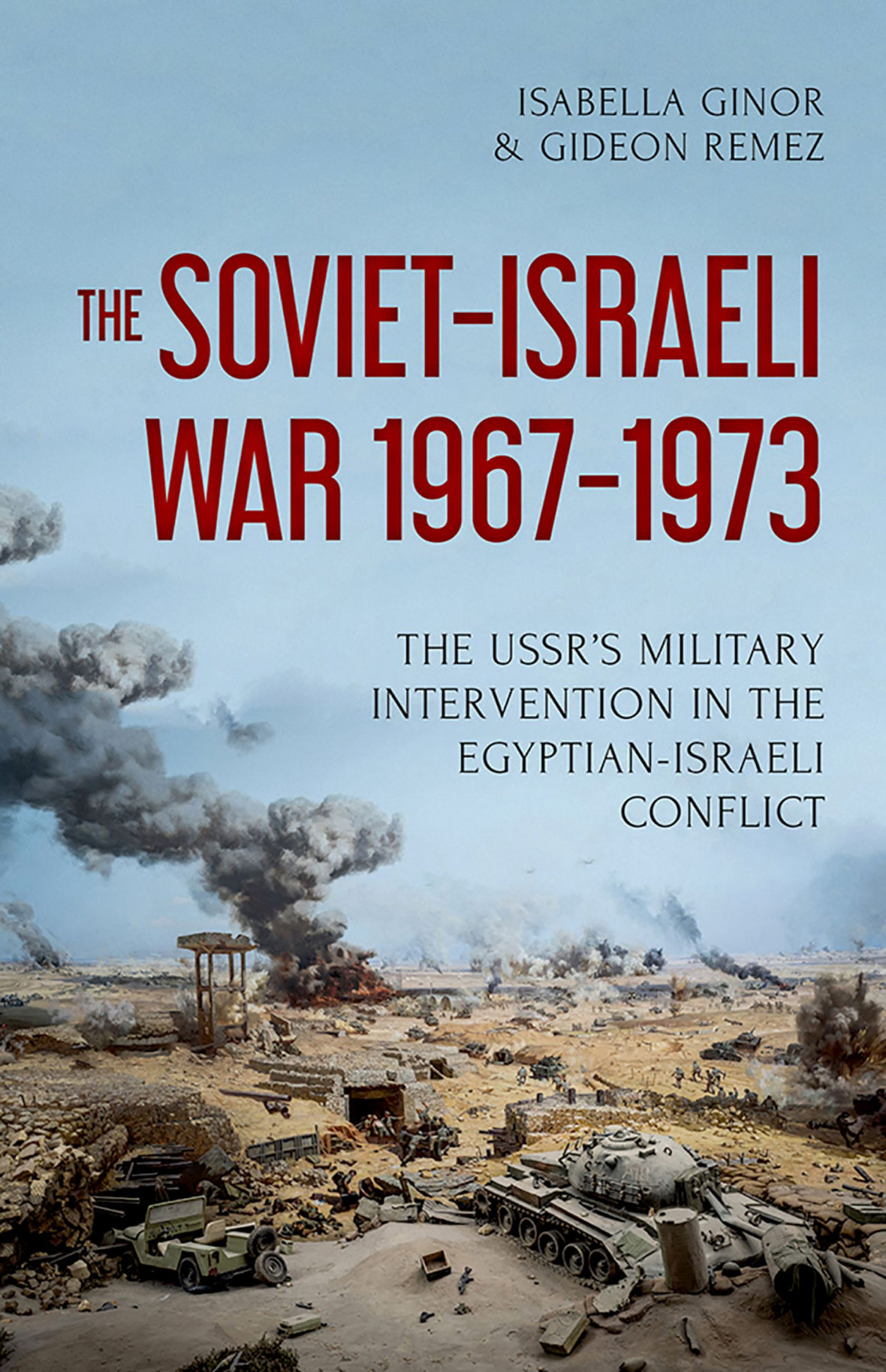
ISABELLA GINOR
& GIDEON REMEZ

THE SOVIET-ISRAELI WAR 1967-1973

THE USSR'S MILITARY INTERVENTION IN THE EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT



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For our children and grandchildren

CONTENTS

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ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Agranat Commission
AFP	Agence France-Presse
AP	Associated Press
APR	(Agranat Commission) Additional Partial Report
ASU	Arab Socialist Union
CC	(CPSU) Central Committee
CDE-IHC	Captured Documents—Egypt collection (Hebrew translation by IDF Unit 550), Intelligence Heritage Center Library, Herzliyya, Israel
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, Washington
CSM	*Christian Science Monitor*
CWIHP	Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington
DR	*The Rise of Detente: Document Reader*
DRG	*diversionnye-razvedyvatelnye gruppy* (sabotage-intelligence groups)
EAF	Egyptian Air Force
EW	Electronic Warfare
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office, UK
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act (US)
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany)
FRUS	*Foreign Relations of the United States*
GRU	*Glavnoye razvedyvatel'noye upravleniye* (Russian military intelligence agency)
HSU	Hero of the Soviet Union
IAF	Israel Air Force
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
ISA	Israel State Archive
JTA	Jewish Telegraphic Agency
LBJ	Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas
MA	The Vasili Mitrokhin Archive, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge

MENA	Middle East News Agency (Egyptian, "semi-official")
MER	*Middle East Record*
MI	Israeli [IDF] Military Intelligence
MiG	Mikoyan-and-Gurevich (Soviet fighter aircraft)
MOD	Ministry of Defence, UK
NA(PRO)	National Archive (formerly Public Records Office), London.
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD
NPT	(Nuclear) Non-Proliferation Treaty
NSC	National Security Council
NYT	*New York Times*
NVO	*Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* military supplement)
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
SAM	surface-to-air missile
SAR	*Soviet–American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969–1972*
TASS	Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (central news agency)
UAR	United Arab Republic (Egypt only, 1961–71)
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UPI	United Press International
USAF	United States Air Force
WSAG	Washington Special Action Group
WSO	Weapons System Officer
VKO	*Vozdushno-Kosmicheskaya Oborona*

FOREWORD

I. UN-REWRITING HISTORY

A. The hottest front of the Cold War

> It was clear that we were actually fighting against Russia.
>
> Maj.-Gen. Yisra'el Tal, Hearing of the Agranat Commission, 2 January 1974[1]

This book's title encapsulates its purpose: to describe how, between the Six-Day War of June 1967 and the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, the USSR conducted a direct military campaign against Israel along the latter's front with Egypt, at varying levels of intensity. What has conventionally been regarded as a conflict among regional actors, with the superpowers' backing for their respective clients, was actually a front of the Cold War itself—indeed, the hottest. In 1969–70, when it was *called* a war—the "War of Attrition"—this became the largest commitment of Soviet troops outside the Warsaw Pact until Afghanistan: up to 20,000 men at a time, for a total of over 50,000.[2] This phase saw the climactic, and bloodiest, head-on clash between Soviet and Israeli forces. In military terms, the Soviet servicemen then posted in Egypt largely accomplished their mission, while suffering considerable casualties.[3] They were instrumental in creating the preconditions for a Soviet-supported Egyptian offensive across the Suez Canal to regain the Sinai Peninsula that Egypt lost in '67.

But both before and after its acme in 1969–70, the Soviet role exceeded even the greatly expanded capacity of "advisers" and "technicians," and extended into combat operations or direct support thereof. A continuum was thus created between the two better-known wars that bracketed the period in question, and in which the USSR planned—and partly implemented—direct interventions. Our previous book, *Foxbats over Dimona: The Soviets' Nuclear Gamble in the Six-Day War* (2007), was the first—at least in Western academic historiography—to reveal the USSR's deliberate instigation of the crisis in May 1967 and its plans to intervene in the war that the crisis was intended to provoke. This disputed the bulk of existing literature, and has therefore been termed "truly revisionist."[4]

The same applies all the more to our present findings, not least because previous studies were much fewer. Commonly held perceptions of this period seldom acknowledged high drama; the term "war of attrition" speaks for itself. It settled into

a violent but monotonous routine, and the three years after this war's ostensible end with the ceasefire of August 1970 seemed even duller, as diplomatic maneuvering toward a settlement stagnated. Those Middle Eastern developments that made front-page news were mostly from other arenas, such as the newly prominent (and newly Soviet-supported) Palestinian organizations and their clashes with both Israel and Jordan. Then the lull was punctuated by the thunderbolt of the Egyptian–Syrian offensive in October 1973.

As a result, while the spectacular events of 1967 and 1973 have been the subject of countless academic works, the intervening years have received a relative dearth of scholarly attention. For the most part, they are briefly included as a foreword, afterword or *entr'acte*.[5] Conversely, the handful of studies that did focus on this period tended to confine their treatment between the accepted dates for the War of Attrition's beginning (March 1969) and end (August 1970), downplaying the connection with its antecedents and, especially, its consequences—as well as the Soviet input.[6]

Likewise, this period in the Egyptian–Israeli or even the broader Arab–Israeli theater received cursory mention at most in general Western works on Soviet foreign and military policy, or on worldwide processes such as the Cold War and détente. This was not the view from the USSR. In the latest example, in 2014, it was announced that the Soviet casualties from Egypt would at last be memorialized among other Cold War losses at "Victory Park" overlooking Moscow. The report referred to their having fallen during "six years of war" from 1967 *through* 1973—that is, a single, unbroken campaign that was part of the global confrontation.[7] Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser hardly needed to convince the Soviet envoy in Cairo that "the Arab–Israeli conflict is in truth a Soviet–American conflict."[8]

B. Challenging the myth of Soviet restraint

During almost twenty years of research into this Soviet campaign, we were surprised to find, in case after major case, that previously unquestioned assumptions were no longer tenable. Moving along the 1967–73 timeline, this book aims to demonstrate (among other points) that:

- The USSR not only undertook a massive rearmament and retraining of Egyptian forces while the Six-Day War was still in progress; regular Soviet personnel took up positions opposite Israeli forces to hold the Suez Canal line and man anti-aircraft defenses around Cairo until Egyptian formations could recover. The first Egyptian counteroffensive moves in the summer and autumn of 1967 were made upon, not against, Soviet advice, and almost certainly with direct Soviet participation. In the following year, Soviet advisers were central to the preparation, launch and conduct of Egypt's War of Attrition.
- According to conventional chronology, the massive deployment of integral Soviet units to Egypt came in response to Israel's "depth bombings" in the Egyptian hin-

terland, which began on 7 January 1970. Specifically, the Soviet intervention was requested by Nasser during an urgent, secret visit to Moscow later that month, and granted only then by the Soviet leadership. We will show that the Soviet commitment preceded this Israeli move, and that Nasser's visit—if it took place at all—at most accelerated its implementation. The direct Soviet military intervention developed as a Soviet initiative; its peak extent was decided upon and set in motion during the summer of 1969 at the latest, following smaller precedents that began immediately after Egypt's 1967 defeat.

- The Soviet expeditionary force, using the USSR's most advanced and sometimes still-experimental systems, was highly successful in countering Israel's US-supplied weaponry. Contrary to the legend fostered by Israeli claims that the ceasefire of August 1970 represented a striking victory over Soviet as well as Egyptian forces, it was actually imposed upon Israel by the superiority of Soviet arms, the unsustainable human and material losses they caused to the Israelis, and the deterrent effect of the Soviet presence.
- Israel—and the United States—were therefore incapable of challenging the ceasefire's immediate and continuing violation by the Soviets and Egyptians in advancing the air defense system to the bank of the Suez Canal. This created an essential precondition for the Egyptian offensive across the canal in 1973.
- The hitherto unquestioned notion of an "expulsion of Soviet advisers" by Egypt in 1972, because of a rift between Cairo and Moscow, was certainly erroneous and most probably the result of a deliberate deception. What occurred was in fact a withdrawal of the integral Soviet formations, which was agreed not only between the USSR and Egypt but also with the United States. The advisers attached to Egyptian units continued to play a vital role in preparations for the canal crossing. Supply of Soviet offensive weapons—the denial of which was purportedly a cause of the rupture—also went on unabated.
- While tensions existed between Cairo and Moscow before the 1973 war, the USSR was party to determining the date and operational outline of the Egyptian–Syrian onslaught on 6 October, and the Arab side enjoyed full Soviet support throughout the hostilities as well as limited Soviet military involvement.

