memoirs; Levanon, *Nativ*.

45. Katriel Katz to Aryeh [Ilan], 24 October 1966, ISA, div. HZ, box 4049, file 7.

**Chapter 8: The “Conqueror” and “Victor” Plans**

Epigraph: In an interview with the BBC Russian service to mark the launch of a book based on notes taken surreptitiously by aides at Politburo meetings during the Gorbachev presidency, Moscow, 19 September 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/5359924.stm.


18. Despite Khrushchev’s orders to confront his Western counterparts forcefully on the Suez issue at a conference in London after Nasser nationalized the canal, Shepilov accepted an invitation by US secretary of state John Foster Dulles to negotiate a joint policy. Although the affair ended with considerable gain for the USSR, thanks in large measure to Washington’s stand against the British, French, and Israeli attack on Egypt, Shepilov—until then a Khrushchev protégé—was sacked and later reduced to penury in menial positions. Mlechin, *MID*, 343.


20. It was noted that the division’s manpower included 841 CPSU members and 101 candidates for membership, organized in 60 party cells. Kravchenko, *Podvodnye sily*, 113, 115; Tatarinov, *Shtab*, 120, 367.


25. Ibid.


28. IDF Hebrew translation (22 June 1967) of Syrian telegram, Southwestern regional HQ to 8th Brigade, top secret—immediate, 4 June, “pursuant to Operations Branch directive of 3 June,” Captured Documents—Syria, Intelligence Heritage Center, Herzlia, Israel (henceforth cited as IHC).


33. Shmuel Bendor to Arye Levavi, 8 and 18 December 1966, secret, ISA, div. HZ, box 4031, file 16 (emphasis added).

34. Levavi to Bendor, 13 December 1966, secret, ISA, div. HZ, box 4031, file 16.


38. Cited in ibid., 55, app. 6.


43. Ben-Tzur, *Gornim Sovietim*, 165, citing *Al-Ahram*, 25 February 1968, on the testimony of Shams Badran at his trial. Badran, then minister of war, was a member of Amer’s delegation in Moscow.


47. Department of State Incoming Telegram 029479, Ambassador Moscow to Secretary of State, confidential, 28 May 1967, LBJ, kindly provided by Michael Oren. Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson qualified the credibility of this information, pointing out the source’s “dislike of both Nasser and the Soviets.”


49. Akopov, transcript.


52. Nikolai G. Yegorychev, telephone interview with authors, 11 November 2000; Andrew and Gordievsky, *KGB*, 503; Yefim Segal and Zinovi Dubrovski, “Ne dolzhny molchat’” [Must not keep silent], *Novosti Nedeli* (Tel Aviv), 2 March 2000.


**Chapter 9: The Naval and Aerial Buildup**


2. “The Americans have full information about this.” Yosef Hadas, Israel Embassy, Paris, to Middle East and Research Departments, Foreign Ministry, J-


4. Wiet, *Ostblock intern*, 165. Erwin Wiet, Gomulka’s interpreter, understood in retrospect that Brezhnev was alluding to the war against Israel, into which “Nasser was tempted by the Soviets.”


11. E.g.: “The first significant appearance of Soviet sea power in the Mediterranean came in 1967 during the Arab-Israeli conflict, with the Soviet ‘Eskadra’ numbering 5–7 vessels. This presence rapidly expanded; by 1970, the eskadra maintained nearly 70 vessels in the eastern Mediterranean.” Daly, “Oil, Guns, and Empire.” Polmar (*Guide*, 18–19n.6) states that continuous operations in the Med began in the “mid-1960s” and “by the early 1970s the Soviets had an average daily strength of 50 or more naval units in the Mediterranean on a regular basis.”


13. Ibid., quoting (and disputing) F. M. Murphy, “The Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean,” *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, March 1967, 38–44. Herrick’s low estimate of the Soviets’ capability in general and in the Med in particular (“except by a wholly unexpected attack, the USSR could not realistically entertain much hope of... successfully attacking the Sixth Fleet”) was so exceptional that the Naval Institute saw fit to append a disclaimer to his book (xi–xii).


15. Kravchenko, *Podvodnye sily*, 124, text of convention at http://www.turkishpilots.org.tr/ingilizcedernek/DOCUMENTS/montro.html. Article 19 offers an example of the advantages Moscow stood to gain by getting Israel to strike first: while in time of war vessels of the belligerent powers are barred from passage, an exception is made, under certain conditions, “in cases of assistance rendered to a State victim of aggression.”
18. Goldstein and Zhukov, “A Tale of Two Fleets.”
21. Israel did plan one naval landing operation, a battalion-level armored task force that was slated to sail from Ashdod and land west of El-Arish in Sinai on the night of 5–6 June. This operation was called off “when the force was already on board the landing craft,” as the Egyptian defenses collapsed before it could begin. The troops that had trained for it were then attached to ground operations, indicating that no other landing was contemplated. Personal communication from Shlomo Erel, commander of the Israeli navy in 1967, 7 August 2004. The range of this operation (from Ashdod) was less than 150 kilometers, as against about 250 kilometers from Haifa to the nearest Syrian shore and over 300 to Latakia. Even so, Erel considered the Sinai plan to have been “dangerous, since we lacked control of the naval arena,” indicating that an attempt at an even longer strike with slow and vulnerable landing craft would have been highly unlikely.
22. Cherkashin, Povednevnya zhizn’, 173–78. In a previous version, (“Yemu bylo prikazano unichtozhit’ Izra’il’” [He was commanded to destroy Israel],” Yevreisky Vesty [supplement to Golos Ukrainy, Kiev, organ of Ukrainian parliament], no. 17–18, September 1996), Cherkashin specified that the missiles in question were eight SS-12s. This version, however, misdated the episode in 1968.
27. Top-secret memo to prime minister from Research Department, Foreign Ministry, 29 August 1966, ISA, div. A, box 7228, file 7.
29. Israelyan, Kremlin, 192.
30. Parker, Politics, 31–32, citing Mohammed Hassanein Heikal, 1967: Al-Infijar [1967: The explosion] (Cairo, 1990), 625, which in turn cites minutes of this talk and includes “a barely legible photocopy in the appendix.” The document is signed by Badran and was apparently translated by Parker (emphasis added).
32. Yuri Khripunkov, telephone interviews with the authors, August 1999 and 18 September 2006, and personal interview, 9 October 2006.
34. Kapitanets, Na sluzhbe okeanskому flotu, 174; Shirokorad, Flot, 410.
35. Khripunkov interviews.
36. Personal communication from Dr. Yossef Bodansky, executive director, Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, US House of Representatives.

37. Kislov, “Ne v ladakh s faktami.” Professor Kislov is now head of the Center for Research of Peace Problems in Moscow. His article is an afterword to Ginor, “Shestidnevnaya voyna.”


44. Amir Nachumi, telephone interview with the authors, 20 July 2006; e-mail communication from McFarland, 12 September 2006.


46. Pevtsov and Portnov, “A bylo eto.”

47. Tatarinov, Shtab, 81.

48. Aleksandr Khaldeyev, “Nesostoyavshiisya desant” [The landing that did not occur], Okna (Tel Aviv), 14 September 2000.

CHAPTER 10: MID-MAY

Epigraph: “Secret Materials: Soviet Intelligence Provoked War” (unsigned), www.presscenter.ru, 26 March 2001. This report was followed the next day by an article signed Oleg Frolov (“Tainy proshlogo”), which points to the same conclusion.

1. Haber, Today, 149.

2. Middle East Record 1967, 185.


4. Zvyagelskaya, Izrail, 168. Irina Zvyagelskaya, who wrote the book’s historical section, is the head of the Middle East International Relations Department at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow and a professor at the Russian Foreign Ministry’s academic institute. She was a member of Naumkin’s editorial team for the collection of Foreign Ministry documents.


7. Oleg Grinevsky, “Atomnaya bomba i Blizhnij Vostok” [The A-bomb and the Middle East], Dipkur’er (supplement to Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Moscow), 1 March 2001; Grinevsky, Stsenarii, 112 (emphasis added).

8. Korniienko, Kholodnaya Voyna, 130–31; Mlechin, Mossad, 246–47. According to these sources, the KGB rezident in Cairo warned about up to 12 brigades concentrated on the Syrian border. Mlechin’s account apparently originated from the same source as Korniienko’s.

9. For a comprehensive overview of these theories see Parker, Politics, 3–20.

10. Ronen Bergman, “Kimat shiva yamim” [Almost seven days], Yediot Ahronot, 7 Yamim supplement, 1 June 2006, 40.


12. Egyptian diplomat Tahsin Basheer, in Parker, SDW, 55.


14. Parker, SDW, 65. This Ryevsky is unknown from any other source and his role merits further investigation.

15. Middle East Record 1967, 185.


17. Nasser’s speech at UAR forward air headquarters, 25 May 1967, cited in Laqueur, Road, app. 3, 371–76. This contention was repeated by Mahmoud Riad to Parker as late as 1989: “The proof of Israel’s intentions, if any was needed, was a statement by Yitzhak Rabin . . . on May 12 threatening to occupy Damascus and overthrow the Syrian regime.” Parker, Politics, 14, 249n.35.

18. Haber, Today, 146. Zvyagelskaya (Izrail, 168) notes this but still posits the Israeli threats as a direct cause of the crisis.

19. Department of State incoming telegram 012062, Barbour to Secretary of State, 12 May 1967, secret.


31. Grinevsky, *Sekrety sovetskoy diplomatii*, 6. Korniyenko was also a member of this delegation and so must have known the position of trust that was conferred on Semyonov.
34. Akopov, transcript.
35. Israelyan, *Battlefields*, 166. He too confirms Semyonov’s “excellent professional reputation.” Semyonov’s interlocutor was Tekoa; Tekoa to Foreign Ministry, 25 October 1968, secret, ISA, div. HZ, box 4221, file 5.
41. Bar-Zohar, *Embassies*, 1. In a telephone interview from his home in Tel Aviv on 1 November 2002, Bar-Zohar confirmed this quote and gave his source as “probably a British intercept.”
43. Parker, *Politics*, 250n.42.
45. “Der Rede von L. I. Breschnev auf dem Juniplenum des ZK der KpdSU, Uber die Politik der Sowjetunion im Zusammenhang mit der Agression Israels im Nahen Osten, 20.06.1967” [The speech of L. I. Brezhnev at the June plenum of the CP of the USSR in connection with the Israeli aggression in the Middle East, 20 June 1967], Stasi document SAPMO=NA ZPA IV 2/1/362 (emphasis added), quoted with the kind permission of Stefan Meining; kindly translated by Avraham Ben-Tzur. The Polish report of the same speech (AAN KC PZPR 2632) was found and partly published in Uri Bar-Noi, *Notes from the Chaim Herzog Center for Middle East Studies and Diplomacy* (Beersheba: Ben-Gurion University), 6 May 2001, accessible at the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) Web site: http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.publications&doc_id=35467&group_id=13349. Bar-Noi, however, contends that the speech “does not shed light on the controversial information about concentration of Israeli troops,” and he appears to attach no significance to the mention of the Politburo.
47. Uri Ra’anan, “Not Just Six Days, Not Just a War,” *Bostonia* (Boston University), Fall 2002; http://www.bu.edu/alumni/bostonia/2002/fall/essays/raanan/raanan-02.html. Ra’anan and Bar-Zohar (*Embassies*, 2) were among the first who pioneered the hypothesis of a deliberate disinformation maneuver on the part of the USSR. Ra’anan, however (in “Soviet Global Policy”), suggested that
the Soviets believed the Egyptian response would not cause an actual war, and Moscow could then take credit for preventing an Israeli attack on Syria that was never going to occur anyway.