In sum, we found the Soviet input at all these junctures to have been proactive, purposeful and even aggressive in encouraging and supporting Egypt's military challenge to Israel, rather than a moderating and restraining influence as it was almost universally characterized. It was assumed that Moscow held back *any* Egyptian offensive out of preference for a political settlement and reluctance to risk a clash with the United States. The Soviets, it was held, kept fostering Arab military aspirations in order to preserve their regional standing, but always intended to block the fulfilment of these aspirations so as not to harm the USSR's global interests and its declared détente policy.

Time and again, we encountered the opposite: Soviet motivation to reverse the 1967 debacle was just as strong as the Egyptians', and to achieve this peacefully—even if it had been possible to do so—would not rectify the damage. A Russian commentator was hardly exaggerating when he wrote, at the height of anti-Communist backlash in 1992:

> this war too is on the conscience of the [State Security] Committee. The KGB persuaded President Gamal Abdel Nasser to wage the War of Attrition to the bitter end. Nasser trusted the KGB men but did ask for help, and Big Brother, the best friend of oppressed nations, did help—first with military gear, and when it became clear that the Arabs could not do it on their own, by sending in its own forces.[9]

Likewise, we found that previous studies laid excessive stress on the diplomatic history of the period. While stalemate in peace efforts may have helped to justify the use of force, for Egyptians and Soviets alike winning a military rematch against Israel was from the outset both a means and an end in itself. A negotiated accord might have reversed the results of Israel's victory in June 1967 by gaining a return of lost territory. But it could not undo the humiliation of Soviet weaponry and doctrine, or reassure the USSR's other allies of its support, any more than it could redeem Egyptian valor. There is no indication that both parties' joint determination to achieve these goals was diminished at any point by the prospects for a peaceful resolution. On the contrary, as Egyptian propagandist Mohamed Hassanein Heikal not only admits but boasts, "the deception plan" for the ultimate offensive included instructions to diplomats to "speak in pacific terms (without, it must be added, knowing the purpose)."[10]

Likewise, the Soviets' immense military operation, once prepared and launched, assumed a logic of its own, which was at most modified or rescheduled to accommodate UN assemblies or US–Soviet summit meetings. At least as frequently, such linkage cut the other way. Several examples follow in which the parallel timelines show that diplomatic activity served as a diversion for military strategy. Moreover, persuasive cases have been made that military action in the Middle East was occasionally timed to suit Soviet purposes elsewhere, such as the unleashing of artillery barrages across the canal to coincide with the Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia. But it was also perceived as essential to protect the USSR's own self-defined security interests. Vladimir Vinogradov, the Soviet ambassador in Cairo from October 1970 to April 1974, still maintained twenty-eight years later that the Soviet presence in Egypt was necessary in order "to oppose the United States' military machine and its advance guard approaching ... the southernmost approach to our own country, and ... possessing an anti-Soviet springboard on our very frontier."[11]

C. Obviating the need for harmonization

> It may ... be better to disregard those patterns of behavior which Western Sovietologists have invented and in which they have sought to confine the fluidity of Soviet foreign policy.
>
> James Cable, 1971[12]

When the most glaring instances of Soviet support for, and participation in, Egyptian offensive initiatives appeared to contradict the prevailing concepts of Kremlin moderation, this was described most honestly as "a puzzling pattern" or "contradictions in Soviet strategy" that had to be "minimized."[13] But most Western scholarship tended to paper over the inconsistency with such formulations as "Soviet policy was dualistic ... providing the wherewithal for hostilities while nonetheless urging the Arabs to forego their war plans."[14] Other glosses reached near-Orwellian proportions: "escalated Soviet military involvement need not be interpreted as incompatible with a peace-seeking strategy."[15] When all else failed, resort was made to what might be called adverbial harmonization: the Soviets did what they did reluctantly, or (after a desperate reach for the thesaurus?) "adventitiously."[16]

Even the study of the War of Attrition that was rightly considered definitive waffled: "Soviet policy ... was a curious mixture of adventurism and prudence." But the author, David Korn, did touch the nub of the issue: "not that they had strong objections in principle to another war; their main concern was that Egypt not launch itself into one *prematurely*."[17] Indeed, we found that this was the Soviets' perennial argument for "restraint": that the Egyptian military was not *yet* ready. This was not an excuse for temporizing; constant and often costly tests were made by probing the envelope both of Egyptian capability and of Israeli or US response. When these proved to be ripe—first for various stages in the War of Attrition, then for launching the Yom Kippur War—the Kremlin gave its approval and support. In many of the cases that we explored, the Soviets actually exhorted their advisees to more aggressive, courageous and decisive action—and set personal examples.

The Kremlinology approach of the Cold War era left a lasting mark by ascribing the perceived contradictions between Soviet policy and practice to rivalries within the Soviet leadership: hawks v. doves, conservatives v. reformers, military v. civilian, in addition to shifting personal cliques. In contrast, we found that Soviet operations on the ground were on the whole consistent, purposeful and single-minded. Debates and struggles may have occurred in Moscow, but as the Soviet diplomat and propagandist Leonid Zamyatin put it, "major foreign policy initiatives always required something of a consensus in the Politburo. Without one, there would be no decision."[18] Once such consensus was reached or imposed, its implementation in the field was unequivocal.

The Middle Eastern intervention, before and during the period under examination, did coincide with—indeed, both exemplified and facilitated—the consolidation of CPSU General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev's supremacy in the Soviet power struc-

ture. To cite one telling example: in the 1967 crisis, when the hotline to Washington was first used, it was Premier Alexey Kosygin, the formal counterpart of US President Lyndon Johnson as head of government, who signed the Soviet messages, even if they were formulated in the Brezhnev-dominated Politburo. This was still the case in January 1970, when Kosygin issued the threat of direct Soviet intervention. But by the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, this pretense was dropped: though both Soviet leaders still held the same titles, it was Brezhnev who signed the hotline messages to President Richard Nixon.

Again, to explain seeming inconsistencies, a dualistic harmonization has been offered. The same analysis of Brezhnev's leadership can describe him on one page as "completely in charge," "at the height of his powers," and on the next as "disorganized," "blowing with the wind" and exhibiting "a shambles" of a decision-making process.[19] Some key stages in Brezhnev's ascendancy and his defeat of challenges within the Party indeed paralleled developments in the Middle East (such as the CPSU Central Committee plenum of 20 June 1967). But these processes had at most a marginal effect on shaping Soviet action in the region, which was determined by Brezhnev and his allies before and outside the formal Party organs' convocations that ratified it. As David Kimche perceptively put it in an exceptional analysis twenty-five years ago, the War of Attrition was first and foremost "Brezhnev's War."[20]

We did discern marked variance in the effectiveness and style of implementation that stemmed from differing levels of competence and charisma among Soviet officers and diplomats. Though these had a significant effect on the outcome of Soviet activity, they were completely overshadowed in previous historiography (and in such intelligence reports as have come to light) by concentration on the top political echelon. Try, for instance, to google "Petr Lashchenko"—one of those whose very names, not to mention their momentous input, will be presented here for the first time to the Western reader. In this as in the other aspects just discussed, this book does not presume to create a new reading of history, but rather to restore the *scriptio inferior*, the underlying content that has been obscured in a heavily overwritten palimpsest.

II. THE TYRANNY OF VESTED-INTEREST SOURCES

A. Exclusivity of open sources in contemporary historiography

By this point, the reader must be asking: If the present authors are right, how could generations of analysts and historians have been so wrong? For us, too, our research has provided insights on how the accepted accounts were created and established, which was no less intriguing than setting the factual record straight. These two strands are intertwined throughout this book.

Ideological slant, political correctness or sloppy scholarship can occasionally offer a very partial explanation for unfounded claims that became nearly unassailable axioms.

But it has never been our intent to accuse our predecessors of such flaws. On the contrary, the bulk of their research was made and published when accessible source material was so limited in scope and character that we can but admire, and build upon, the use that many of them made of it. This is especially true of those who qualified their conclusions, when appropriate, as reasoned speculation—which we too have sometimes had to do at the outer fringe of whatever certainty our new sources permitted.

Our only reservation is about the refusal of some established authorities to recognize that the emergence of new evidence may require a revision, and their consequent rejection of our studies out of hand only because of incompatibility with their theoretical models. We, on the other hand, believe that Soviet actions, as they are gradually being exposed, ought to serve as the basis of the historical record, and it is the theories that must be reconciled with the emerging facts. As we also anticipate a similar reaction to this book, we are permitting ourselves an introductory essay on sources and their evaluation.

The paucity of abiding interest in the relatively uneventful years of 1967–73 meant that most historiographical treatment of them occurred fairly soon after, when the available material was still largely limited to official statements, media reports and similarly open sources. This not only led to an exaggerated emphasis on diplomacy, in comparison to military or covert operations. Even within the public-policy sphere, and despite a historian's training to the contrary, speeches, communiqués and so on were too often taken at face value—not only in respect of the actual events but in particular as to intentions and expectations. Declared peace plans were seldom interpreted as anything but genuine policy goals; threatened moves were rarely exposed as having already been made.

Even more treacherous was reliance, for lack of official documentation, on the contemporary media. The Soviet and Egyptian media were usually and correctly treated as just a slightly less binding channel for official statements. But on the other side of the front, the Israeli press differed more in degree than in substance, and the issue of Soviet involvement was very much a case in point due to its political sensitivity. Military censorship excluded certain entirely untouchable areas (such as nuclear policy or new weapons systems); consensual restraint covered a much wider range, and the authorities provided much of the information as well as the terminology for presenting it. This was only partially mitigated by transparent codes differentiating bulletins that were literally dictated to the newsroom from those that a reporter actively obtained—often from the same sources.[21]

But while most historians allowed for these limitations, Western news outlets and particularly "newspapers of record" were relied upon for objective if not entirely accurate factual reports and authoritative commentary. This trust we found to be almost as unjustified as in the Soviet case. For most of the period in question, there was no American and little Western press presence in Egypt; none of either in the combat zone. Tight censorship was enforced, but was rarely necessary as local string-

ers were easily manipulated. Visiting foreign correspondents and even the few resident ones, who seldom spoke the local language, could be fed the desired information through confidential leaks from "knowledgeable circles." Back at the American or British newspapers' or networks' home base, analysts and commentators were similarly dependent on the officials and/or politicians that they had mutually cultivated, or whose agenda they shared.

After reading hundreds of examples, their content and bias became almost comically predictable; but in the absence of other sources for early historiography, they were treated as authentic reflections of what actually happened. Our own approach differed from this not in discarding the contemporary media as a source—on the contrary, following its coverage of events proved essential—but in constant reference to the context, purpose and origin of the information. Reports are cited, when possible, from the original print or broadcast media, often as a means of tracking a story in the daily news cycle or the hourly evolving "takes" of the news agencies, whose impact has rarely been adequately appreciated.