49. Parker, *SDW*, 37, 40, 42. A similar view was presented by Korniyenko.
50. Pyrlin, transcript.
52. Department of State incoming telegram 004387, American Embassy Amman to Secretary of State, priority—confidential, 5 June 1967.
54. Karen Brutents, telephone interview with the authors, 17 October 2000.
57. Ibid.
60. Ibid., 25.
61. Kosygin was away for the UN General Assembly’s extraordinary session and his meeting with President Johnson in Glassboro.
64. Department of State incoming telegram 19499, Ambassador in Paris (Bohlen) to Secretary of State, 31 May 1967, secret, LBJ, Arab-Israeli Crisis, box 9, kindly provided by Michael Oren.
66. Personal recollection of Gideon Remez, who took part in the operation.
67. In a speech on 22 May 1967, Nasser said: “On 13 May we received accurate information that Israel was concentrating on the Syrian border huge armed forces of about 11 to 13 brigades. These forces were divided into two fronts, one south of Lake Tiberias and the other north of the Lake.” Radio Cairo, 22 May 1967, quoted by BBC, 24 May, *Middle East Record 1967*, 190. More detail on the “intelligence” provided by the Soviets was apparently disclosed to a US embassy official in Paris by a “well-connected Arab diplomat”: “top secret Israeli plans for [an] 8 brigade ‘retaliation’ attack on Syrian frontier position” on 15 May, which Nasser “had foiled” by moving troops into Sinai. Here too the purported scope of Israeli action is wildly disproportionate. Department of State incoming telegram 023378, Embassy Paris to Secretary of State, secret, 23 May 1967, LBJ, kindly provided by Michael Oren.
68. Brutents, telephone interview.
69. This relationship between the two agencies was recently confirmed by Israeli double agent Victor Grajewski, who worked with agents of both the KGB and

70. Arab sources quoted in Middle East Record 1967, 17.


72. Solovyov and Klepikova, Zagovorschiki, 20–21. Andropov’s promotion to candidate member of the Politburo was the first for a KGB chief since Stalin’s appointee Lavrenty Beria.

73. On 13 June 1967, Schwarz, Sovetskii Soyuz, 147–50. On Tarabanov as a mouthpiece for Fedorenko, see Lall, UN, 88. Eban correctly identified the Soviet source of the Egyptians’ “bad intelligence” and complained to US ambassador Walworth Barbour that “talking with the Soviet Ambassador here [is] like talking to someone from a different planet.” Department of State incoming telegram 21704, Ambassador Tel Aviv to secretary of state, secret, 21 May 1967.

74. Pyrlin, transcript.

75. “Protokoll” (cited above, chap. 3, n.37), 8–9.


77. Safran, War, 274n, quoting Badran at his trial, according to al-Ahram, 25 February 1968, Jerusalem Post, 28 February 1968.

78. Barron, KGB, 39–84.


80. Ibid., #253, 561.

81. Yevgeny M. Primakov, articles in Pravda, 23 April, 15, 26, and 28 May 1967, among others.

82. Parker, SDW, 65.

83. Brezhnev, “Rede.”

84. Zolotaryov, Rossiya, 182; Latynin, Opit, 49.

CHAPTER 11: ESCALATION AND DENIAL


3. Brezhnev, “Rede” (cited above, chap. 10, n.45). The date of Pozhidayev’s report on his talk with Nasser was added according to the corresponding document in Naumkin, Blizhnevostochnyy konflikt, v. 2, #253, 561–63.

4. Cited in Govrin, Mirror, 10.

5. Laqueur, Road, 97.
6. A copy was sent to Fedorenko; Naumkin, *Blizhnevostochnyy konflikt*, v. 2, #255, 565.
9. Naumkin, *Blizhnevostochnyy konflikt*, v. 2, #256, 566–67. As detailed below, however, another document in the same collection indicates that the statement dated 23 May was in fact composed at least two days earlier, before Nasser closed the straits—which Semyonov, of course, could not admit. Ibid., #252, 560.
13. The source requested anonymity.
14. Draper, *Israel and World Politics*, 54–55, quoting several such blasts in the flagship Soviet organs *Pravda* and *Izvestiya* between 16 and 22 May.
17. Department of State Incoming Telegram 020806 [copy of telegram to Defense Intelligence Agency], confidential, 19 May 1967.
21. Department of State outgoing telegram 198916, from Rusk to Embassies Tel Aviv, Cairo, and Mission UN, secret, 20 May 1967, *FRUS*, v. 19, #25, 34.
25. Department of State incoming telegram 029457, Embassy Cairo to Secretary of State, immediate—secret, 28 May 1967.
26. Department of State incoming telegram 029229, Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, secret, 27 May 1967; the source is identified as “Voslensky,” probably Mikhail Voslensky, a historian and translator who later defected to the West.
27. Department of State incoming telegram 029479, American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, confidential, 28 May 1967, kindly provided by Michael Oren. Thompson “emphasized” that his “source was distraught, that he claimed to be ‘not in the know’ and that his views [were] probably colored by his clear dislike of both Nasser and Soviets.”

29. Sedov’s status as a staffer of the KGB rezidentura in Washington was confirmed years after by his then superior, Kalugin (*Lubianka*, 270–73), and others, including Kissinger.


31. Department of State incoming telegram 028300, copy of cable from Defense Attaché’s Office Tel Aviv to Defense Intelligence Agency, secret, 26 May 1967.

32. Department of State incoming telegram 020806 [copy of telegram to Defense Intelligence Agency], confidential, 19 May 1967.


34. Ronen Bergman, “Kimat shiva yamim” [Almost seven days], *Yediot Ahronot*, 7 Yamim supplement, 1 June 2006, 42.

**Chapter 12: The Badran Talks**


5. Circular from Gromyko to a list of Soviet missions, 28 May 1967, secret, cited in Naumkin, *Blizhnevostochnyy konflikt*, v. 2, #257, 569. Sadat (*Identity*, 173) confirms that the Soviets “asked to see an envoy” and Badran was sent.


7. Akopov, transcript (emphasis added); Brutents (*Thirty Years*, 374) mentions receiving excerpts from these talks for use in preparing Brezhnev’s speech.

8. Karen Brutents, telephone interview with the authors, 17 October 2000.


11. Akopov, transcript (emphasis added).


13. Akopov, transcript.

15. Embtel 1517 (Lisbon), Robert Anderson to President Johnson, 2 June 1967, NSF, NSC History, Box 18, LBJ, cited in Cohen, Bomb, 26, 412n.27.
17. Kosygin to Johnson, 27 May 1967, FRUS, v. 19, #84, 159–60; Department of State outgoing telegram 202239, Rusk to various US embassies and military commanders, 25 May 1967, secret, NARA, POL ARAB_ISR, kindly provided to us by Michael Oren.
18. Memorandum from the Secretary of State for the President, “Your Conversation with the Israeli Foreign Minister,” 26 May 1967, secret, FRUS, v. 19, #71, 123.
22. Ibid., #79, 148–52.
23. Memorandum of conversation, the President and Foreign Minister Eban, 26 May 1967, secret, FRUS, v. 19, #72, 127–36.
24. FRUS, v. 19, #74, 137–38.
26. Memorandum of conversation, the President and Foreign Minister Eban, 26 May 1967, FRUS, v. 19, #77, 140–46.
27. Department of State Memorandum of conversation EUR:SOV:MToon:erk, secret, 26 May 1967, with attached letter; Draft letter to Eshkol, National Security Council History file, Middle East Crisis, v. 2, box 17, LBJ; Department of State outgoing telegram 203943, From Secretary of State to Embassy Tel Aviv, “Flash—literally for eyes only of Ambassador,” 27 May 1967, FRUS, v. 19, #86, 162–64.
28. Ibid., #88, 167–68.
29. Bregman and El-Tahri, Fifty Years War, 76.
30. Brezhnev, “Rede.”
31. Memorandum from the Middle Eastern Countries Department, 8 June 1967, Naumkin, Blizhnevostochny konflikt, v. 2, #266, 579.
32. Pyrlin, transcript.

Chapter 13: Foxbats over Dimona
2. Grinevsky, *Stsenarii*, 108. The report on Israel’s potential mentioned that “in Israel, starting from 1956, in a deep secret, works are conducted to produce nuclear arms.”

3. Valery Yaremenko, “Yadernaya voyna na Blizhnem Vostoke byla by na pol’zu SSSR” [Nuclear war in the Middle East could have been beneficial for the USSR], *Vremya Novostei* (Moscow), 5 June 2002 (emphasis added).

4. Ibid.


6. *Haaretz*, 22 June 1967, 1. The report is attributed to “our science correspondent,” which appears to indicate that its source is the AEC rather than the IDF. The assertion that the attack was intended for 26 May, unless based on yet-classified documents, appears to be inaccurate; the available Egyptian battle orders put the units in readiness from the 26th, but the zero hour is unspecified.

7. Shalom, *Keraam*, 155. He specifies, however, that the point is marked *both* as an objective for bombing and as a missile site.


9. Yehiel Omri, interview with the authors, 18 June 2006.

10. Vasily Reshetnikov, transcript of interview for *The Fifty Years War: Israel and the Arabs*, a six-part television documentary made by Brian Lapping Associates, 1998, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King’s College, London (henceforth cited as “Reshetnikov, transcript”; spelling and grammar reflect the text of the original English translation), 7, 9. “Hock” is the obviously erroneous rendition of Hawk by the original translator. Reshetnikov erred in describing these targets as located in “Sinai.” A Hero of the Soviet Union for his feats in World War II, he retired as a colonel-general.


14. For a detailed discussion of another example, the threat to deploy Soviet regular forces in Egypt, which was made after this move had already begun in 1969, see Ginor, “Helmet,” 138–43.


16. The prevalence of such rumors at the time was confirmed to us by family members of several contemporary Israeli Air Force pilots, and strongly hinted to us by senior test pilot Danny Shapira.


28. Vybornov biography, USAF Air University Web site. An Israeli participant in this gathering, Brigadier General (retired) Amir Nachumi, confirmed to us that Vybornov told him personally about flying a MiG-25 over Israel “and once even having been shot at”; Nachumi, telephone interview, 20 July 2006.


30. V. Vakhlamov, “Aleksandr Vybornov.”

31. Ibid.: researcher’s report for a television series still in preparation, made available to the authors, 7 July 2006.


33. Vakhlamov, “Aleksandr Vybornov.”

34. Researcher’s report, cited in n.31 above.

35. Oren, *Six Days*, 99. As Oren groups his notes for several paragraphs at a time, it is difficult to attribute this data to any specific source.


37. Colonel (retired) Yehiel Omri, interview with the authors, July 2006. Omri was a lieutenant in 1967.
38. The IAF commander in 1967, Mordechai Hod, pointed this out in dismissing entirely any direct risk that Israel faced from the overflights, “though it was a matter of concern that [Dimona] was a priority target for them.” He held in retrospect that the reactor was completely protected by missiles and fighters. Shalom, *Keraam*, 156.


40. Interview with a former intelligence officer on 9 November 2005.


42. Shalom, *Keraam*, 139; Avnery, *Shamayim boarim*, 19. They “were intended to deliver the main counterstrike against Israel,” were in the air “on training” when the IAF struck on 5 June, and were subsequently destroyed on the ground at Luxor the same day; ibid., 22 (quoting Heikal).

43. Memorandum of Conversation, 26 May 1967, 10:30 a.m., *FRUS*, v. 19, #69, 121.

44. Memorandum, *FRUS*, v. 19, #75, 138.


47. Memorandum for the record, 26 May 1967, 1:30 p.m., *FRUS*, v. 19, #72, 127.


49. James M. Ennes, Jr., “Addendum to the 2004 edition of Assault on the Liberty,” http://ussliberty.org/addendum.htm. Sturman states, “We did have Arabic and Russian linguists, as our mission was to determine if Russian nationals (pilots) were flying Egyptian TU95s.” The sole survivor among these linguists, Russian expert Bryce Lockwood, did not respond to our request for further information.


52. Photo at Cooper, “Bear Hunters, Part 1.”


54. Reshetnikov relates a similar overflight of the carrier USS *Enterprise* by a Tu-95 in the same region of Gibraltar, apparently earlier than the *America’s*
encounter, as well as other such cases in the Mediterranean, and notes that McNamara told a press conference this was a reality that had to be accepted. *Chto bylo*, 446–47.

55. Reshetnikov, 2002 interview.


**CHAPTER 14: POISED FOR A DESANT**


5. Yehudit Yeheskeli, “Hikinu lifkuda lishlo’ah til atomi al Yisrael” [We awaited the order to launch an atomic missile at Israel], *Yedioth Ahronot*, 8 May 1992. The source’s identity is withheld at his request.


13. Department of State incoming telegram 032466, Burns to Secretary of State, 31 May 1967.


16. Sheldon S. Cohen, a participant in this meeting, in a personal communication to Professor Barry Rubin, 4 December 2000, which Rubin has kindly provided to us.

17. Even Ennes of the *Liberty* dismissed as “a weird story” the version that appeared, long before the first Soviet accounts of nuclear subs being readied for a counterstrike against an Israeli atomic bombing, as if the United States had

18. “In the ’60s foreign intelligence received information about Israel’s preparations for new aggression against Arab countries, including the date for it to attack Egypt and Syria in 1967. This intelligence was passed on to the leaderships of Arab countries, who, however, undervalued it and overvalued the military potential of their countries.” SVR Web site, http://svr.gov.ru/history/stage09.htm. The mention of an expected Israeli attack on Egypt as well as Syria, and the Arabs’ alleged disregard of the Soviet warning (which was not the case in mid-May), shows that this refers not only to the Soviet warning about Israeli “troop concentrations of the Syrian border.”


23. List in Turkish attached to secret Israel Foreign Ministry memo, Minister in Ankara D. Laor to Deputy Director General Y. Tekoa, 1 June 1967, kindly translated by Alegra Amado.


25. Aleksandr Khaldeyev, “Nesostoyavshiisya desant” [The landing that did not occur], *Okna* (Tel Aviv), 14 September 2000.


28. Reshetnikov, transcript, 4. “Race” is clearly a translation error that appears in the transcript but was corrected to “raids” in the BBC documentary film, which reflects Reshetnikov’s audible words in Russian.

29. Ibid., 10.
30. Ibid., 5–8. He reiterated in the 2002 interview: “First maps were distributed, and then the order came to paint the planes.”
31. Pyrlin, transcript, 10–11.
32. Reshetnikov, 2002 interview.
34. Reshetnikov, 2002 interview.
35. Reshetnikov, transcript, 6.
36. Reshetnikov, 2002 interview.
37. Reshetnikov, transcript, 8.
38. Yuri V. Nastenko, video interview for an Israeli Russian-language television documentary, filmed in Moscow, July 2002, in authors’ archive.
40. Weizmann, Lekha shamayim, 267; Shalom, Keraam, 190–93.
41. Shalom, Keraam, 156.
42. McNamara interview. This is apparently a favorite anecdote of McNamara’s, who repeated it on several recorded occasions, including an oral history tape made by Robert Dallek in 1993 and accessible at the LBJ Library; transcript at http://www.lib.utexas.edu/Johnsson/archives.hom/oralhistory.hom/McnamaraR/Mcnamara-SP1.PDF. The White House record of “The Washington–Moscow ‘Hot-Line’ Exchange” (LBJ) puts the receipt of Kosygin’s first message 32 minutes later, evidently because Moscow insisted that the president be at the machine before the message was transmitted.
43. Memorandum of Conversation, “The Hot Line Exchanges,” Llewellyn Thompson and Nathaniel Davis, 4 November 1968, Middle East Crisis, v. 7, LBJ.
45. Brezhnev, Vospominaniya, 69–70.
46. Grechko was Brezhnev’s immediate superior. Zén’kovich, Samye zakritye ludi, 117–20.
47. Brezhnev, “Rede” (cited above, chap. 10, n.45).
48. Brutents, Tridtsat’ let, 263.
49. Memorandum for the President, from Henry A. Kissinger, 22 August 1969, 3, NARA.
50. Valery A. Yaremenko, telephone interview with the authors, 25 October 2000. He asserted that according to established procedure, the order must have been approved at the level of defense minister or by the Politburo.
52. Kravchenko, Podvodnye sily, 125, 422.
53. Khripunkov interview.
54. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Max Jakobson, personal communication to the authors, 17 March 2004.
6. The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 18 April 1961, article 45, states: “If diplomatic relations are broken off between two States, or if a mission is permanently or temporarily recalled: (a) the receiving State must, even in case of armed conflict, respect and protect the premises of the mission, together with its property and archives; (b) the sending State may entrust the custody of the premises of the mission, together with its property and archives, to a third State acceptable to the receiving State; (c) the sending State may entrust the protection of its interests and those of its nationals to a third State acceptable to the receiving State.” U.N.T.S. Nos. 7310–12, v. 500, 95–239; http://fletcher.tufts.edu/multilaterals.html.
7. Muistiinpano [memorandum], M. Salomies, Foreign Ministry, Helsinki, to the president, prime minister, foreign minister, and others, 11 June 1967, provided by Finnish embassy, Tel Aviv, 14 April 2004, and kindly translated by Semy Kahan. The original letter from the Finnish embassy to the Israeli Foreign Ministry, requesting the ministry’s consent for Finland’s appointment as the USSR’s protecting power, dated 11 June, is in the ministry’s archives, ISA, div. HZ, box 4048, file 27. It was delivered on 12 June, as recorded by the receiving official; box 4083, file 2.
9. Israel Foreign Ministry, memorandum to the Minister from Aryeh Ilan, Director of East European Division, 13 June 1967, ISA, kindly provided by Michael Oren.
10. Finland, in view of its special relationship with the USSR, was indeed extraordinarily prompt in delivering the note at any time on the same day. The Netherlands, which undertook the parallel role representing Israel to the USSR, took four days (16–20 June) to transmit the first Israeli note to Moscow. Dagan, *Moscow and Jerusalem*, 239.
11. Naumkin, *Blizhnevostochnyy konflikt*, v. 2, #265, 579n.1. In this case, the Finnish channel is not mentioned in the document itself but in an editorial note. Our hypothesis is that the supposed transmission of the 7 June note through Finland was inferred by the editors of the Russian volume from the cover letter of the previous note (on 5 June) rather than from independent evidence.
16. Gilboa, Shesh shanim, 244.
18. Ibid., v. 2, #252, 560 (emphasis added).
19. Ibid., v. 2, #263, 577. Dagan (Moscow and Jerusalem, 227) gives an obviously erroneous and grammatically incorrect English translation of this phrase, influenced apparently by hindsight: “the treacherous aggression by Israel against the neighboring Arab States [in the plural], the United Arab Republic.”
20. Message from Premier Kosygin to President Johnson, 5 June 1967, 7:47 a.m. (EDT, that is, 3:47 p.m. in Moscow), FRUS, v. 19, #156, 300. We checked these and other details of the Soviet hotline messages against the Russian-language originals in LBJ, National Security File, Head of State Correspondence, USSR, Washington–Moscow “Hot-Line” exchange, 5–10 June 1967.
23. Popov, Tridsat’ sem’ let, 105.
29. Vasilyev, Ot messianstva k pragmatizmu, 80.
30. Intelligence note #436 to the Secretary from the Director of Intelligence and Research of the State Department, 5 June 1967; Katz ("Yamim aharonim bemoskva") gives a similar description of Soviet broadcasts on that day.
32. Velie, Countdown, 11.
33. Schwarz, Sovetskii Soyuz, 110.
35. Intelligence note #436 (emphasis added).
37. Parker, Politics, 23.
39. Akopov, transcript, 16. For similar characterizations of Gromyko, see Israeliyan, Battlefields, 71–72; Mlechin, MID, 355–57.
41. Bovin, XX vek, 160.
42. Viktor Sukhodrev, interview for Israel-Plus (Channel 9) Russian-language television documentary, Moscow, July 2002, recording in authors’ archive; “Forty Years on, Official Translator Looks Back,” Moscow Channel 1 TV.


44. Sukhodrev interview.


CHAPTER 16: Debates, Delays, and Ditherings


1. Ms. Steffler, who retired as ambassador in Bulgaria, wrote in response to our questions that she had retained no documents from the period in question, nor had she any specific recollections.


3. Prime Minister’s Bureau to Eshkol [then touring Africa], 29 May 1966, ISA, div. HZ, box 4049, file 5. Oren (Six Days, 34) describes Komer as “an old Israel hand,” but he was actually a central figure in Johnson’s Vietnam policy.


5. Message from President Johnson to Premier Kosygin, Washington, 6 June 1967, FRUS, v. 19, #175, 325.


7. Telegram 61037Z from COMSIXTHFLT to CINCUSNAVEUR, NARA, RG 59, Office of the Executive Secretariat, Middle East Crisis Files, 1967, Entry 5190, cited in FRUS, v. 19, #175, 325n.2.