B. The impact of early memoirs: Heikal and Kissinger

Most historians, and certainly the best of them, were well aware of at least some of these pitfalls. But they were unavoidably susceptible to the inculcation of stretched or utterly false notions that was made over the following fifteen to twenty years by the handful of central figures who staked early claims with memoirs and other publications. This is hardly unique to the present subject and period: Churchill too, among many more or less iconic figures, "wrote a widely read multivolume account of the [second world] war to make sure that contemporaries and future generations would see the conflict and his role in it the way he preferred."[22] What stands out in the present instance is the degree of pervasive influence that these writers enjoyed. Since they were at or near the top leadership level, they gained wide attention and were ascribed the authority of possessing "inside information," which ensured their predominance in setting the factual record (*what* happened) in addition to its interpretation for causality (*why* it happened)—even though these actors obviously had the strongest vested interest in enshrining their versions.

The following chapters will demonstrate how a handful of these writers, and particularly newspaper editor and politician Mohamed Hassanein Heikal and Henry Kissinger, succeeded in establishing self-serving and highly misleading versions about pivotal events in the Soviet intervention: the former as to when and how it began, the latter as to when, how—and, indeed, *whether*—it ended.[23] It was no less than astonishing to follow the track of footnotes from one scholarly or popular publication to another, and to find how many of them originated mainly or exclusively from these two sources. Their shared celebrity status and media skill helped; the front cover of Heikal's *The Sphinx and the Commissar* (1978) features an endorsement from

Kissinger, which contrasts with his own evaluation of Heikal at the time of the described events: "I don't even know who Heykal is. Of course, I know his title, but I don't know what he stands for."[24]

Kissinger's and Heikal's respective vantage points, however, are still inadequate to explain why objections that were obvious even at the time did not call their narratives into more question than they actually met. The extra ingredient was, metaphorically, a perfect storm: a confluence of interests and constraints, on the personal as well as national level, that discouraged *any* of the parties involved—both contemporaneously and retrospectively—from pointing out the misstatements and spelling out what actually happened.

Readers will soon find that the following pages make extensive use of many subsequent memoirs by prominent political and diplomatic figures, as well as the very same books by Kissinger and Heikal. In the Soviet case, first *glasnost*, then the demise of the USSR, added a raft of former *nomenklatura* members to the already swollen ranks of US, Israeli and Arab figures for whom

> the genre of memoirs has become not a bad means for improving one's own biography ... if it is unknown and unremembered how much was left out of these autobiographical memoirs, one might think that the world had never seen a better, more decent, more honest man than the writer.[25]

This does not mean such literature is useless—only that it must be subjected to the same adjustment for context and purpose as the contemporary open sources. Except when verified by cross-checks against sources with clearly differing motivations, these VIP memoirs must be treated as what their writers sought to establish, not necessarily what actually took place. Reminiscences of rank-and-file participants, whose use is one of our main innovations, called for other tools and tests that will be discussed presently.

C. Archival documentation: worth the wait?

Historians who were rightly dissatisfied with the available sources often ended their presentations with the caveat, and on the hopeful note, that better-founded conclusions would have to await the opening of the relevant archives. Well, forty years or more have passed since the events in question; developments in both the political sphere and information accessibility have been no less than revolutionary, and the result has been mainly to undermine confidence in official records as the ultimate arbiters of factual truth.

First of all, the very notion that comprehensive—or even fairly representative—archival documentation is ultimately bound to emerge has proved to be illusory. When we mention our use of newly available sources from the former USSR, the response is almost always: "Ah, you mean the Soviet archives that have been thrown

open." We then encounter disbelief or worse when we reply that this opening was largely mythical even at its height during the chaotic and corrupt heyday of Boris Yeltsin's administration.

There were several joint initiatives with Western countries to publish selected documents of the respective foreign ministries on their mutual relations; the Soviet entries were selected by Russian officialdom, but nonetheless were occasionally revealing, intentionally or otherwise. The same applies to document collections that were published unilaterally (though with Western sponsorship) by the Russian Foreign Ministry or other official institutions.[26] Disorder and economic hardship in the disintegrating USSR itself combined to make it possible for well-connected and well-heeled Westerners to obtain entire, but random, *fonds* of archival material.[27] Regime change in former Warsaw Pact member states enabled access to Soviet documents that had been shared with them.

But the declassification of Soviet archives, which was decreed by law soon after the transition from the USSR to the Russian Federation, "ran into political resistance as soon as 1992."[28] The archives that might be most essential for our purposes—such as those of the military General Staff and GRU (military intelligence), the Politburo and the KGB—were never made accessible in any systematic fashion. Occasionally, Russian researchers were granted a peek, or defectors made off with copies they had accumulated.[29] But even officially sanctioned writers who in theory should have enjoyed full access (from foreign intelligence chief, foreign minister and premier Evgeny Primakov through researchers of the Military History Institute and on down), often had to resort—admittedly or not—to citing Western studies on some key issues and to leaving others completely undocumented. So a good deal of material did emerge, and there was a good deal to be learned from it, but the opening was nowhere near exhaustive enough to permit drawing conclusions from *absence* of evidence.

Again, the situation in the United States and Israel differs mainly in degree, and it appears that even if full release does occur someday it may produce far less than all the answers. In the most recent Israeli example, when after forty years large batches of testimonies before the Israeli Commission of Inquiry on the Yom Kippur War (the Agranat Commission) were at last declassified in 2012, the potentially most revealing features were still withheld. Other records in the IDF archive are for the most part accessible only selectively and to officially authorized researchers.[30]

In the American case, from the accession of the Nixon administration in January 1969 through the Moscow summit, we initially had only limited US documentation to compare with the memoirs of Kissinger and others. These documents were mainly transcripts of formal Soviet–American talks, which, though made by the US side, presumably recorded the conversations verbatim or almost so.[31] This period, like the Johnson administration before it, was gradually covered by successive volumes of *Foreign Relations of the United States* (*FRUS*). These were immensely useful and are extensively cited here, as the editors can certainly be trusted at least to have omitted

most of the insignificant underbrush that would have taken any individual researcher years to plow through (the handful of documents that we obtained laboriously through the FOIA process exemplified this difficulty). Therefore, the main problem here is not that the *FRUS* volumes are necessarily selective. Rather, the editors themselves have protested the continuing and sometimes gratuitous *exclusion* of highly relevant papers. They did this by listing in *FRUS* the mere existence of documents whose contents remain classified, in major part or even entirely.[32] How many more there are, or were, can only be guessed.

Still, these documents alone were adequate to prove that Kissinger was rather sparing with the facts, to say the least. More recently, a joint US–Russian publication of the parallel reports submitted by Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin on their "'back channel" meetings has filled in a lot of the blanks and confirmed our hypotheses.[33] This collection is not only as entertaining as an epistolary novel, thanks to the authors' comments about each other; it also underlines the risks of relying even on archival documents from a single side of any process, as the two interlocutors' versions of a conversation often hardly appear to describe the same event. From the back channel, by definition, there are and will be no transcripts, so piecing together what actually was said and agreed is tricky. Yet even the most charitable reading for Kissinger shows up his memoirs as hardly worthy of the trust that historians have put in them.

D. The four filters between events and accessible archival documents

As we compared the Soviet archival papers that did surface with other newly available sources, it became increasingly apparent that political decisions and military operations that hardly squared with the USSR's declared principles would never be intentionally, directly and authentically revealed in official documents. Indeed, declassification and accessibility are only the last of a series of filters that such decisions and operations had to pass before being so disclosed.

First, the matter had to be put to paper to begin with. Both testimonies about the Soviet decision-making process, and the failure even of latter-day Soviet and Russian leaders to locate documentation of key turning points, showed that these were routinely determined in informal and undocumented meetings. Rudolf Pikhoya, who was head of the Russian Archival Service (1990–6), wrote in 1998:

> The most important and responsible decisions were worked out not in Politburo sessions, but before them in what was known as "the Walnut Room" next to the Politburo's meeting hall in the Kremlin. ... The director of the General Department simply noted in the working journal: "this issue was discussed in the Walnut Room and was not recorded."

It was in such a meeting, at a dacha in Crimea, that the decision to invade Czechoslovakia was made in August 1968—a move that was mutually related with

some of those discussed below, and considered of equal magnitude.[34] These decisions were simply officially ratified in such formal organs as the Central Committee and the Politburo, where compartmentalized orders for implementation were issued.

Second, when relevant documents were composed—including those operational directives—we showed in *Foxbats* that their formulation was often designed (with the prospect of future exposure in mind) to obscure rather than to record the actual substance, cause and purpose of a decision.[35] This was hardly by way of a new revelation, though the maxim that Hugh Trevor-Roper "mercilessly taught" has been honored more often in the breach than the observance: "before plunging into a public archive, it is first essential to discover just why and how the records were kept, and what they signified to their authors."[36]

But since *Foxbats* appeared, the frequency and importance of yet a third filter has been increasingly highlighted: in order to be someday discovered, a document must be preserved. The eminent historian Col.-Gen. Dmitry Volkogonov pointed out in 1992, after a search made at his request in the KGB archive failed to turn up evidence of a case from the 1950s, that even if the documents had been honest and exhaustive "there are no guarantees that [they] all survived."[37] Pikhoya was more explicit: "there was a thorough 'purge of *fonds*' in the Party and State archives. During the 1960s and 1970s, more than 25 million files were destroyed there." One of the last resolutions of the Central Committee Secretariat, in March 1991, was entitled "Ensuring the Preservation" of Party documents but actually mandated their partial destruction.[38]

There are explicit testimonies that these processes specifically affected the area of this study. Even in the heady days of 1992, a Russian writer complained that "documents about the participation of Soviet forces in Egypt's war with Israel are not being publicized more than before; *many of them were destroyed*." He was still hopeful that "after the army, maybe the KGB too will repent."[39] But fifteen years later, little of this had materialized.

A former counterintelligence officer who took part in the deliberations that led to the Soviet initiation of the Six-Day War applied to the KGB's successor agency for the release of his own memoranda from those days for his present work as a media commentator. His request was not simply denied,

> I received a letter from the FSB Central Archive to this effect: "Unfortunately ... a number of files from 1967, including those of the subdivision for which you worked, were destroyed in 1978 *in situ* and were not deposited in the archive." That is how the state security agencies treated their own history, and in the 20 volumes that I handed over at my retirement there were even more serious matters.[40]

Numerous examples follow to illustrate that for authentic documentation of the events here in question, surviving *all* these first three tests was the exception rather than the rule even before declassification became an issue.

In this respect, as in those already listed, the Soviet setting (not to mention the various Arab countries) differed from the Israeli, American and other Western cases only in degree, though definitely to a considerable degree. But in the case of the former USSR, another perfect storm provided—in a window of opportunity that lasted about fifteen years—a remarkable alternative and complement to the historian's conventional fare of archival documents.

E. "Resurrected from oblivion": the Soviet veterans' narrative

> The secrecy covering us has been lifted. Our purpose is to tell the truth about these magnificent young men, who did not spare themselves and accomplished their combat missions successfully, for the greater glory of their fathers and grandfathers.
>
> Gen. Alexey Smirnov, Commander of the Soviet 18th Air Defense Division in Egypt, 1969–71.[41]

The appearance of this alternative was presaged even by the official Soviet media in its waning years. In one of its last numbers, the monthly *Sputnik* admitted:

> For most of our country's citizens, the wars in which their own country took part remain unknown. ... Even less is known about the regular units who took part in local conflicts. One of them is the Egyptian–Israeli one. Only 20 years later, the opportunity appeared to tell the truth about those days.[42]

The Soviet Union's final tailspin, and then the chaotic initial period of the Russian Federation, created an economic crisis, and one of the groups worst affected were those subsisting on state pensions. Many veterans of the Middle East operations in the 1960s and '70s were already in this group, or were now joining it. For them, the difference in benefits between war veterans and ordinary discharged soldiers became financially vital. Most of all, they demanded recognition—both for their fallen comrades and for themselves—as fighters in, indeed heroes of, a full-fledged though undeclared foreign war. As retirees, they had the leisure to pursue this goal and little to lose by way of jobs or status.

"We considered ourselves the heirs of those who had fought in Spain," writes one of the operation's commanders. "We were proud of the title 'internationalist.' ... Later, when praise for Egypt in the press gave way to frosty alienation, many things were remembered in a different light. The media began discussing our military personnel's role in Egypt only in November 1988."[43] As a former political officer put it, they were only then "resurrected and brought back from oblivion."[44]

Those of the "Egyptian" veterans from 1967 to 1973 who remained in active duty ten to fifteen years later, usually by then as ranking officers, and were posted to Afghanistan remembered this lesson well. As an admiring interviewer wrote about one of them, before Afghanistan

> his destiny included another, unknown page: participation in the Egyptian conflict, which no one ever mentioned. The internationalist soldiers ... found themselves completely forgotten. To prevent this injustice from happening again, many [such] officers rallied to defend the rights and interests of the *Afgantsy* combatants. Among them was our general.[45]

The mass of long-discharged Middle East "internationalists," which followed the example of the younger and even more numerous *Afgantsy*, mounted an organized struggle for their rights. Clubs and councils of Middle Eastern veterans sprang up in major urban centers, and a main channel for promoting their cause was to retell, and in effect unveil for the first time, their battlefield experience. This was enabled by the other prevailing winds that created a second perfect storm. One was the relaxation of censorship, surveillance and enforcement in the interregnum. Another was the prevailing *Zeitgeist* to pillory the communist regime as both criminal and antithetical to the authentic Russian spirit, which peaked in the Yeltsin administration's drive to outlaw the Communist Party. A third contributing factor was the advent and rapid spread of the Internet in Russia.

As a result, an extensive literature flourished and persisted even after one of the original purposes—recognition as combat veterans—was achieved, at least in theory, on 16 December 1994. The State Duma (lower house of parliament) then amended the "Federal Law on Veterans" to recognize as combat veterans participants in forty-six "local" military conflicts in various countries, including Egypt.[46]

However, proving one's eligibility was problematic, as the veterans' own papers provided no evidence. Although the Soviet presence in Egypt was too big and active to conceal entirely, US reluctance to decry it and pressure on Israel not to do so helped Moscow to keep up the pretense that it was limited to a few advisers. Even after the 1994 law, obtaining confirmation from military archives was difficult when at all possible—especially for those who now resided in the non-Russian republics of the former USSR.[47] In 2006, even a retired officer in Russia was still trying to claim "the financial allowance" he deserved for service in the Middle East.[48]

So the veterans' struggle continued, and their literature appeared in a variety of genres and media. The veterans' clubs, in the main cities and provincial towns, initiated and sponsored the publication of newsletters, monographs and book-size anthologies. A panoply of websites appeared, sponsored by the veterans themselves or their branches of the Russian armed forces. These were dedicated to memorializing the dead, as well as conserving the survivors' memoirs, backed up with photos and documents from their private scrapbooks. A quintessentially Soviet tradition was perpetuated by "bards" who composed and sang their own ballads to express both sentiment and protest:

> No one knew, nor knows till now
> About the awful heat and scorching sands;

How in the fiery Arabian desert
We suffered thirst and yearning.

We defended the *fellah*'s home and life
But no one ever thanked us.
No one but Allah knew
How it was there and what happened.

And there, in the sands on the Suez Canal
It was as any war is:
Fate did not spare my comrades,
But commanded me to remember them.

And to my last day I'll recall them
Whose life they gave for the struggle
Let the *Afganets*, my friend and heir,
Sing about their fate and his.

Vasily Murzintsev, "No One Knew"[49]

Interviews with the veterans or articles they contributed appeared in a wide range of print, broadcast and online news media ranging as far as corporate house organs and obscure regional papers. This was often in order to highlight local heroes on such military-oriented occasions as Army Day or the commemoration of victory in the "Great Patriotic War."

Even the books—which usually had print runs as small as a few hundred copies—and certainly the newspaper and electronic platforms were often ephemeral. It is only because we monitored this literature as it developed that we managed to assemble what we believe is one of the largest collections, and to introduce it as a source into Western scholarship. Its value was soon recognized: as Fredrik Logevall wrote in 2008, "Admittedly, key archival documentation remains under lock and key and will be inaccessible for a long time to come ... But enough material is available, in the form of declassified documents, memoirs, oral histories and journalistic treatments, to begin to piece together the story."[50]

The following pages will further illustrate what a wealth of insights and detailed information this reservoir of material offered, as well as the criteria we had to develop for evaluating its reliability, while allowing for such inherent risks as self-glorification, selective memory and hearsay. Thanks to their sheer number, overlapping descriptions from unrelated writers bear out their overall authenticity. They are most reliable in respect of what the writers actually did or witnessed; their perceptions of the overarching political or strategic considerations and decisions are less trustworthy in factual terms, but are noteworthy in themselves as reflections of what was rumored among the troops or was imparted to them by their *politruks* (political officers).

As a rule, the higher the writer's rank at the time, the stronger his knowledge of and commitment to the official line, though some of the senior officers are remark-

ably critical—even discounting for the benefit of hindsight. Often this is explained by the officers' subsequent careers: whether they remained in uniform and how high they eventually rose. As another yardstick, diaries that were written at the time (in violation of explicit orders) rate higher on the credibility scale than recollections that were recorded decades later. But all these measures defy precise definition and had to be adapted to each individual case; sometimes the decisive hurdle was a sense, refined by experience, of whether a narrative had "the ring of truth."

We then verified and complemented these post-Soviet sources by means of interviews and/or correspondence whenever possible, and compared them with whatever documentary record that emerge from Soviet archives. Next, we cross-checked them against official Israeli and US statements, military and intelligence documents, and similar alternative sources. There are parallels to the Soviet veterans' literature on the Israeli side as well: privately issued personal memoirs and memorial publications initiated by various military formations, often compiled, written or edited by noted authors. Although subject in theory to military censorship and often even published by the Defense Ministry, these first-hand testimonies feature a surprising number of deviations from the official account.

Likewise—though less often relevant to the present topic—the websites of US veterans from various units in the Mediterranean and Middle East, while usually limited to travelogues and descriptions of everyday service and off-duty adventures, occasionally give away operational information that has otherwise never been released. Since Arab archives remain inaccessible and memoirs by anyone below senior-officer status are nonexistent, we had to rely for comparison with the Soviet versions mainly on Egyptian documents captured by Israeli forces in "Africa" (west of the Suez Canal) in 1973.

In sum, the veterans' literature not only provided the human dimension and color that is usually associated with oral history; it enabled—indeed, demanded—our aforementioned challenges to the most established assumptions about the overall dateline and contours of the Soviet role. The extent of this innovation is exemplified by the absence, in any Western research before ours, of the Soviet codename for the massive intervention in Egypt, Operation *Kavkaz*.[51] Like the identity of its architect Lashchenko, this term was never so much as mentioned even in such Western intelligence reports as have so far come to light. In respect of the Yom Kippur War, too, Vladislav Zubok's authoritative Cold War history acknowledges that "the Soviet role in this war has long been the subject of great controversy. Today, this story can be analyzed with much more clarity, thanks to the recollections of ex-Soviet veterans."[52]

F. Putin's Russia: back to the USSR—for historians, too

What we call the "golden age" of the veterans' literature (*c.*1988–2003) did not endure for long. Under Vladimir Putin, a profound reversal began in respect of dis-

closures about Soviet involvement in the Arab–Israeli conflict, as a corollary of Russia's domestic backslide toward authoritarian rule and its reversion to a pugnacious bipolar foreign-policy orientation. The change was soon felt in the area of archive opening. As one expert put it, "the collapse of the Soviet Union ... after a breath of fresh air in the mid-1990s, left Russian records firmly shut to public scrutiny."[53] What had not been opened before is not going to be opened, and a lot that had been opened has been locked anew.[54] Putin ensured the enforcement of this clampdown when in 2016 he assumed direct formal control of all state archives.[55] Even the controlled process of publishing bilateral collections of diplomatic papers has come to a halt.[56] By 2008, it could again be stated that "the history of combat operations in Egypt from 1956 till 1975, when the USSR assisted a friendly nation ... is to this day full of blank spots and many things still 'cannot be declassified.'"[57]

What is worse, Russia has gradually been gripped again by fear of incautious talk and writing, after dozens of politicians, activists, journalists and others who dared to flout the approved line met sticky ends. Veterans, academics and other sources who once communicated with us freely now decline to be interviewed without permission "from higher up," which they assume will not be granted.

Furthermore, the official line itself has changed radically. The element of Russian national pride has been greatly reinforced, but the earlier dissociation from the Soviet past has given way to identification with it. Not only is Russia perceived as the linear heir of the USSR; there is nostalgia for the latter's redoubtable superpower status, truculent resentment at its loss, and determined aspiration to regain it. Putin has repeatedly demonstrated this tendency in the Middle Eastern arena, most recently in the Syrian crisis, with almost the same assertiveness as toward the former Soviet fiefdoms of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. Any exposure of lies, aggression or crimes in the Soviet past has become an insult to, if not subversion of, Russia's resurgence—and is punished accordingly.

The formalization of this process began in May 2005, when the State Duma adopted a declaration condemning "attempts to falsify history."[58] In early 2009, the minister for emergencies, Sergey Shoigu (since promoted to defense minister), proposed a law against such "distortion."[59] In May of that year, Dmitry Medvedev, who had temporarily taken Putin's place as titular president, appointed a state commission to combat "distortion of history *to the detriment of Russian interests*."[60] In February 2012, the commission was disbanded, but in May 2014, Putin—now reinstated as president—signed its main project into law: a statute imposing up to five years in prison and a stiff fine, with heavier penalties if the falsification is backed up with "fabricated" evidence and/or spread through the mass media.

The law was passed in the context of the Russian–Ukrainian crisis, which was cast by Moscow as a renewed fight against Nazism. Like the preceding initiatives, it was painted mainly as being aimed against negative presentation of the USSR's role in the

Second World War, and thus received some positive notices in the West and Israel as a measure against Holocaust denial.[61] But the law actually applies the prohibition to *any* "reports … that express disrespect for society, or public profanation of symbols of Russian military glory."[62]

The veterans had already got the message. Their organized activity continued—the Moscow Council of Veterans of the War in Egypt held a public celebration of its twenty-fifth anniversary in January 2014.[63] But in retelling their memories, caution now dictated a change. The overall number of overtly factual accounts appears to have declined, but the change in their character and thrust is often a matter of nuance and cumulative effect. The pledges of secrecy that the servicemen were required to sign had been largely disregarded as inoperative since the demise of the USSR. Now, as one of the earliest and most outspoken among them wrote as early as 2001, this again became a concern: "In 1973, I gave a written commitment to the state security organs that I would never divulge their involvement in those events. Who knows, maybe that signature of mine is still binding."[64]

The transition is most starkly exemplified by a tendency to abandon documentary publications altogether in favor of supposed fiction: stories, novellas and full-length novels that can always be disavowed as imaginary. On the one hand, this enabled the authors to feature some of the most startling claims and to deal with events and areas that remained off limits even at the height of the "golden age." On the other hand, it posed a methodological question: How far can a text be trusted as a historiographical source if its author will not or cannot affirm its authenticity? The criteria that we had employed for the veterans' memoirs had to be applied with greater rigor, but even under such scrutiny this "fiction" did yield some significant disclosures that had never appeared before.