9. Commander, Sixth Fleet, to Joint Chiefs of Staff, 7 June 1967, FRUS, v. 19, #192, 343.


12. McNamara interview.


15. Department of State incoming telegram 007778, from Embassy Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, immediate, 8 June 1967, 1218.
17. Zolotaryov, Rossiya, 184.
18. Yegorin, Egıpet, 116. He adds (118) that the return flights were used to evacuate the Soviet personnel’s dependents, and claims that the planes—including the one with his own family on board—were fired upon over the Mediterranean by Israeli aircraft.
22. Brezhnev, “Rede.”
23. Ibid.
27. Pyrlin, transcript, 10 (emphasis added).
28. Segal and Dubrovski, “Ne dolzhny Molchat’”; Yegorychev interview.
29. Anatoly F. Dobrynin, telephone interview with the authors, 10 October 2000.
32. Yuri V. Nastenko, video interview for an Israeli Russian-language television documentary, filmed in Moscow, July 2002, in authors’ archive.
33. Yuri V. Nastenko, “Aviatsiya v Egipte” [Aviation in Egypt], in Grif “sekretno” sniat, ed. Safonov et al., 55–64.
34. Department of State incoming telegram 007482, American Embassy Ankara to Secretary of State, secret, 8 June 1967, 9:00 a.m. Turkish time. The Iraqi president took the unusual step of telling the Turks he was “very disappointed,” but they stood their ground lest “a precedent would be set . . . for overflights from USSR into Middle East.” Department of State incoming telegram 008880, American Embassy Ankara to Secretary of State, secret, 9 June 1967; both documents kindly provided by Michael Oren.
35. Memorandum from Rostow to Johnson, 8 June 1967, 10:10 a.m. FRUS, v. 19, #208, 365.
37. Zeev Katz, personal communication to the authors, June 2000.
38. Nastenko interview.
40. Oren, Six Days, 177.
41. Teveth, Tanks, 204.
42. Yegorin, Egıpet, 116.
NOTES TO PAGES 175–81 257

44. Brezhnev, “Rede.”
47. Zolotaryov, Rossiya, 187, quoting Grif sekretnosti snyat: Poteri Vooruzhennykh Sil SSSR v voynakh, voevykh deystviyakh i voennykh konfliktakh [Secrecy classification removed: The losses of USSR armed forces in wars, combat activities, and military conflicts] (Moscow, 1993), 396 (not to be confused with Safonov et al., eds., Grif “sekretno” sniat).
49. Department of State incoming telegram 008002, Embassy Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, secret, 8 June 1967.
51. Brezhnev, “Rede.”
52. Yoel Ben-Porat, interview with the authors, 8 March 2002.
53. Pevtsov and Portnov, “A bylo eto.”
54. Morskaya Gazeta, Flot supplement, 26 December 2002. The same information is also attributed to Admiral I. V. Kasatonov, Flot vyshel v okean [The fleet enters the ocean] (Moscow: Andreevsky Flag, 1996).
57. Personal communication from Shlomo Erel, 7 August 2004.

CHAPTER 17: THE LIBERTY INCIDENT
1. FRUS, v. 19, #207, 364, and #212, 368.
3. Polmar, Guide, 293, 300. Both ships took part on 21 September 1968 in the operation to locate and retrieve the Soviet spacecraft Zond-5 that returned from its flight to the Moon and came down in the Indian Ocean; O. Pavlenko, “K 35-letiyu poleta korablja Zond-5” [Toward the 35th anniversary of the Zond-5 [space] ship’s flight], part 2, Novosti kosmonaviki, no. 12, 2003, http://spacenet.h1.ru/Publish/0936.htm. Our conjecture is that the third ship spotted by the Liberty was also a naval craft, probably a supply vessel. Ennes, inexplicably, refers to these ships as “three Soviet destroyers” (Assault, 29).
4. Kravchenko, Podvodnye sily, 137.
5. From USS Liberty to Rudlkd/CINCUSNAVEUR, 2 June 1967, provided by NSA to authors under FOIA request.


8. Tatarinov, Shtab, 78.

9. List in Turkish attached to Israel Foreign Ministry memo, 1 June 1967.

10. Tatarinov, Shtab, 80.


13. Ennes, Assault, 42.


21. Udi Erel, telephone interview with the authors, July 2004.

22. Oren, “Case Closed.”

23. Rabin, Pinkas sherut, v. 1, 196–97. Navy commander Erel, who was at his headquarters in Haifa, maintained to us that despite awareness of a massive Soviet naval force, a Soviet intervention was never a major concern in the IDF’s conduct of the war.


26. Bausin, Spetssluzhby, 92. The latest Russian version to be published—by Mlechin (Stalin, 450), who does not state its source but usually bases his prolific work on Soviet materials—held that the Liberty was misleading Israeli radar systems with distorted “images” of the ship’s own characteristics. While Primakov may have invented his charge from whole cloth at the time of the events, Bausin and Mlechin’s versions may offer another example of Soviet mirror-imaging.

27. Sturman interview.
29. Ennes, Assault, ch. 5, as reproduced at http://ussliberty.com/about.htm; Sturman notes, possibly based on Ennes’s claim: “I have been informed that just prior to 1 of the 5 Israeli torpedo(es) launched at us, our intercept operators picked up those Russian pilots’ conversations while flying around in the Egyptian TU95s.”
30. Robert S. McNamara, interview with the authors in Jerusalem, 27 March 2000.
32. Ennes, Assault, 116.
34. Gerhard and Millington, Attack, 44. The “/4” is unaccountable; Soviet ships’ hull numbers did not include such features, as Captain Khripunkov confirmed to us.
36. Gerhard and Millington, Attack, 44.
37. Stefanov, “Hot Summer.”
38. Kapitanets interview.

CHAPTER 18: OFFENSE BECOMES DETERRENCE

2. Facsimile of order for artillery forces, Hameiri, Mishnei evrei harama, 57.
3. Dayan, Avnei derekh, 473.
4. Shalom, Keram, 463–72. A Russian history of the Syrian air force claims that these raids were carried out after the IAF destroyed most of Syria’s air power. This version holds that the Syrian sorties were “effective,” claiming among others damage to the oil refineries in Haifa, and admits the loss of two aircraft. “Istorija VVS Sirii” [History of the Syrian Air Force], Aviatsionnaya entsiklopediya 2004, http://www.airwar.ru/history/af/siria/siria.html.
5. Seale, Asad, 136–41.
6. Ibid.
7. Maoz, Syria and Israel, 95.
8. Hameiri, Mishnei evrei harama, 71.
11. Dayan, Avnei derekh, 473.
13. Personal communication from Professor Aharon Loewenschuss, Hebrew University, then a reservist at this outpost.
21. Yoel Ben-Porat, interview with the authors, 8 March 2002.
23. Golovko, “Epizody shestidnyevnoy voyny.” *Desant* here evidently refers to a paratroop drop or to a helicopter landing, as was indeed carried out by the IDF in the southern Golan Heights.
25. Yuri Khripunkov, telephone interviews with the authors, August 1999 and 18 September 2006, and personal interview, 9 October 2006.
29. Brezhnev, “Rede.”
32. Jakobson, personal communication.
34. Brezhnev, “Rede.”
35. Raymond L. Garthoff to Foy D. Kohler, “Possible Soviet Intervention in Syria,” 10 June 1967, secret, numbered 10104, LBJ, Box 15: Miscellaneous Reports.
36. The AP report was quoted in the West German Foreign Ministry’s newsletter.
38. Tekoa to Shimoni, Israel Consulate, New York, 21 June 1967, ISA, div. HZ, box 4085, file 1. The next day, answering a question by Iran’s representative in Israel “whether we were holding Russian POWs,” a Foreign Ministry official
said “he had no knowledge about it.” Zvi Gabai, Middle Eastern Department, to mission in Tehran, 22 June 1967, secret, ISA, div. HZ, box 4095, file 20.


41. [Austrian Ambassador Walther] Peinsipp, Tel Aviv, to Foreign Minister Lujo Toncic-Sorini, Vienna, 17 June 1967, reproduced in Rolf Steininger, ed., _Berichte aus Israel Vienna: Olzog_ 2004, v. 9, original document kindly provided by Rolf Steininger. On 17 May 2005, former Mossad chief Amit responded to our inquiry that “in a check of Mossad archives, no confirmation was found for the Austrian document’s assertion.” Peinsipp was a seasoned expert on Soviet affairs; he was ambassador in Hungary during the 1956 uprising, and he “befriended” Andropov there. “A Portrait in Light and Shadows,” _Time_ 29 November 1982, http://strweb1-12.websys.aol.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,955080,00.html.

42. Garthoff to Kohler, “Possible Soviet Intervention in Syria.”

43. Dayan, _Avnei derekh_, 488.

44. Kosygin to Johnson, 10 June 1967, National Security File, NSC Histories, container 19, v. 7, LBJ.

45. Anatoly F. Dobrynin, telephone interview with the authors, 10 October 2000.

46. Ibid. Dobrynin had, and apparently still bears, a personal grudge against Sedov, whom he later resented for monopolizing Soviet contacts with people close to Richard Nixon, such as Henry Kissinger; Andrew and Mitrokhin, _Archive_, 270–73.

47. Robert S. McNamara, interview with the authors in Jerusalem, 27 March 2000.


49. Ibid.

50. Department of State incoming telegram 007778, Embassy Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, secret, 8 June 1967.

51. Thompson and Davis, “The Hotline Exchanges.”


53. Weizmann, _Lekha shamayim_, 295.

54. Saunders, Memorandum.

55. Thompson and Davis, “The Hotline Exchanges.”

56. McNamara interview.

57. Saunders, Memorandum.

58. McNamara interview.

59. Khrispunov interviews.

60. Aleksandr Khaldeyev, “Nesostoyavshiiya desant” [The landing that did not occur], _Okna_ (Tel Aviv), 14 September 2000.

62. Grinevsky, Tainy, 11–12, 335.
64. Golovko, “Epizody shestidnyevnoy voyny.”

CHAPTER 19: AFTERMATH
1. Ginor and Remez, “Mismomer.”
3. Andropov and Gromyko to CPSU Central Committee, 10 June 1968, secret, reproduced in Morozov, Yevreyskaya emigratsiya, 62; Central Committee resolution, in ibid., 63.
8. Johnson, Vantage Point, 483.
10. Circular from Gromyko to ambassadors in several People’s Democracies for verbal relay to the heads of state, cited in Naumkin, Blizhnevestochnoy konflikt, v. 2, #258, 581–86.
12. Quoted in Mlechin, Stalin, 436.
15. Israelyan, in Parker, SDW, 61.
17. Yegorin, Egipet, 114.
22. A version of this doctrine published in 1974, as cited by Francis Fukuyama in “Soviet Military Power in the Middle East; or, Whatever Became of Power Pro-
jection?” in *Soviet-American Competition*, ed. Spiegel, Heller, and Goldberg, 163–64.