As in the earlier phase of documentary publications, an outsize role in the new genre of supposed fiction (and in the following pages) was played by the former military interpreters, who according to their professional supervisor at the peak of Soviet involvement in Egypt numbered up to 1,000 at a time.[65] Many of them

> "got to sniff the smell of gunpowder." It was said that injured students, and even dead ones, were sent back from Egypt … the sad part was that none of these "interns," who fulfilled their "internationalist duty," was credited for this mission even as part of their military service—let alone [nominated] for decorations—nor received any documentation that they had fulfilled this duty in Egypt.[66]

Resentment that they were denied even the combatants' limited recognition added to these linguists' motivation to tell their stories. The alumni club of the Military School of Languages even started a competition for "amusing and edifying narratives."[67] As they were drawn from military and civilian academies, the interpreters had both better training and stronger inclination to write than other servicemen, especially after many of them resumed their careers in academe, journalism or related

domains. Most of them specialized in Arabic and therefore were also more knowledgeable about the culture and politics of the region. Since they accompanied higher-ranking officers, they were exposed to more privileged information than ordinary lieutenants or captains, and thus ranked high on one of our credibility tests: the likelihood that the writer might have had first-hand knowledge in real time.

The reader must have concluded by now that what follows can hardly be pigeonholed into any rigid sub-discipline of history; rather, it combines, and moves among, military, diplomatic, social and even cultural historiography. For the most part, it forgoes any presumption to "magisterial sweep" in favor of cumulative detail. We trust that an overview will emerge from our blend of blow-by-blow chronology, thumbnail biography and forensic investigation. Purists may disapprove, but we consider that this eclectic approach has brought us a step or two closer to fuller and deeper comprehension of the long-past chapter in our own lives that we have relived vicariously through the eyes of our sources/protagonists.

Finally, readers of *Foxbats* may notice some fine-tuning of our argument. Since we completed that book, further evidence has emerged which—most gratifyingly—in nearly every case confirmed our overall thesis. Several factual errors required correction, which we completed in a follow-up essay. But our overall concept has also continued to evolve, and to the extent that this book differs from its predecessor, the exposition here reflects the present—but not necessarily final—state of our research. We were flattered and encouraged when the validity of both our methodology and our findings was recognized by citations in the most authoritative new surveys of regional arenas and Soviet foreign policy in the Cold War.[68] Retaining this trust demands that we constantly reappraise our own work, and any constructive critique that may help us improve it will be gratefully welcomed.

PART 1

"WE WILL NOT LEAVE EGYPT IN THE LURCH"

1

RESCUING AND REARMING THE USSR'S ALLIES IN JUNE 1967

> Now Nasser is flagellating himself, but we are not feeling any better.
>
> Leonid Brezhnev[1]

A. Fighting back: Soviet perception of June 1967 as a replay of June 1941

The pattern for future Soviet military involvement in Egypt was set even before the end of the Six-Day War. Subsequent chapters of this book will address the question of when and how the USSR's deployment of regular military formations in Egypt (Operation *Kavkaz*) was determined and began. But a detailed review of Soviet moves in June–July 1967 shows that commitment of various Soviet units actually occurred at this stage, to meet tactical as well as political demands that the war's results created. Moreover, the types of Soviet forces involved mostly correspond with those that had already been allotted for the intervention that Moscow had planned to exercise in the Six-Day War itself.

We described in *Foxbats* how the unexpected devastation of the Egyptian Air Force (EAF)'s craft and bases by Israel's preemptive strike on 5 June 1967 not only doomed the Egyptian army in Sinai. It also obviated most of the original Soviet plan to intervene directly in favor of an Arab counteroffensive once Israel had been provoked into an "aggressive" preemption. This setback delayed and redefined the assignments that Soviet units were tasked to perform but did not require new approval at the Politburo level. When such authorization did become necessary for a major expansion of the Soviet combat presence, both precedents and experience had been created, and expanding on them was already a matter of degree rather than principle. Among various dates that are given in post-Soviet sources for the onset of *Kavkaz*, the earliest is in late 1968.[2] But the operation's origin can be traced as far back as the initial Soviet–Egyptian war planning in mid-1966, and certainly to the plan's partial implementation in June–July 1967.

Most previous accounts of the Soviet Union's response to the Arab rout assumed that Moscow had been surprised not only by its allies' defeat but by the very escalation of the crisis in May 1967 into full-scale war. Although it was widely accepted that a false Soviet warning of Israeli troop concentrations ignited the crisis, this was held to have been a routine disinformation exercise that got out of hand. But the comparisons that within days became ubiquitous in the Soviet media, between the Israeli attack and the Nazi onslaught on the USSR, appear to have bespoken more than mere propaganda. For the politicians and generals who had been commanders or commissars during "the Great Patriotic War" and the mid-ranking officers who had been young soldiers, the impact of the Egyptian fiasco was evocative and emotional. This comparison reflected an almost-instinctive Soviet response to regroup and counterattack, as a linear continuation of the June war rather than a new and distinct chapter. As a future commander of Soviet fighter pilots in Egypt recalled, "everyone was waiting for what was to come next ... Far-sighted commanders understood this was to be continued."[3]

Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Semenov had played a key role in the run-up to the Six-Day War. When it began on 5 June, he was summoned to a Politburo meeting that lasted till 3 a.m. He recorded in his diary that "SOS signals coming in from Cairo" were "both tragic and comic. The first days of war in the Soviet Union, 1941, were repeating themselves."[4] Air Force Maj.-Gen. Aleksandr Vybornov had been sent to Egypt before the war to study the feasibility of Soviet air intervention.[5] The scene he witnessed at an Egyptian airbase under Israeli attack "reminded him of the Russian defense of Moscow in 1941."[6] Sympathy for the Egyptians' plight was partly due to the Soviets' sad memories of their own country's unpreparedness: Vybornov was struck by the "utter chaos," Semenov by "the illiterate Egyptian peasants, who were incapable of mastering technology and scattered at the sound of the first shot." Veiled equation of Israel with Nazi Germany by means of code words like "treacherous attack" soon gave way to explicit comparisons in the official press.[7] Newspaper editors were reprimanded for running photos of a medallion struck in Germany with Moshe Dayan's portrait, or of an admiring Danish actress wearing the Israeli defense minister's trademark eyepatch.[8] Recriminations were rife in the CPSU's own rank-and-file and even within the Soviet leadership. As Ukrainian Communist Party leader Petro Shelest noted in his diary, "everyone is in a kind of depressed state. ... there was confusion, apprehension, and uncertainty."[9]

B. The airlift creates new definitions for Soviet military presence

The Soviets' war experience and doctrinal preconditioning disposed them to expect that Israel would maximize its triumph by resuming air attacks, ground advances or both across the Suez Canal. This dictated an immediate response to prevent an even worse debacle. The first manifestation of Soviet resolve to up the ante in Egypt—the

massive airlift of military materiel to Moscow's Arab allies—began as soon as the dimensions of the latter's defeat became apparent. On 20 June, addressing the first Central Committee session after the war, Brezhnev stated that the Politburo resolved "to provide the UAR [Egypt] and Syria assistance in renewing their armed forces" only after the cessation of hostilities on 10 June. Even as regards Syria, where the ceasefire had taken effect on that day, this date for the start of the resupply effort is questionable; in respect of Egypt, which acceded to a ceasefire on 8 June, Cairo's first request to replenish its war losses was received and approved as early as the 5th—that is, within hours of the Israeli strike. On the same day, Kosygin sought and received permission to overfly Yugoslavia, and the first flights took off on the 7th.[10]

This was as soon as the Egyptian runways could be cleared and patched up. A Soviet serviceman who made several round trips on the airlift relates that on the first, at night, Cairo International Airport and the adjoining Cairo-West airbase were still blacked out. On his second landing, in daylight, tow trucks were still moving some forty wrecks of Egyptian warplanes. There was a pause when Nasser declared his resignation, but flights resumed once he retracted it.[11] Indeed, it was the sight of Soviet transport planes over Cairo, pointed out by Soviet Ambassador Dmitry Pozhidaev to Nasser, that caused the latter to call off demonstrations against the Soviets' perceived inaction. These protests were staged on 8 June and ended on the 9th, so that by then the airlift was in full swing.[12] By the 14th, Nasser told Pozhidaev that his children, playing in their backyard, were counting Soviet planes landing every ten minutes.[13]

If indeed the Politburo formally approved the airlift only on the 10th, as Brezhnev claimed, then (as would recur in subsequent cases) this resolution either rubber-stamped an operational order that had been approved in a smaller, informal council and was already being implemented; or it was one in a series of continuing adjustments that were made as the Politburo's marathon session went on throughout the war; or it was simply a gesture to satisfy Arab demands and to reassure edgy Warsaw Pact leaders who gathered in Moscow on 9 June. Andrey Kirilenko, a key Brezhnev ally and Politburo member from 1965, is described in 1972 as "in charge" of a "committee for the Middle East" (apparently of the Central Committee Secretariat), directly overseeing the General Staff in this area.[14] According to a 1969 CIA analysis, Brezhnev himself as chairman of the Defense Council, "the supreme military–civilian consultative body attached to the Politburo," by then controlled "the Defense Council as fully as the Secretariat."[15] This was presumably the case by 1967. The transition from planned intervention to damage control to redoubling the stakes was almost seamless, rather than a single, deliberate turning point—which led to underestimates of its scope and significance by the adversaries. Israeli sources contended even four months after the war that Egyptian losses could not have been ascertained so soon, and therefore discounted the airlift as mainly a morale-boosting exercise.[16]

The materiel, in whole or in part, may have indeed been pledged to Egypt before the war, as some US sources pointed out to downplay the airlift's importance.[17] The declared purpose and outcome of the talks held in Moscow on 25–8 May by an Egyptian delegation led by Minister of War Shams Badran was to bring forward the delivery of weapons whose sale had already been agreed for the following year, and to have them shipped by the end of 1967. Although we have shown that the talks actually dealt primarily with Egypt's demand for clearance to strike first at Israel, the accelerated arms deliveries may have been concluded too. Some airlift effort may also have been prepared to replenish losses that were expected even if all went as planned.

But marshalling and transporting additional hardware, sooner and faster than foreseen, was still a prodigious undertaking and required large-scale improvisation. As early as 1974, one of the first Western studies estimated that the airlift's "promptness and efficiency ... must be regarded as one of the most decisive great-power acts since World War II."[18] And that was written before its full extent, and the dislocation it caused in the Soviet military, were fleshed out by the participants' own accounts as well as newly available Soviet documentation. These have shown how this operation effectively launched the presence of Soviet regulars in Egypt and the establishment of *de facto* Soviet bases there.

Replacements for the aircraft that Egypt and Syria had lost—by all accounts, the airlift's first priority—had to be collected from Soviet stockpiles or active squadrons as far afield as Kaliningrad on the Baltic and Tbilisi, Georgia.[19] For lack of Soviet aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean or other refueling options, flying the fighters from an East European base to Egypt was impractical. Instead, formations of An-12 transports (the Soviet look-alike of the C-130 Hercules) were used to carry disassembled MiGs. As the fighter's empty weight was around 5 tons, over one-quarter of the An-12's maximum payload, at most two crated MiG-21s could be carried by each transport plane.[20] On 11 July, Brezhnev reported to a gathering of Socialist bloc leaders in Budapest that 544 An-12 sorties had already been flown and 336 fighters delivered, as well as small arms, anti-aircraft guns and even tanks.[21]

The An-12s were hastily painted over with Aeroflot markings and the guns were removed from the tail turrets, though the overall green color easily gave away their military identity. In case of a forced landing, the pilots wore civilian clothes or Aeroflot uniforms. As one of them, Boris Dikusarov, admitted retrospectively to a Belarussian newspaper, they were well aware that this "conspirative" delivery of weapons in civilian airliners violated international law.[22] This made communications especially sensitive; while their route down the Adriatic and Ionian Seas would not enter the airspace of Italy and Greece, they would pass through the air traffic control zones of these countries—and the Soviet military pilots were not trained to communicate in English. The problem was addressed by pressing into service, in the middle of final-exam season, the entire student body of the Military Institute for

Foreign Languages. In the first month of the airlift alone, Brezhnev listed 302 of them as dispatched to the Middle East, mostly to Egypt.

The first group of these linguists had, before the war, been "sent to Crimea and was on alert at airfields there."[23] The rest were recruited so hastily that "we were in motley civilian clothes and looked like partisans. Only later were civil-aviation uniforms issued, as well as service passports. We made the first foreign flights with the kind of papers that were used by Soviet forces in Socialist countries." Fortuitously, some of the interpreters had prior experience. As one of the recruited students, Vitaly Sochnev, relates: "two years before enrolling in the institute I had served in a special-forces unit as a *mikrofonshchik* [radio monitor] eavesdropping on radio communications of the USAF and NATO. I knew the terminology as a priest knows his liturgy." The others had to make do with a single briefing from "a lieutenant-colonel, who dictated abbreviations and terms, some of them exotic ... advised how to answer questions in flight, and listed the signal codes of air controllers in Italy, Greece and Egypt ... which later was very useful."[24]

The necessity to overfly Yugoslavia (where controllers still spoke Russian); the stopovers that the nominal head of state Nikolay Podgorny later made there on his way to Egypt and back; and particularly the first exposure of the airlift in the Yugoslav media, created the lasting impression that the Soviet transports landed there for refueling.[25] The interpreters' recollections were the first to clarify that the airlift's main staging point and refueling stop was actually the Soviets' airbase at Tököl, Hungary. From here, according to Sochnev, they took off for Egypt in formations of twenty to twenty-five aircraft each. As Tököl is located on the southern outskirts of Budapest, the delegates to the 11–12 July conference there were doubtless aware of this traffic's extent, even though Brezhnev only told them that the flights went "over Yugoslavia."

Moscow had good reason to distrust the Yugoslavs' confidentiality, and President Josip Broz Tito had every interest in maximizing his passive and inexpensive contribution to Nasser, his longtime partner in the leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement. Barely a week after the airlift got underway, "informed but unofficial Yugoslav sources and reliable Western diplomats ... confirmed a report that the Soviet Union has flown approximately 100 MiG fighters to Egypt."[26] This was even before the Israeli ambassador in Rome learned from "informed sources in the Prime Minister's office" that Italian air traffic controllers reported overflights by forty-five Soviet planes a day.[27]

The crated MiGs had to be accompanied by crews of mechanics to put them together, which—along with the onboard interpreters—partly accounts for the fifteen men on each transport (at least in the first rounds), while the craft's normal complement was five. Additional passengers were connected with other Soviet materiel, which was being sent by sea. As witnessed by a Soviet correspondent in Cairo, "the equipment from the USSR was no longer directed to training bases, but went

directly to the surviving Egyptian units." This urgency dictated a substantive upgrade in the status of the Soviet personnel who accompanied the hardware. "Together with the technical materiel, 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."[28]

The transition from "specialists" (*hubara*) to "advisers"—that is, from technical services to operational supervision—would prove as significant as the addition of a third category, *askaryun Suvyet* (Soviet soldiers) would become two years later.[29] With the airlift still in progress, Brezhnev already referred to a *fait accompli*: the advisers were being directed "to all sub-units," that is, they would function at the field level and not only at headquarters or training facilities. On 11 July, Brezhnev already gave their number for Egypt, Syria and Algeria as 1,069, "plus 261 other specialists." The separate number of "military specialists for aircraft assembly" alone came to 514.

The Soviet ground crews reassembled the fighter planes on the runway, a process that took six hours per craft. Then the planes had to be test-flown, and Soviet pilots were on hand to do it. Even when the larger intervention plan backfired, pilot-instructors who were supervising the induction of newly supplied Su-7s apparently flew them on several combat missions during the war. Vybornov's team was also still in Egypt when "Podgorny visited us," that is, at least until 21 June. In addition, Soviet pilots were tasked at Algeria's request to ferry the fighters that it loaned to Egypt as a stopgap in the first days after the Israeli raids.[30]

"Working day and night, from 8 June to 26 July 1967 our officers assembled and test-flew some 200 combat aircraft that arrived from the USSR in kits."[31] Cairo-West's location adjoining the international airport meant that the test flights took place in full view of any observer in town. This was the origin of reports from Western newsmen, such as a UPI correspondent who flew out of Cairo on 16 June, when non-Egyptian airliners were first allowed in to evacuate foreigners.[32] His Greek plane "was one hour late because five brand-new MiG fighters, apparently flown in from Russia, landed on the main runway. The new Soviet MiGs have been flying in over Cairo since Thursday [15 June]."[33] His AP colleague, who also left for Athens, was closer to reality: "Soviet Antinov [*sic*] transports have been flying into Cairo airport since the end of the war. They are believed to have delivered between 50 to 80 MiG jets ... In ones and twos [the MiGs] make almost daily flights over the capital." Besides test flights, he considered that "Egypt is getting the maximum propaganda out of the MiGs ... probably in a bid to convince Egyptians their air force is intact."[34]

The suggestion that the MiGs flew in on their own power exemplifies the widespread misconceptions in the Western press, most of whose reporters were sent to Cairo only after the outbreak of the crisis in mid-May. It also accentuates this press corps' subsequent departure from Egypt. Nearly all the US correspondents had been rounded up along with hundreds of other Americans when Egypt severed diplomatic relations on 8 June and were shipped out of Alexandria the same night.[35] Most of the

remaining Western reporters, such as Europeans and Canadians, left as soon as they could after the war, having been intimidated and even assaulted.[36] They then published retrospective reports stressing that these were now "uncensored"—by implication, unlike their previous dispatches from Cairo.[37] By-lined stories filed from Egypt virtually disappeared from the Western, and especially American, press after 18 June. The staff correspondents were replaced by wire-agency dispatches from unnamed local stringers. Their cables were augmented with "think pieces" by home-base commentators that reflected their own sources' spin. The imprint this left on historiography will crop up repeatedly as the Soviet involvement is reviewed.

US intelligence capabilities in Cairo and Damascus were also crippled by the closure of American embassies—as admitted by CIA Director Richard Helms (1966–73) when he was unable to assess the Soviet intervention threat that came over the hotline on 10 June.[38] US estimates of the airlift's scale lagged behind its actual pace. As Brezhnev spoke of 325 planes already delivered, "US intelligence information indicates Communist European nations have sent Egypt about 50 MiG jet fighters ... they disputed claims of Israeli military sources here [Washington] that ... the Soviets, Czechs and others have sent 150 to 200 MiGs."[39]

As the Arab disaster began to unfold, Moscow renewed the jamming of Voice of America (VOA) and BBC broadcasts, which had been suspended four years earlier. This was interpreted in the West as reflecting concern about social and economic discontent, rather than resentment of political or military defeat:

> it was too much to let the public know that anywhere from a billion to two billion dollars of war materiel supplied by the Soviet Union was being destroyed on the Sinai desert. Such a total waste hardly squared with the repeated pledges out of the Kremlin to raise the level of living ... in the 50th year of the Russian revolution.[40]

In Washington, there were hopes that highlighting the effect on Soviet consumers (rather than on domestic defenses) might restrain the reconsolidation of the USSR's Middle Eastern influence. In a paper on "propaganda issues" presented to White House adviser McGeorge Bundy on 15 June, a "joint State/USIA/CIA group," 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."[41]

Actually, the increase in defense spending trickled down to quite a number of Soviet consumers, particularly the servicemen themselves and their families. "I don't know whether this should be written about," a former "Egyptian" officer told an interviewer in Latvia as late as 2008, "but ... many wanted to take part in local wars because they were paid well."[42] When Soviet regular formations followed the advisers, the reward for enlisted men was relatively even higher. Aleksandr Kon'kov, a private who served in Egypt in 1970–1, earned 130 rubles a month—equal to or better than a doctor or teacher—whereas domestically stationed soldiers were normally paid 3.8

rubles. Most of an "internationalist's" pay was credited to his account and paid upon his repatriation in "yellow checks"—certificates that could be redeemed at *Beriozka* foreign-currency stores. "Dazed by the windfall," Kon'kov "wanted to fill a taxi with cognac and speed home to Yaroslavl," but his sober grandmother made sure he went by train.[43]

Pilots and other officers did even better. Out of their pay in Egypt, advisers "could save enough for a Soviet-made car in 7–8 months"—even a Moskvich 412, "the *dernier cri* of Soviet fashion."[44] A colonel was paid 100 Egyptian pounds, at an official exchange rate of 6 rubles; but felt that for "combat officers who risked their lives daily, this was low. We knew that specialists bringing in weapons from other countries got three times as much."[45] As a naval-aviation engineer recalls, "Our pilots' patriotism also had a material basis." In addition to standard salaries of 300 to 500 rubles, they received a special allowance of up to 1,000 rubles "which was terrific money. When they returned to the Soviet Union they bought cars and smashed them up for lack of [driving] experience."[46]

Even had US propaganda successfully presented aid for Egypt as depriving Soviet consumers, this was a basic misreading of Kremlin priorities. The economic cost of Moscow's vastly expanded presence in Egypt was acutely realized; as Shelest noted: "this is not going to come cheaply for our people and state."[47] But even at the height of détente five years later, with the USSR in its worst recorded drought and desperate for US grain supplies, a Soviet official would note derisively:

> perhaps Kissinger and Nixon really adhere to the concept so widely promoted by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, who believe that the best way to establish universal peace on earth, or at least prevent nuclear war, is to raise the Soviet people's standard of living to American levels.[48]

The US "control group" went on to a forecasting error: "The Soviets, disappointed with Nasser's performance, may wish to make Algeria their major tool for their troublemaking in the area."[49] In fact, the involvement of Algerian President Houari Boumedienne was already being seen in Moscow as a hindrance to the main Russian effort in Egypt.[50] Within a year, Algeria would rebuff Soviet requests for the use of its main naval base at Mers-el-Kébir; in 1970, even the personal intercession of Soviet Navy Commander Sergey Gorshkov failed to obtain this concession, as well as joint naval maneuvers and use of a military airfield—all of which (as US intelligence confirmed) the Soviets had by then achieved in Egypt.[51]

Overall, the control group memo recommended that the United States "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*]." In order 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

... It could get the Soviets off the hook."[52] But it was in fact the United States that got itself off the Middle Eastern hook. Washington returned to its preoccupation with Vietnam, and it took a change of administration, as well as a serious challenge to Israel's US-supplied hardware by the Soviet presence in Egypt, to activate any American response.