27. Yegorin, “Iz-pod arabskoy zheltoloy kaski sineli russkiye glaza” [From under the yellow Arab helmet gleamed blue Russian eyes], *Trud-7* (Moscow), 6 March 1998, 22.


29. Zardusht Alizadeh, telephone interview with the authors, 16 February 2001.


31. Yuri Khripunkov, telephone interviews with the authors, August 1999 and 18 September 2006, and personal interview, 9 October 2006.

32. V. P. Kliimentov, “God s tankistami vtoroy polevoy armii” [A year with the tankists of the Second Army], in *Togda, v Egipete*, ed. Goryachkin et al., 191–92.

33. Safran, *Embattled Ally*, 262–63. Cf. Rubinstein, *Red Star*, 80; Vasilyev, *Ot messianstva k pragmatizmu*, 91. Alizadeh (interview) reports that Soviet advisers were among the casualties from Israeli air raids on the Egyptian Second and Third Armies west of the Suez Canal, which “disrupted their training exercises in preparation for liberating the occupied territories.”

34. Ginor, “Kavkaz.”


38. John F. Walsh, Executive Secretary, Control Group, to McGeorge Bundy, White House, 15 June 1967, secret, LBJ, box 15, Memos to President and White House.

39. A. Vladimir Voronov, “Zhara, klopy i ‘stingery’” [Heat, bedbugs, and “Stingers”], *Sobesednik* (Moscow), reprinted in *Ekho*, Tel Aviv, 13 September 1999, 42; Irina Temirova and Vladimir Shunevich, “Vo vremya voyny na Sinaye, izrail’tyanye menyali egipetskikh plennykh na arbuzy” [During the war in Sinai, the Israelis exchanged Egyptian prisoners for watermelons], *Fakty i komentarii* (Kiev), 26 December 2000.


42. Walsh to Bundy, 15 June 1967.


45. CIA Intelligence Information Cable 49185, 14 February 1968.

51. Inbar, Rabin, 12.


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INDEX

Titles reflect positions held at time of events described. Capital cities listed only as locations of actual events.

Abramov, A. N. (Soviet ambassador to Israel), 32
Aeroflot (Soviet airline), 169
Aircraft carriers: Soviet, 85; US, 82, 85, 136, 166–67, 177, 180, 205, 249–50n54
Akko (Acre, north of Haifa, Israel), 70–71, 145, 160
Akopov, Pavel (Soviet foreign ministry official), 23, 115–16, 123
Al-Ahram, 92
Aleppo (Syria), 206
Alexandria (Egypt), 78, 140, 145, 150, 177–78, 205
Al-Hayat, 74, 76
Alliluyeva, Svetlana (Stalin’s daughter), 101
Allon, Yigal (Israeli labor minister), 30, 41–42, 195
Al-Manar, 61
Almog, Zeev (Israeli submarine captain), 178
Amer, Abdel Hakim (Egyptian vice president), 56, 69, 71, 72, 78, 88, 102, 104, 123, 124, 137, 168, 169, 174
Amit, Meir: as Israeli military intelligence chief, 42; as Mossad director, 42, 43, 76, 90, 111–12, 144, 228n26, 232n1, 261n41
Anderson, Robert (former US secretary of treasury), 116
Andrei Vil’kitsky (Soviet “research” ship), 181, 257n3
Andropov, Yuri (KGB chairman), 59, 64, 100, 101, 114, 116, 162, 172, 198, 208, 210
Anti-Kythira (Soviet anchorage), 177
Anti-Semitism, 15, 16, 19, 209
Antonov transport planes (Soviet), 169
Arab autonomous region proposal, 18
Arafat, Yasser, 216
Argov, Shlomo (Israeli diplomat), 73

275
Armistice lines (1949), 23–24, 216
Arms sales: Czechoslovak, 33, 195;
    French, 53, 56–57; Soviet, 18, 19–20;
    United States, 52; West German, 41–42
Arnonson, Shlomo (Israeli scholar), 36–57
Al-Assad, Hafez (Syrian defense minister), 58, 192–93
Associated Press, 74, 200
Aswan Dam (Egypt), 19, 55, 65
Atlit (Israel), 178–79
Atomic Energy Commission, Israel (AEC), 29, 34, 74–75
Avigur, Shaul (Israeli Soviet expert), 67, 234n44
Azzat, Suleiman (Egyptian naval commander), 57
B-31 (Soviet submarine), 82–83
B-70 (Valkyrie, US bomber), 130
B-74 (Soviet submarine), 83
B-105 (Soviet submarine), 81–82
Baath Party, in Syria, 58, 193
Badeau, John (US ambassador to Egypt), 30
Badran, Shams (Egyptian war minister), 83, 94, 99, 103, 106, 114–16, 120, 123–24, 136–37, 165, 236n43, 238n30, 243n77, 245n5
Baghdad. See Iraq
Baghdad Pact, 19, 32
Balfour Declaration, 16
Baltic Fleet (Soviet), 83–84
Barbour, Walworth (US ambassador to Israel), 73, 108, 114, 118, 128–29, 133, 203, 204
Barkovsky, Anatoly (Soviet ambassador to Syria), 66, 234n42
Barzilai, Yisrael (Israeli health minister), 29
Bar-Zohar, Michel, 226n4 and 6, 241n41
Bassiouny, Salah (Egyptian diplomat), 94, 103, 241n37
Battle, Lucius (US ambassador to Egypt), 109
Bausin, Lev (KGB operative), 102, 186
Beer, Yisrael (Soviet spy in Israel), 37–39, 227n11
Bendor, Shmuel (Israeli AEC external affairs manager), 58, 74–75
Ben-Gurion, David (Israeli prime minister): and Harel, 41, 42, 47–48; nuclear program of, 29, 42; pro-Western policy of, 19, 42; resignation of, 42, 44
Ben-Porat, Yoel (Israeli head of signal intelligence), 177, 183
Ben-Tzur, Avraham (Israeli orientalist), 58, 60, 64, 68–69, 74, 76, 232n11
Berlin, 79, 95, 165; Berlin Wall, 50
Bezymensky, Lev (Russian historian), 16, 18
Bir Gafgafa (Egyptian air base), 137
Black Sea, 15, 80, 84, 112, 145, 149, 189
Black Sea Fleet, 68, 72, 79–87, 145, 152, 182
Blumenfeld, Alfred (West German foreign ministry Soviet affairs unit), 164, 165
Bovin, Aleksandr (Soviet political official; ambassador to Israel), 59, 207
Brecher, Michael (political scientist), 107
Brezhnev, Leonid (CPSU general secretary), 25, 26, 59, 60, 64, 68, 214; on Badran’s mission, 114–15; on cease-fire, 169, 170; at Central Committee plenary session (1966), 72; confirms warning on Israeli aggressive intent, 96, 99; decision on military intervention, 170–71; demands removal of Sixth Fleet from Mediterranean, 79, 86, 110; denies collusion with Egypt, 105; on diplomatic-relations break, 198, 200; and escalation of conflict, 103, 106; on intervention in favor of Syria, 197; on Israeli attack, 159; and KGB, 101; on Nasser’s demand for Soviet intervention, 168–69; and naval landing operation, 149–50; political repercussions of Six-Day War, 209–10, 211; secret speech of, 95–96, 98; on setback in Middle East, 209
Brutents, Karen (CPSU Central Committee counselor), 92–93, 98, 100, 115
Budionny, Semyon (Soviet civil war commander), 24
INDEX 277

Bulganin, Nikolai (Soviet prime minister), 29, 31
Bulgaria, 24, 101; as Soviet protecting power in Israel, 156
Bundy, McGeorge (US presidential adviser), 149, 204, 215
Cairo (Egypt), 77, 87–88, 90, 94, 145, 169–70, 175, 214, 217
Cairo West (Egyptian air base), 148, 158
Carmon, Yigal (Israeli deputy head of military intelligence), 111, 114
Castro, Fidel (Cuban leader), 168, 209
Central Intelligence Agency. See CIA
Chemical weapons, 33, 42, 185, 225n26
Cherkashin, Nikolai (Russian naval writer), 188–89, 190
Chernyakov, Yuri (Soviet chargé d'affaires in the United States), 108, 117, 119
Chernyayev, Anatoly (Soviet presidential aide), 68
China, 19, 53, 150, 230nn14–15
Churchill, Randolph S. (British author), 167, 183
Churchill, Winston III (British author), 167, 183
CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), 77, 96, 108, 114, 139, 168, 215, 216, 217; on Cuban-Soviet relations, 209; on Israeli nuclear capability, 75; on Liberty incident, 183, 186, 188, 190; on Soviet intervention threat, 118
Cohen, Avner (Israeli historian), 51, 65, 74, 97, 139, 226n3
Committee for Nuclear Demilitarization of the Middle East (Israel), 50
Communist Party, Israeli, 38, 39–40, 60
Crete, 110, 141, 177
Cuban missile crisis, 21, 31–32, 148, 199
Cyprus, 177
Czechoslovakia, 34, 79, 215, 221n18; arms sales, 18, 20, 33, 195
Daily Telegraph, 55
Damascus (Syria), 91, 127, 194, 197, 200, 202–4, 206, 240n17
Dan (Israel), 195
Dayan, Moshe (Israeli defense minister), 143, 185, 194, 208; and Ben-Gurion, 42, 47; and disclosure of nuclear weapons program, 46; in national unity government, 142; in Sinai-Suez campaign, 20, 221n18, 224n16; and Syrian invasion, 195–96, 202, 204
Dedyula, Ivan (Soviet KGB agent), 34, 43, 61, 144
De Jong, L. (Dutch historian), 28
Desant (Soviet landing operation): planned in Israel, 13, 70–71, 82, 85, 140, 145, 149–52, 177, 197–98; in China, 150
Dimona (Israel), Negev Nuclear Research Center at, 42, 43, 110, 118, 223n13, 228n27; Egyptian attack plan against, 123–24, 125, 126, 249n38; Egyptian threat to, 28, 30–31, 51, 76; Hawk missile defenses, 122, 124, 132–33, 137; reconnaissance flights over, 27, 107–8, 122, 126–38, 142, 249n38; USSR and, 35, 43, 46, 48, 56, 65, 97, 121–23, 150, 217, 229n46
Dobrynin, Anatoly (Soviet ambassador to the United States), 59, 66, 93, 148, 172, 202–3, 233n40
Dulles, John Foster (US secretary of state), 235n18
Dyadyun, Aleksandr (Soviet navy captain), 150
Eban, Abba (Israeli foreign minister), 32–33, 40, 47, 51, 52, 75, 108, 117, 118, 119, 134, 156, 228n27, 243n73
Egypt: blockade of Israeli shipping, 30, 104, 106–7, 109–10; cease-fire call, 169–70, 175; chemical weapons of, 33; end of British domination, 19; Israeli air strike on, 26, 86, 144, 148, 158–59, 162, 192; military plan for Six-Day War, 69–71, 76–77; and Operation Conqueror, 69, 106, 137, 159, 160; research reactor of, 148; and Sinai
Egypt (continued)
troop movements, 104–5, 119; sinking of Eilat, 213; and Syria defense pact, 64, 69, 76; and UN forces withdrawal, 89, 104, 105–6; US relations with, 19; War of Attrition, 213–14; war readiness order, 88; weapons development in, 41–42. See also Egypt-Soviet relations; Nasser, Gamal Abdel