As for the control group's concern for the "Czech" consumer, Czechoslovakia had served as a proxy for Soviet arms deals and security cooperation with Egypt since their beginning in the mid-1950s. But while US reports still credited it with a major role, Moscow now largely dispensed with this pretense. A former top defense official in Prague has stated that after the 1967 war the Soviets "took over from the Czech intelligence service, which had already comprehensively penetrated the Egyptian War College and had recruited valuable agents in the civil service and the armed forces."[53] Direct Czechoslovak involvement was now limited mainly to technical assistance: a staff officer of the Soviet force that was later stationed in Egypt states that Czechoslovak engineers supervised a program to house the resupplied aircraft in hardened underground hangars in order to forestall another Israeli attack as on 5 June, with dummy hangars and aircraft providing additional protection. The project cost, by this officer's accounting, the equivalent of 100 million pounds sterling and was completed by the end of 1967. But it was the Soviets themselves who put "our experience from the defense of Moscow" in the Second World War to use in stationing barrage balloons around the airbases, which required precise coordination to lower them for takeoff and landing of friendly planes.[54] Later, balloons were also used, at Soviet advice, to block approach routes through *wadi*s (ravines) leading up from the Red Sea coast.[55]

While attention was focused on the freight that the An-12s flew *in* to Cairo, few if any noticed what they took *out*: dependents of Soviet advisers who had been stationed in Egypt before the war (but not the advisers themselves). The transports' human engineering was hardly designed for such long-haul missions, and certainly not for civilian passengers; one of the interpreters recalled how onlookers were impressed by the huge puddle that the crew left on the tarmac after landing. A toddler being flown out was overheard asking his mother to make sure she had brought the potty.[56]

C. Damage control, military and political

The evacuation of Soviet dependents suggests that in the summer of 1967 Moscow's apprehension of renewed Israeli attacks was more than mere propaganda. Just as the Soviets considered their continuing involvement as another round of the same war, they expected Israel to make good on its success for further gains. At the global level, Soviet ICBMs that had been armed with half-megaton warheads during the May–June crisis remained in readiness for two months, as attested by a former officer of the Strategic Missile Forces in the Far East.[57] In October, Israeli Foreign Minister Abba

Eban "recalled that in July, Israel had received [a] message from [the] Sov[iet]s, through Swedes, that if Israelis crossed [the] Canal [the] Sov[iet]s would no longer consider this merely an Arab–Israeli matter."[58]

This message was brandished by Soviet combat aircraft that, unlike the MiGs, did fly into Egypt under their own power: on 14 June, a squadron of Tu-16 bombers landed at Cairo-West. About thirty TU-16s had been readied on the eve of the June war, and some had been flown to a forward base in the Caucasus, for the putative intervention against Israel; they had been disguised in Egyptian air force markings.[59] Now the bombers arrived in full Soviet colors, "for moral support." They stayed only briefly, but set a precedent for such an overt presence of integral Soviet forces.[60]

Two days after their arrival, Chief of Staff Marshal Matvey Zakharov "slipped into the [Egyptian] capital unannounced" with a delegation numbering dozens of officers, and with a clear brief as stated by Brezhnev: "after analyzing the lessons of the war ... [they] launched the re-arming of the Egyptian Army." The Air Force deputy chief of staff, Lt-Gen. Nikolay Ostroumov, recalled his urgent summons: "Late one evening," his superior "ordered me to go the following morning to one of the airfields near Moscow, but wearing civilian clothes and, he emphasized, without any documents ... There I met ... Col.-Gen. [Afanasy] Shcheglov and some other air defense generals and officers." Later, Zakharov arrived with Col.-Gen. Petr Lashchenko, whose assignment would soon be clarified. Even the senior officers in the delegation were informed of their destination only en route, though Ostroumov recalled that he had already guessed after hearing the news. "We flew to Cairo in the dark. The lights were never switched on because the Egyptians feared that this would lead to an attack on the aerodrome."[61]

Because word about Zakharov's presence spread only after Podgorny's much-fanfared arrival on the 21st, it was and still is widely assumed that the marshal was just part of the president's entourage.[62] But the future Soviet deputy chief of mission in Cairo, Pavel Akopov, who was in Podgorny's delegation, has confirmed that the marshal was already in Cairo when they landed.[63] In fact, his visit was more closely connected with the military resupply effort. It lasted much longer and had far more important and immediate practical consequences than the head of state's.

A diplomatic damage-control effort was undertaken along with the military one. In Budapest on 11 July, Brezhnev assured his allies that "since your departure from Moscow [on 10 June] there has hardly been a day or night without a meeting of the Politburo. We have been putting aside other matters and focusing on ... the Middle East." The limits of disclosure about Soviet involvement in the war and guidelines for presentation of the Soviet response had indeed been adopted by the Politburo within a few days of the war's end. They were already circulated by Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko to Soviet missions abroad on 13 June, a week before they were brought before an urgent, closed meeting of the Central Committee.[64] By 16 June, when the entire Politburo saw Kosygin off to Paris and New York, his brief had been determined both

for the UNGA and for the subsequent Glassboro summit with Johnson.[65] The Soviet premier frustrated the US president repeatedly when "each time I mentioned [intercontinental] missiles, Kosygin talked about Arabs and Israelis."[66]

The next day—17 June—Brezhnev, "very concerned and much affected by the events," informed Shelest by telephone to Kiev that it had already been decided to send Podgorny urgently to Cairo, as "the situation has to be saved; everything must be done to shore up support for and trust in Nasser."[67] On 19 June at 11 a.m., when yet another Politburo meeting began about the "Near Eastern issue," Shelest still recorded that

> everyone was in a depressed mood. After Nasser's warlike and boastful declarations, we had not expected the Arab army to be routed so quickly ... 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. ... Most of the military equipment had been captured by Israel.

However, Shelest added, Brezhnev had already resolved that "'one battle in the campaign is lost but the political struggle of the Arab people against the US and Israel will continue.' We apparently will have to start everything from scratch: policy, tactics, diplomacy, arms ... this was not going to be inexpensive."[68]

This—19 June 1967—was the same day that the Israeli cabinet, also in secret, adopted a far-reaching proposal to return nearly all of the territory it had captured in exchange for peace and recognition.[69] The staff of the Soviet embassy in Tel Aviv, which was formally closed when Moscow broke off diplomatic relations on 10 June, had left Haifa on a Soviet ship on the 18th, and the Israeli proposal could not be presented formally to the USSR. In retrospect, this was the only point in the entire 1967–73 period when a proactive peace initiative might have had any chance of altering the Soviet or Egyptian course, before it was firmly cemented in both declarations and actions. But even at this early stage, the prospect was slim: Moscow had already moved in both principle and practice toward containment, then reversal of the Israeli gains by military means. In an analysis that runs counter to most conventional Western accounts, David Kimche stressed that 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."[70]

The course had been set before the Central Committee convened in closed session on 20 June, and its propaganda cover had already begun. The same day, after analyzing foreign media reports, the retired "dean of Israeli military historians," Col. El'azar Galili, felt it was his duty to alert Foreign Ministry Director-General Arye Levavi. His conclusion ("*not* certain but *very* possible") was that

> the Soviet government has *resolved* to prepare a "fourth" Arab–Israeli war—and is already *acting* toward this purpose; not only by reestablishing the political and mental starting

> point that would make such a war inevitable, but also by rebuilding a background of military numbers that would make it possible.[71]

His prognosis was based, among other things, on a report from Moscow by the veteran Indian correspondent Dev Murarka:

> The Russians are determined that in the next round Israel must not be the winner. For one thing the Russians are likely to persuade the Arabs to be better prepared and to undertake more intensive training of their troops. … Soviet energy in the coming months will be directed toward coming closer to the Arabs, rather than in the quest of an elusive Middle East settlement.[72]

Galili was right in ascribing more weight to Murarka's report than mere speculation. In 1985, the Indian newsman was listed by a former KGB operative who specialized in recruiting "cooperation from professional foreign journalists stationed in Moscow" via the Novosti news agency. "Murarka was in fact 'our man.' … Mr Murarka's 'freelance' status was a fake."[73] The well-placed leak eagerly published as an "exclusive" would be widely employed by all the parties to the conflict.

D. Brezhnev ascendant: domestic repercussions in the USSR

Later accounts described the Central Committee plenum of 20 June 1967 as the climactic clash in a protracted struggle between Brezhnev's allies and his rivals, but the general secretary's authority was in fact challenged openly just by Nikolay Egorychev. The party boss in the city of Moscow had visited Egypt shortly before the war and had actually recommended all-out support for Nasser, so that Egorychev may have expressed genuine concern for his bailiwick's security, or acted for unrelated motives, when he now questioned Brezhnev's Middle Eastern policy.[74] He "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 own capability to defend its own territory."[75] Shelest confided to his diary that Egorychev "spoke the absolute truth, also addressing Brezhnev as Head of the Defense Council. What 'politician' likes such criticism?" But Shelest himself and others did not join in, the purportedly moderate Kosygin was absent, and such opposition as Egorychev's speech represented was swiftly quashed.[76] By the end of the session, he was deposed; the recently appointed KGB chief Yury Andropov, who had supported the intervention plan, not only retained his post but was promoted to candidate membership of the Politburo.

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."[77] The region was singled out specifically by the Soviet military as a theater for the "liberating mission of the Armed Forces" according to the nascent "Grechko Doctrine", named for Defense

Minister Andrei Grechko: "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."[78] Grechko himself was well known for his anti-Israeli, indeed anti-Semitic disposition; he was quoted as declaring, as early as 1963, "within 15 years the Israelis will be glad if we just permit them to live."[79] Together with his Egyptian counterpart Abdel Hakim Amer, he had hatched the plan to provoke a war against Israel, and its failure in May–June 1967 could hardly have moderated his attitude.[80]

Brezhnev's own speech to the Central Committee developed the key elements of the authorized narrative in detail. He left a telltale clue to be discovered only when the text came to light thirty-five years later: an offhand confirmation that the warning to Egypt and Syria about purported Israeli aggressive intent and preparations was made under a Politburo decision, in expectation that the Arabs would take "appropriate measures."[81] But at the time, 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 murky 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" when it went against the Arabs.

Brezhnev did carry out a "changing of the guard" in the Soviet diplomatic team, especially in Middle Eastern capitals.[82] But the ambassadors who had handled the crisis were neither demoted nor otherwise penalized. Dmitri Chuvakhin, the envoy to Israel, was approaching retirement age when the closure of his embassy left him without a post; until the collapse of the USSR and even afterward, he was held to have been ousted from the diplomatic service and exiled to Siberia.[83] Western researchers who sought to interview him were falsely told, as late as September 1990, that he had died.[84] In fact, he was not only rewarded with an adviser's sinecure at ministerial-rank pay but was charged by Brezhnev with compiling a detailed report on the crisis, which included recommendations for the next conflict.[85] In Cairo, Pozhidaev was replaced after the war by Sergey Vinogradov, but interpretations that the former had been sacked for failure disregarded the fact that he too was approaching retirement age and his successor had already been designated in May 1967.[86] At that time, there were rumors in Moscow about dissatisfaction with Pozhidaev's performance. But as he was considerably outranked by Sergey Vinogradov after the latter's twelve-year tenure in Paris, his appointment in itself may just as plausibly have reflected the heightened importance that Moscow ascribed to the Cairo post in the run-up to the 1967 crisis.[87]

The plenum's deliberations, having been kept under wraps, could not silence all skepticism. To ensure grassroots backing, as Shelest noted, "a series of political moves

began—assemblies, meetings, reports, speeches—all in support of the Arabs and condemnation of Israel." Brezhnev and his associates who had elaborated the war strategy had to point to their own domestic solidarity in order to assuage concerns and rebut accusations among the USSR's embittered and disturbed clients worldwide. Brezhnev saw need to reassure his Polish guest that "we did not have any panic. Rallies are being held in many plants and institutions. There were only isolated Zionist statements."[88]

Shelest was less optimistic: "in the [Ukrainian] republic, 2% of the population is Jewish, but they display organization and unity. Attempts are made to find Jews who will come out with condemnations for Israel. There is some success, but it is not convincing." The upsurge in Jewish national sentiment was addressed immediately: "following a submission by the KGB that was approved by the Central Committee in June 1967, the departure of Soviet citizens of Jewish nationality for permanent residence in Israel was stopped."[89] It would be restarted only in order to be used for planting agents, when other means proved inadequate. Persecution of "Zionist activity" was stepped up to levels that had not been approached since the death of Stalin. But at the Budapest conference three weeks later, speaking extemporaneously after his prepared remarks, Brezhnev admitted: "in terms of morality and prestige, we suffer[ed] a defeat. Not every one of our workers understands why 2 million Israelis defeated so many Arabs, equipped with our weapons. It is not easy to explain."