Egypt-Soviet relations: and aerial intervention, 172–75; appeal for countervailing weapons, 33–34, 54–55; arms sales, 19–20, 33; demand for Soviet intervention, 168–69; Gromyko’s visit, 77; guarantee against nuclear attack, 55–56, 76, 78; Hussein on, 142; intelligence sharing on Israeli weaponry, 56; Kosygin’s visit, 55, 61, 63, 64–65, 66; military advisers, 85–86, 87, 123, 184, 212; naval bases, 212–13; Podgorny’s visit, 211–12; post–Six-Day War break in, 207–8; post–Six-Day War military aid, 211–15; reconnaissance flights over Israel, 107, 122, 126–37; in Sinai-Suez crisis (1956), 20; and troop-concentration claim, 88–89, 90, 91, 92, 94. 102–3; Yegorychev’s visit, 77. See also Six-Day War, Soviet role in Eichmann, Adolf (Nazi war criminal), 37 Eilat (Israeli destroyer), sinking of, 184, 213 Eitan, Raphael (Israeli Mossad operative), 227n8 El-Arish (Egypt), 145, 168, 182, 184, 186, 238n21 Elazar, David (Israeli northern-front commander), 195, 200 Ennes, James (USS Liberty survivor), 135, 187, 188, 189, 250n17, 257n3 Erel, Shlomo (Israeli navy commander), 178–79, 182, 238n21, 258n23 Erel, Udi (Israeli torpedo boat officer), 184 Eshkol, Levi (Israeli prime minister), 99; commitment to restrict nuclear activity, 52, 53; connection to Harel, 37, 40, 41, 42, 44, 46; denial of nuclear pro-
Gilboa, Moshe A. (Israeli author), 90–91, 156
Gluska, Ami (Israeli historian), 91, 108, 129, 144
Golan Heights, 69, 72–74, 100, 191–206, 260n23
Goldberg, Arthur (US ambassador to the United Nations), 118
Goldstein, Lyle (author of US Naval War College study), 81
Golovko, Igor (Soviet military interpreter), 194, 197, 206
Gomulka, Wladislaw (Polish communist party first secretary), 79, 96, 196
Gorbachev, Mikhail S. (Soviet president), 4
Gorkshkov, Sergei (Soviet navy commander), 21, 68, 78, 82, 139
Grajewski, Victor (Israeli double agent), 34–35, 113–14, 116, 120, 137, 144, 225–26n31, 229n36, 242–43n69
Great Britain, 16–18, 19, 20, 26, 31–32, 40, 55, 65, 88, 109, 117, 165, 173, 221n19, 235n18, 254n31
Grechko, Andrei (Soviet defense minister; Warsaw Pact forces commander), 68, 198; and Dimona overflights, 136–37; in Egypt, 54–55; link to Egyptian/Syrian war plans, 71–72, 165, 168; in military intervention debate, 171–72; and naval buildup, 83; and naval landing operation, 149; promotion of, 64, 100–101, 210; threats to liquidate Israel, 24, 25
Grechko-Amer plan, 69, 76, 86–87, 95, 97, 102, 119
Grechko Doctrine, 211
Greece, 17, 116, 201
Grinevsky, Oleg (Soviet foreign ministry official), 31, 35, 121–22, 124, 126, 223n13
Gromyko, Andrei (Soviet foreign minister), 62, 92, 93, 101, 114, 119, 132, 208; action plan of, 106, 157; attitude toward Israel, 24, 32–33, 216; Cairo visit of, 77; and diplomatic-relations break, 162, 198; and disclosure of Israeli nuclear program, 37, 43, 49, 228n29; on Israeli attack, 89, 158–59; on nuclear background of 1967 war, 121–24, 126, 136; on nuclear testing, 3–4; and Partition Plan, 17; on UN forces withdrawal, 105
GRU (Soviet military intelligence), 34, 84, 91, 100, 243n69
Haaretz, 2, 34
Hadas, Nitzan (Israel embassy staffer, West Germany), 164–65, 197
Hadden, John (CIA station chief in Tel Aviv), 111–12, 114, 117, 251n17
Haganah, 38, 40
Haifa (Israeli destroyer), 178
Haifa Technological Institute, 34
Haleyev, Ephraim (Mossad chief), 112
Harel, Isser (former Shin Bet head and Mossad director; intelligence adviser to prime minister), 37–48, 51–52, 56–58, 62, 137, 142, 153, 226m2, 4, and 6, 227n8, 21, and 22, 228m26, 29, and 30
Harman, Avraham (Israeli ambassador to the United States), 108–9, 133–34, 165–66
Hawk missiles, at Dimona nuclear center, 122, 124, 126, 130, 132–33, 137, 247n10
Heikal, Mohammed Hassanein (editor of Al-Ahram), 5, 92, 95, 169
Helms, Richard (CIA director), 55, 118, 204, 205
Hersh, Seymour (US journalist), 33, 46, 230n13
Hershberg, James (US historian), 5
Herzl, Theodor (Zionist leader), 15, 16
Hod, Mordechai (Israeli Air Force commander), 247n8, 249n13
Hotline, Moscow–Washington, 10, 21, 148–49, 158, 159, 162–63, 166, 174, 180, 199, 200, 202, 205
Hounam, John (British writer), 251n17
Hussein, King of Jordan, 76, 142, 158, 169
Ilan, Aryeh (Israeli foreign ministry official), 141, 155
Inshas (Egyptian research reactor), 33, 148
Institute of Military History (Russia), 11, 79
Iran, 8, 17, 32, 47, 70, 201, 260n38
Iraq, 7, 22, 32, 47, 60–62, 102, 121, 127, 142, 158, 173, 226n32, 246n1, 256n34
Israel: air strikes on Egypt, 26, 73, 86, 144, 148, 158–59, 162, 192; Communist Party, 38, 39–40, 60; diplomatic recognition of, 18, 22–23; Egyptian blockade of, 30, 104, 106–7, 109–10; Eilat, sinking of, 184, 213; Independence Day (1967), 88; invasion of Syria by, 73, 195–98, 202–6; Iraqi nuclear reactor raid, 121; national unity government in, 142–43; in naval engagement, 178–79; naval landing plan of, 238n21; preemptive action opposed by United States, 117–119; pro-Western policy of, 19; reconnaissance flights over, 107, 122, 126–37; statehood for, 17–18; Suez Canal engagements, 175, 176; Syrian-supported attacks in, 60; timing of preemptive attack, 144, 148; Vietnam policy of, 165–66; and War of Attrition, 213–14; West Germany relations, 32, 42. See also Israel-Soviet relations; Liberty (US intelligence ship); Nuclear weapons development, Israel; Six-Day War
Israel-Soviet relations: boundaries of 1947 and, 23–24; British mandate background to, 16–17; in Cold War context, 21–22, 59; diplomatic actions in response to nuclear program, 59–63; diplomatic recognition, 18; diplomatic-relations break, 154–57, 161–62, 198–200; diplomatic-relations restoration, 207; espionage in Israel, 34, 38, 43–44, 141, 208; Harel’s disclosure of nuclear program, 37–39, 40, 41–43, 44, 46–48, 56; and Jewish emigration, 208–9; “liquidation” threat, 24–25; and nuclear threat, 31–33; post-Six-Day War, 216–17; propaganda actions, 63–64; and reorientation to Arab countries, 19; response to Harel’s disclosure, 49–53, 57; Sinai-Suez crisis, 20–21, 31; and statehood, 17–18; troop-concentration charge, 10, 65–67, 74, 88–103; tsarist background to, 15–16. See also Six-Day War, Soviet role in Israelyan, Victor (Soviet foreign ministry official), 61
Ivry, David (Israeli air force pilot), 129
Izvestiya, 58, 64
Jakobson, Max (Finland’s UN representative), 154, 156
Jerusalem, 16, 23, 35, 70, 88, 113, 141
Jewish autonomous region (USSR), 16
Jewish Chronicle, 61
Johnson, Lyndon B. (US president), 30, 56, 108, 120, 134, 173, 209; hotline exchanges with Kosygin, 148–49, 158, 162–64, 166–67, 171, 180, 199–200, 202, 205; and naval deployment, 205; and preemptive attack, 117, 118–19
Johnson (Lyndon B.) Presidential Library, 134
Jordan (kingdom), 6, 23, 76, 88, 91, 98, 127, 142, 158–59, 169, 185, 192–93, 195, 224n26
Jordan River, 70, 74, 100, 194
K-52 (Soviet nuclear submarine), 81, 82, 178
K-125 (Soviet nuclear submarine), 80, 140
K-131 (Soviet nuclear submarine), 82, 178
K-172 (Soviet nuclear submarine), 82–83, 140
Kalugin, Oleg (KGB operative in the United States), 98, 175–76
Kapitanets, Ivan (Soviet naval officer), 84, 145, 177, 190, 198, 206, 25017, 258n24
Katasonov, Sergei Vasilyevich (Soviet intelligence expert), 95
Katz, Katriel (Israeli ambassador to USSR), 65, 67, 156, 200, 254n30
Katz, Zeev (Israeli professor), 174
Katzenbach, Nicholas (US undersecretary of state), 204
KGB (Soviet security agency), 18, 22, 25, 34, 43–44, 46, 56, 59, 64, 69, 85, 95, 97–98, 100, 101, 102, 110, 112–14, 116, 144, 162, 171, 175, 185–86, 200–201, 208, 209, 212, 227n21, 229n46, 240n8, 242–43n69, 243n72, 245n29
Khaldeyev, Aleksandr (Soviet journalist), 87, 171
Khripunkov, Yuri (Soviet naval officer), 2, 3, 83–84, 150–52, 177, 184, 198, 205, 213
Kimche, David (Israeli author), 211
Kinneret (Lake, Israel), 66, 70, 74, 194
Kirpichenko, Vadim (Soviet agent in Egypt), 43, 171, 212
Kislov, Aleksandr (Soviet journalist), 84–85
Klimentov, V. P. (Soviet military interpreter), 213
Klingberg, Marcus (Israeli scientist and Soviet spy), 225n26
Komer, Robert (US official), 165
Korniyenko, Georgy (Soviet deputy foreign minister), 93, 94, 98, 106, 241n31
Kosygin, Alexei (Soviet premier): Cuba visit of, 168, 209; Egypt visit of, 55, 57, 61, 63–67, 78; Eshkol’s message to, 53; hotline exchanges with Johnson, 148–49, 158, 162–63, 166, 180, 199–200, 202–5; messages to Eshkol, 119–20, 153–54, 159; and military intervention, 171, 173–74; preemptive action opposed by, 115–16, 123, 137; and Soviet aid to Egypt, 168; and Syrian invasion, 202, 204; threat of confrontation with US by, 10, 11; troop-concentration claims confirmed by, 99; warns of Israeli aggression, 116–17
Krymskiy Komsomolets (Soviet landing ship), 85
Kuznetsov, Vasily (Soviet deputy foreign minister), 63, 156
Lall, Arthur (Indian ambassador to the United Nations), 170
Landau, Emily (Israeli researcher), 75
Latakia (Syria), 177, 190, 206, 238n21
League for Friendship (Israel-USSR), 38–39
Lebanon, 91, 130, 198
Leibovich, Yeshayahu (Israeli academic), 230n13
Levanon, Nehemia (Israeli official), 234n44
Levavi, Aryeh (Israeli foreign ministry director-general), 75, 114, 118, 156
Levite, Ariel (Israeli researcher), 75
Liberty (US intelligence ship): Israeli attack on, 134, 140, 179; Israeli explanations for attack, 182–83, 184; mission of, 134–36, 181, 187, 251n17; Soviet role in incident, 185–90; Soviet ships in vicinity of, 181–82, 183–84, 188–89; US response to attack, 180
Libya, 17, 121
Likhachev, A. S. (Soviet chargé d’affaires in Israel), 52
McFarland, David (US air force lieutenant colonel), 86, 131
McNamara, Robert S. (US defense secretary), 109, 134, 144, 148, 167, 188, 203, 205, 249–50n54, 252n42
McNamara Doctrine, 205
Madrid Conference, 207
Magnit (Soviet hydrographic ship), 182
Magomed Gadjiev (Soviet submarine tender), 145, 151
Maki (faction of Israel Communist Party), 39–40, 60
Malik, Yakov (Soviet deputy foreign minister), 93–94, 156
Malinovsky, Rodion (Soviet defense minister), 101
Malta, 145, 198, 205
Manescu, Corneliu (Romanian foreign minister), 199
Manor, Amos (Shin Bet head), 47
Mapam (United Workers’ Party, Israel), 29, 38, 39, 165, 233n28
Marabu, Operation, 101–2, 107
Mardor, Munya (Israeli weapons development agency head), 74, 138, 139
Martin, William (US Sixth Fleet commander), 80, 87, 166
Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, “Gathering of Eagles” at, 85–86
Medvedev, Roy (Russian historian), 49
Meining, Stefan (German historian), 95, 101
Meir, Golda: as Israeli envoy to USSR, 19; as cabinet minister, 41–42, 51–52, 228n27
MGB (Soviet KGB precursor), 18
MiG-15 (Soviet-made aircraft), 20, 86, 221n18
MiG-17, 20, 86, 192
MiG-21 (Foxtat), 11, 86, 130–37, 214
Military advisers, Soviet, 16, 20, 69, 72–74, 85–86, 87, 123, 184, 193–95, 197, 200, 207, 212–14, 263n33
Mirage IIIC (French-made Israeli aircraft), 127–30, 138, 174
Mitrokhin, Vasily (KGB archivist), 22
Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939), 17
Montreux Convention (1936), 80
Moskva (Soviet aircraft carrier), 85
Mossad (Israeli intelligence agency), 37, 41, 42, 46, 76
Mukasei, Mikhail and Yelizaveta (Soviet agents), 43–44, 208
Nachumi, Amir (Israeli pilot), 86
Nahal Sorek, Israeli research reactor at, 31, 123
Nasr, Salah (Egyptian intelligence head), 95
Nasser, Gamal Abdel (Egyptian president), 25, 29, 43, 64, 73, 76, 78–79, 105–6, 109, 129, 142, 172, 196, 211, 215, 225–26n31, 233n28, 237n4; and Arab summit, 60; blockade of Israeli shipping, 30, 104; demand for Soviet intervention, 168–69; and Grechko-Amer plan, 76–77; and nuclear capability, 33–34, 63; nuclear complex attack plan of, 122–24, 223n10, 226n3; and post–Six-Day War military aid, 212; post–Six-Day War offensive strat-
ey of, 213; preemptive action opposed by Soviets, 113–16, 119, 120, 123, 137; in Soviet arms deal, 19; in Suez-Sinai crisis, 20, threats of preemptive war, 30, 34, 53–56, 57, 63, 66, 75; and troop-concentration claim, 88–95, 102–3, 242n67
Nastenko, Yuri (Soviet air force officer), 147, 172–74, 201, 214–15
Nastoychivy (Soviet destroyer), 84, 145, 190
Naumkin, Vitaly (Russian scholar), 91, 97, 157, 159
Navy, Israeli, 151, 178–79, 184, 213
Navy, Soviet: bases in Egypt and Syria, 18, 212–13; battle alert, 145, 167; battle readiness of, 11, 140–41; control of eastern Mediterranean, 165, 188, 258n23; engagement with Israeli navy, 178–79; Gorshkov’s strategy, 21, 139–40; landing forces and operations, 2–3, 13, 68, 70, 77, 149–52, 176–79, 188; Mediterranean deployment of, 21, 55, 57, 68, 72, 78–87, 110, 112, 237n11 and 13; nuclear submarines and weapons, 80–83, 140–41; Politburo decision for intervention, 171; Pueblo incident, 180; Red Sea deployment of, 55, 83, 185; on Syrian coast, 197–98; in vicinity of Liberty, 181–84, 188–89
Negev Nuclear Research Center. See Dimona, Negev Nuclear Research Center at
Nes, David (US Cairo embassy counselor), 76
New York Times, 34, 53–54, 56, 63
Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), 45, 63, 65
Le Nouvel Observateur, 105
Novosty (Soviet news agency), 91, 169
Nuclear submarines, Soviet, 21, 72, 80–84, 140, 143, 178
Nuclear weapons development, Israel: capability during high alert period,
138–39, 144; deterrence policy, 7–8, 32–33; deterrent effect of, 7–8, 45, 216; and Egyptian relations, 226n3; and France, 31, 42, 228n30; as motive for Six-Day War, 26–27, 28, 29–31, 35, 74, 108, 121–23, 223n10; Nasser-Amer attack plan, 123–24; Nasser’s warnings of preemptive war, 53–54, 56, 57, 63; and “non-introduction” policy, 45, 64–65, 75; opposition within Israel, 42–43, 50, 228n27; origins of, 28–29; and Soviet diplomatic actions, 59–63; Soviet knowledge of, 34–35, 41–44, 46–47, 56, 139; and Soviet naval strategy, 139–40; Soviet response to disclosure of, 49–53; testing of nuclear device reported, 74–75, 76; and United States, 33, 42, 45–46, 47, 52, 75; and West Germany, 32. See also Dimona, Negev Nuclear Research Center at

Observer, 75

Ogarkov, Nikolai V. (Soviet military adviser to Andropov), 205–6

Omri, Yehiel (Israeli colonel; Hawk missile commander), 124, 132

Operation Conqueror, 69, 106, 137, 159, 160

Operation Marabu, 101–2, 107

Operation Victor, 69, 70, 160, 192–94

Oren, Michael (Israeli historian), 30, 43, 69, 93, 97, 104, 110, 116–17, 132, 136, 184

Palestine: under British mandate, 16, 17; Haganah in, 38; Jewish settlement in, 15, 16; Partition Plan, 17–18, 23; Soviet influence in, 16–17; Tsarist policy toward, 15–16

Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), 53, 216, 230n14

Palestinians, 20, 22–24, 60–61, 64, 74, 76, 91; consequences of Six-Day War for, 1, 8, 216

Parker, Richard B., 30, 66, 90, 96, 97, 98, 161

Partition Plan (Palestine), 9, 17–18, 22–23, 79, 216

Pauls, Rolf (West German ambassador to Israel), 168

Pearson, Anthony (British writer), 251n17

Peres, Shimon (Israeli politician), 42–43, 47, 142–43, 216, 228n27, 29, and 30

Pestel, Pavel (Russian antimonarchist), 16

Podgorny, Nikolai (Supreme Soviet chairman), 92, 211–12

Pokryshkin, A. I. (Soviet general), 214

Poland, 26, 38, 79, 95–96, 196, 201, 205, 209, 221n18, 225–26n31


Port Said (Egypt), 78, 85, 184, 213

Powers, Gary (US pilot), 93

Pozhidayev, Dmitri (Soviet ambassador to Egypt), 78, 83–95, 97, 116, 137, 142, 169, 210, 233–34n42

Pravda (CPSU newspaper), 5, 58, 65, 74, 103, 186, 188, 244n14

Priluki (Soviet air force base), 136, 147

Primakov, Yevgeny M. (Soviet journalist), 103, 186, 258n26

Prisoners of war (Soviet), 200–201, 261–62n138

Proletarsk (Soviet ship), 190

Pueblo (US intelligence ship), 180

Putin, Vladimir (Russian president), 3

Pyrlin, Yevgeny (Soviet foreign ministry official), 23, 24, 92, 97, 106, 110, 120, 145, 146–47, 159, 171

Qaddafi, Muammar (Libyan leader), 121

Quandt, William B. (US historian), 96, 97

Quneitra (Syria), 70, 197

Rabin, Yitzhak (Israeli chief of staff; ambassador to the United States): on Dimona overflights, 133, 136; on Israeli
Rabin, Yitzhak (continued)
nuclear capability, 45; on Liberty incident, 184–85; and Peres, 142–43, 250n14; on Soviet naval capability, 80; on Soviet threat, 143, 218; threat to Syria, 91, 102, 240n17
Rafael, Gideon (Israeli diplomat), 90
RAFAEL (Israeli weapons development agency), 74, 138
Rakah (faction of Israel Communist Party), 40
Ratner, Yevgeny (Israeli weapons development project head), 138–39
Red Sea, 130, 132; Soviet naval deployment in, 55, 78, 83, 140, 185
Reshetnikov, Vasily (Soviet strategic-bomber commander), 124, 126, 136, 145–47, 174, 187, 247n10
Richardson, Elliot (US acting secretary of state), 45
Romania, 157, 199, 216
Rosen, Pinhas (Israeli justice minister), 29
Rostow, Eugene (US undersecretary of state), 108
Rostow, Walt (US presidential adviser), 109, 118, 165, 173–74
Rusk, Dean (US secretary of state), 66, 117, 118, 119, 148, 175–76, 199, 233n40
Russian Foreign Intelligence Agency (SVR), 89
Russian Orthodox Church, KGB operatives in, 18, 34–35, 141, 208
Ryevsky (Soviet intelligence officer), 91, 95
S-38 (Soviet submarine), 82
S-100 (Soviet submarine), 82
Sabri, Musa (Al-Akhbar editor), 169
El-Sadat, Anwar (Egyptian parliamentary speaker), 56, 90, 92, 93, 94, 245n15
Sadek, Muhammad (Egyptian military intelligence director), 104–5, 127, 132
Sakharovsky, Aleksandr (KGB lieutenant general), 89, 101
Saudi Arabia, 22, 111, 142
Schwarz, Solomon (US historian), 58, 66, 232n1
Seale, Patrick (biographer of Assad), 192–93
Sedov, Boris (KGB officer), 110, 200–203, 245n29, 261n46
Semichastny, Vladimir (KGB chief), 101
Semyon Dezhever (Soviet “research” ship), 181, 257n13
Semyonov, Vladimir (Soviet deputy foreign minister), 51, 65, 90, 92, 93, 94, 106, 169, 207, 241n35
Shalom, Danny (Israeli aviation writer), 124, 127, 129, 131–33
Shapira, Danny (Israeli test pilot), 127, 133
Shashkov, Nikolai (Soviet submarine commander), 82, 83, 140, 178
Shchiborin, Alexei (Soviet foreign ministry official), 62
Shelagov, Igor (Soviet pilot), 175
Shelest, Pyotr (Ukrainian communist party leader), 210–11, 214–15
Shepilov, Dmitri (Soviet foreign minister), 31, 72, 221n16, 224n24, 235n18
Shevchenko, Victor Stepanovich (Soviet marine artillery commander), 176–77, 187
Shin Bet (Israeli General Security Services), 34, 35, 37, 40–41, 47, 113, 208, 226n31, 227n21
Shirokorad, Aleksandr (Soviet historian), 141
Sieff, Lord (British Jewish leader), 65
Sina-Suez crisis (1956), 33, 65, 69–70, 72; Soviet military intervention in, 20–21, 221n16; Soviet nuclear threat in, 31–32, 195–96, 217
Sitte, Kurt (spy in Israel), 34, 37, 226n4
Six-Day War: cease-fire call, 169–70, 175, 191; claim of US complicity with Israel, 166–67; collapse of Arab joint command, 193; consequences of, 1, 8–9; Egyptian front, 175, 176; Israeli “battle fog” policy, 158; and Israeli Communist Party, 40–41; Israeli preemptive strike, 26, 73, 86, 144, 148, 158–59, 162, 192; Jordanian front, 142, 193; naval engagements, 178; Syrian front, 191–98, 200–206
Soviet role in: aerial intervention, 20, 146–48, 171, 172–75; air force adviser in Egypt, 85–86; in authorized history, 11; Brezhnev’s denial of collusion, 105; combat alert, 145–48; conventional assumptions about, 10–11; cover-up of, 12, 30, 89, 93, 176–77, 201; decision on military intervention, 170–72; desant (planned naval landing in Israel), 13, 70–71, 82, 85, 140, 145, 149–52, 177, 197–98; deterrent purpose of, 11–12; and escalation of conflict, 104–10; eye-witness accounts of, 5–6, 13–14; Israeli knowledge of, 12–13; lack of archival evidence for, 3–5; in Liberty incident, 183–90; military advisers in Syria, 72–74, 193, 195; military master plan, 69–71; and nuclear capability, 139, 143; and nuclear complex attack plan, 123–24, 126; nuclear intervention scenario, 143; nuclear issue as cause of, 26–27, 28, 35, 48, 74, 76, 108, 122, 216, 223n10; and POW rumors, 200–201; preemptive action opposed by, 113–14, 115–16, 123; and propaganda reports, 160; provocation of, 7, 59–60, 68–69, 71, 74; response to Israeli attack, 153–63; in Soviet military lore, 13; and Syria, 192–93, 196–98, 200–206; and troop-concentration charge, 10, 65–67, 74, 88–103; Turkey warns US of aerial intervention, 173–74; West German assessment of, 164–65. See also Egypt-Soviet relations

626 (Soviet destroyer), 145, 184, 188–90
SKR-6 (Soviet frigate), 2, 83–84, 151, 177, 184, 198, 205
SKR-13, 84
Slava (Soviet cruiser), 87, 141, 167, 177
Smirnov, Nikolai (Soviet chief of naval operations), 167
Sneh, Moshe (Israeli communist), 23, 24, 43, 44, 46, 49, 50, 53, 226n6, 227n7–8; as Communist Party leader, 38, 39–40, 60, 221–222n29, 227n21; as informant for Soviets, 36–39, 41, 51, 58; and Six-Day War, 40–41, 227n20
Sokolov, Sergei (Soviet general), 73
Sovietkaya Kyrgyziya, 64
Sovietkaya Rossiya, 65
Soviet Union: 50th anniversary of revolution, 25–26; activist foreign policy of, 59; aircraft development of, 130; archives of, 3–5; Chinese border clashes, 150; Cuban relations with, 209; desant (planned naval landing in Israel), 13, 70–71, 82, 85, 140, 145, 149–52, 177, 197–98; political repercussions of Middle Eastern setback, 207–10; in Sinai-Suez crisis, 20–21; and Syrian coup, 58–59. See also Egypt-Soviet relations; Israel-Soviet relations; Navy, Soviet; Politburo; Six-Day War, Soviet role in

Stalin, Joseph (Soviet leader), 9, 16, 17–18, 19, 24, 29, 68, 93, 101, 208, 225n31
Stasi (East German security service), 95, 101, 102, 164
Steffler, Christel (West German foreign ministry Soviet affairs unit), 164
Straits of Gibraltar, 80, 83, 136, 181–82, 205, 249n54
Straits of Tiran, 30, 69, 77, 104–6, 109–10, 112–13, 244n9
Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), 93
Sturman, Richard S. “Rocky” (USS Liberty survivor), 175, 181–82, 186, 249nn49 and 51, 259n29
Su-7 (Soviet-made aircraft), 174, 187
Submarines, Soviet, 21, 72, 80–83, 86, 140, 145, 167, 178–79, 197, 205; nuclear, 21, 72, 80–84, 140, 143, 178
Suez Canal, 20, 88, 152, 169, 171, 175–77, 187, 208, 212–14, 217, 235n18, 263n33
Suez crisis. See Sinai-Suez crisis
SVR (Russian Foreign Intelligence Agency), 89
Syria: air raids on Israel, 192, 259n4; Baath Party in, 58–59, 193; cease-fire call, 191; delegations to Moscow, 60, 71–72; Egyptian defense pact with, 64, 69, 76; fortification of Golan Heights, 72–73; Israeli invasion of, 73, 191–98, 202–6; military plan for Six-Day War (Operation Victor), 69, 70, 160, 192,
Syria (continued)
193, 194; provocation of Six-Day War,
59–60, 74; Soviet aid following Six-
Day War, 211; Soviet military advisers
in, 72–74, 193, 195; Soviet naval bases
in, 212–13; and troop-concentration
claim, 2, 10, 65–67, 74, 99–100
Sysoyev, Viktor (Soviet vice admiral), 87,
167, 177

Tarabanov, Milko (Bulgarian UN delegate),
101, 243
TASS (Soviet news agency), 64–67, 84,
227
Tekoa, Yosef (Israeli foreign ministry
deputy director-general), 58, 201, 207,
230
Tel Aviv (Israel), 40, 61, 70, 160, 172, 178,
184, 190, 251
Tevel, Shabtai (Israeli journalist-
historian), 174
Thompson, Llewellyn (US ambassador to
the USSR), 10, 93, 109–10, 202–3, 205
Tito, Josip Broz (Yugoslav leader), 211
Tripartite Declaration, 19
Tu-16 (Soviet-made aircraft), 133, 136, 187,
211
Tu-95 (Bear), 135–36, 147, 187, 249
Turkey, 15–16, 17, 29, 32, 197; overflight
of Soviet aircraft, 172–74, 201; Turkish
straits, 17, 80, 145, 182
Turkmen, Ilter (Turkish foreign office
official), 173
Tzaban, Yair (Sneh associate), 40
Ulbricht, Walter (East German leader),
79, 96, 196
United Nations, 19, 23, 99; and cease-fire
call, 170, 175, 194; Emergency Force
(UNEF), 69, 77, 89, 104, 105, 106.
See also Partition Plan
United Press International, 91–92, 231
United States: Brezhnev’s demand for
removal of Sixth Fleet, 79, 110; claim
of complicity with Israel, 166–67; and
Dimona overflights, 133–34; and escala-
tion of conflict, 108–12; hotline ex-
changes with Kosygin, 148–49, 158,
159, 162–63, 180, 199–200, 202, 205;
and Israeli nuclear program, 33, 42,
45–46, 47, 52, 75; and Israeli preemptive
action, 117–19, 144, 148; naval
deployment in Mediterranean, 72, 79,
85, 166–67, 205; and Partition Plan,
18; and Syrian invasion, 202–5; Turk-
ish warning of Soviet aerial interven-
tion, 173–74. See also Liberty (US intel-
ligence ship)

Vanunu, Mordechai (Dimona technician),
41, 46–47
Vasilyev, Alexei (Russian orientalist), 160
Vasyukov, Vladimir (Russian rear admiral),
198
Vaziani (Soviet air force base), 172
Velie, Leslie (US journalist), 33, 224
Vienna Convention, 154, 253
Vietnam, 23, 26, 59, 109–11, 119, 158,
165–66, 215, 253
Vinogradov, Sergei (Soviet ambassador
to Egypt), 210
Voronezhskiy Komsomolets (Soviet landing
ship), 85
Vybornov, Aleksandr (Soviet pilot), 85–86,
107, 131–32, 136–37, 148, 158, 212,
248

War of Attrition, reconnaissance flights
over Israel in, 126, 213
Warhaftig, Zerah (Zionist leader), 227
Weizmann, Ezer (Israeli military chief of
operations), 196, 204
Wheeler, Earle G. (Joint Chiefs of Staff
chairman), 118, 134, 231
Wilson, Harold (British prime minister),
117

Yaremenko, Valery (Russian military
historian), 35, 56, 122–23, 137, 150,
178, 226, 246
Yariv, Aharon (Israeli military intelligence
chief), 59, 107, 108, 177
Yediot Ahronot, 53, 111
Yegorin, Anatoly (Soviet journalist), 91,
95, 169, 172, 175, 212–13
Yegorychev, Nikolai (Moscow party boss), 77, 100, 171, 172, 198, 210
Yeltsin, Boris (Russian president), 3
Yemen, 33, 83, 102; reconnaissance flights over Israel from, 131–32
Yerevan West (Soviet air force base), 172
Yerofeyev, Vladimir (Soviet ambassador to Egypt), 56
Yom Kippur War (1973), 81, 171, 208, 214, 217
Zakharov, Gennadiy (Soviet submarine captain), 178, 179
Zakharov, M. V. (Soviet chief of staff), 212
Zhukov, Yuri (author, US Naval War College study), 81
Zimuki, Aryeh (Israeli journalist), 53
Zionism, 15–16, 17, 19, 22, 24, 38, 40, 60, 208
Zvyagelskaya, Irina (Russian expert on Israel), 239n4