Indeed, insubordination to Moscow was now being rewarded: Romania was the only Warsaw Pact country that refused to follow the Soviet lead in severing diplomatic relations with Israel on 10 June 1967. Soon, Shelest complained: "Romania was buying captured tanks from Israel, which were of our manufacture." Farther afield, as the CIA reported, "since the Middle East crisis the Castro regime has been very critical of the USSR for not supporting its friends ... The Cuban leaders [fear] the USSR will not come to the aid of Cuba in case of an attack." From Glassboro, Kosygin hastened to Havana to reassure Castro that "the USSR had been prepared to aid [Egypt] in the struggle against Israel" and offering the dubious pretext that this aid had been obviated only by Amer's message "that [Egypt] intended to stop fighting within several days."[90]

2

HOLDING THE LINE ON THE SUEZ CANAL

A. Podgorny's visit obscures military moves

On 21 June 1967, a Soviet flight that did refuel in Yugoslavia brought Podgorny to Cairo, after overnight talks with Tito. The brief for his mission in Egypt had, then, been determined before the plenum was convened, and as Brezhnev confirmed, he departed before the session concluded. The version propagated by Mohamed Hassanein Heikal in his memoirs, and reiterated as late as 1990, described the Soviet head of state's "heavy-handed efforts to get Nasser to agree to give the USSR naval and airbases in Egypt," against the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement. This supposedly left Nasser with "a bad taste in his mouth" from the "disastrous" visit.[1]

This was the politically correct version in Egypt at the time of Heikal's writing, after the Soviet–Egyptian alignment had deteriorated. Contemporary Soviet documents paint a different picture: Nasser recognized that Egypt's "armed forces in their present state cannot guarantee the defense of the country." In particular, its "aerial forces and other air defense means were incapable of it."[2]

In June 1967, only a small part of Egypt's SAM-2 (surface-to-air missile) array had been deployed in Sinai. At least one battery was captured intact (the first to fall into Western hands); it had apparently scored the single kill attributed to Egyptian missiles during the war.[3] Elsewhere, although the Egyptian batteries expended a large number of missiles, they proved completely ineffectual (unlike anti-aircraft cannon).[4] In Western analyses, and apparently in the USSR too, this was blamed on incompetent operation or on the poor quality of locally assembled missiles, though the main reason was probably the system's ineffectiveness against the IAF's low-flying tactics, as well as disruption by electronic countermeasures.[5]

To remedy this, Nasser "as a supremely urgent request ... brought up the question of direct Soviet participation in the restoration, reorganization and reequipment of the UAR's [Egypt's] air defense array." In return, he offered not only Soviet use of all his country's ports but also an overt political realignment:

> He posed to us the question of new forms for the mutual relations ... including the military sphere; a formal withdrawal from the nonaligned policy, because in effect—he said—the

> UAR was long since not a nonaligned country, that for over a decade it was in step with the Soviet Union.[6]

Relating this in Moscow to his Polish visitor even before Podgorny returned, Brezhnev quoted the Egyptian president more bluntly: "Nasser ... would like to forsake the policy of disengagement and reach a direct military agreement with the socialist countries." Like Podgorny's delegation in Cairo, the top leadership in Moscow was unprepared for this ostensible triumph. As Brezhnev put it,

> One cannot naturally announce it, but one must attend to it ... The Politburo ... has discussed a number of times ... what position we should take towards Nasser's proposal. ... we responded: we welcome with satisfaction his position ... but we do not consider it proper for the UAR to deviate from the policy of nonengagement. ... Nasser recognized the correctness of our position.[7]

A CIA report in 1971 quoted with some reservation a source (whose identity was still withheld when the document was declassified in 2007) as being told by "Egyptian leaders":

> Soon after the 1967 war the Egyptians had asked the Soviets to take over responsibility for the war-shattered Egyptian air defense; an elaborate agreement was supposedly worked out ... but the Soviets then "got cold feet" and backed away ... It seems unlikely that the USSR would have even considered such a suggestion in the immediate aftermath of the dangers run during the June 1967 war, but this story may nevertheless have some validity as a garbled reflection of Egyptian–Soviet arguments on the subject in 1968 and 1969.[8]

However, the evidence now available *does* indicate that in June–July 1967 the Soviets, while balking at a declared political alliance with Egypt, not only contemplated Nasser's specific military request but complied. "Nasser's attention was called to the necessity to address the solution of this issue not only from the viewpoint of military efficacy but also with weighty consideration of the political aspect, while taking into account the international resonance and domestic reactions."[9]

The Soviets had their own tactical concerns to address: their airlift's main terminal at Cairo-West had been exposed. This heightened the perceived urgency of defending this and other points of Soviet presence. According to a member of Pogdorny's entourage, future KGB *rezident* (station chief) in Egypt Vadim Kirpichenko, Nasser was promised "much more active assistance in organizing Egypt's air defense."[10]

The internal Soviet report about Podgorny's talks in Cairo (released thirty-five years later) stopped just short of specifying that Egypt had requested, or Moscow had approved, the manning of newly supplied SAM batteries by integral Soviet crews, as distinct from individual advisers: "Consent was given to supply military equipment, armaments, and military advisers. In respect of organizing the air defense service, the degree and form of the Soviet side's participation" was theoreti-

cally subordinated to the aforementioned political considerations.[11] But in practice, deployment of Soviet air defense detachments had already begun before Podgorny's talks ended.

B. Creating precedents: Soviet air defense units dispatched to Egypt

In a July 1967 session of the Ukrainian Communist Party's Politburo, Shelest encountered blunt criticism: "we took up the question of air defense in Ukraine," and General A[leksandr] Pokryshkin reported on its "grim" state. "It is simply criminal that ... in our republic, many vital objects are vulnerable, unprotected and undefended, while at the same time equipment *and crews*, ... combat aircraft and SAM batteries are being dispatched to 'cover' Cairo." Shelest noted that after hearing Pokryshkin's "very disturbing and important question, I took [it] up with L. Brezhnev." The general secretary heard him out "in Olympic serenity" and replied: "don't interfere in this issue. There is an overall plan and we are following it."[12]

At the Budapest conference on 11 July, Polish Party Chief Władysław Gomułka reported that "Nasser also approached us about delivery of anti-aircraft machine guns and radar equipment, but at the same time he demanded sending people to service this equipment, as it turns out that he doesn't have such people."[13] Brezhnev confirmed that by then 182 anti-aircraft cannon and 300 AA machine guns had been dispatched by air, along with 334 "military advisers." As the latter are listed separately from "officers-advisers," this figure clearly referred to the weapons' operators. As Brezhnev explained,

> with regard to the participation of Soviet forces in their anti-aircraft defense, etc.—for which they asked us—we thought ... it is more advisable to send an unlimited number of Soviet advisers, *even to form here and there complete advisory units*, but not to take the entire air defense into our hands.[14]

Vladimir Shirin, a SAM *divizyon* commander "on active duty defending our [Soviet] airspace," was ordered in late July 1967 to prepare for a mission to a "hot, arid climate."[15] He was kept on hold for some time; "later we learned that the question was being discussed whether to send military 'experts' or 'advisers' to Egypt, and the government decided on 'advisers.'" Shirin and three colleagues from his outfit were rushed through five days of briefing, and their yet-undefined status was reflected by a last-minute change: "first we were told that we were going for a year's mission without our families. Two days before departure, this was changed to two years and documents could be arranged for the families."[16]

The Soviets' presence was indirectly detected by Western journalists who left Cairo as soon as civilian flights were resumed: they noticed that "anti-aircraft guns bristle from dunes around the airport."[17] By 21 June, "gun placements appeared in Cairo and new antiaircraft gun trenches were being built on the outskirts."[18] It was the Yugoslav

party organ *Borba* that first reported from Cairo that "the Soviet Union is providing *crews* for the new radar system, missiles, planes and other complex systems."[19]

Since this deployment was kept under wraps, and since Israeli planes did not actually challenge Cairo's defenses for another two years, the exact scope and duration of these crews' stay in Egypt cannot yet be determined. They may have been repatriated once fear of an imminent Israeli attack subsided, but there are indications that at least some stayed and formed the vanguard for the full division that arrived in Operation *Kavkaz*. By January 1968, IAF Commander Mordechai "Motty" Hod told USAF officers in Washington that "some 2,000 technicians ... are manning the control centers" of two new SAM sites at Alexandria and Port Said—a much larger number than could be ascribed to advisers alone. Hod described these missiles as "SAM-3 sites (navy version)"—the first source to specify that this new system, designed to overcome the SAM-2's weakness against low-flying aircraft, was deployed in Egypt at this early stage; even two years later, SAM-3s were operated in Egypt only by Soviet crews.[20] Soviet Navy diver Yury Bebishev related that while he served in Alexandria in 1968 "the sky was protected by our *raketchiki* from the Kiev Air Defense District"—Pokryshkin's men.[21]

There is sketchier evidence that fighter jets supplied in the airlift were operated by Soviet pilots beyond the initial test flights. Aleksandr Bezhevets, by then a senior air force officer, held forty years later that after the Six-Day War, "by decision of the Soviet government, a regiment of MiG-21 interceptors and a squadron of Su-7B attack bombers were sent to Egypt. They took part in battles with the IAF from 1967 through 1969."[22] Though there is no other explicit confirmation for this, several incidents are cited below in which Soviet operation of such aircraft was suspected.

When Soviet bloc leaders met in Warsaw in December 1967, "East European" sources claimed that "the Soviet Union wants the military staff of the Warsaw Pact to make ... a special planning section to which Egyptian and other Arab staff officers would be invited." The main idea was "to shift attention away from ... naked Russian imperialism" and to spread the cost and effort.[23] The closest thing to such a Soviet demand that has surfaced in documentation from this conference is a Bulgarian report whereby Gromyko promised "the Soviet Union will back any endeavor of ours to further develop bilateral relations with the Arabs, and most importantly ... the UAR. ... As a result, our bilateral contacts have intensified."[24]

The Soviets could not push too hard for satellite participation, as the meeting was disrupted by Romanian and Yugoslav objections. Gromyko's first deputy Semenov wrote that he got no sleep during the conference out of concern over the Pact's own future, and no evidence has emerged that the Soviet proposal was implemented.[25] Expectations of military aid from Bulgaria to Egypt were among the many Western speculations in the summer of 1967 that never materialized.[26] Direct Bulgarian military involvement in the Middle East never exceeded limited sale of small arms, and though other Warsaw Pact partners did make minor contributions in training and

materiel, the USSR continued to bear the brunt of the effort.[27] While the question of formalizing Egyptian adherence to the Soviet bloc would recur periodically in coming years, the presence of Soviet troops on Egyptian soil was already an accomplished fact.

C. Marshal Zakharov and Soviet marines stabilize the canal defenses

While the political significance of overt Soviet presence may have preoccupied Podgorny in Cairo, it had little bearing on Zakharov's military activity. Anatoly Egorin was in Egypt long before the June war, officially as a correspondent for the Novosti news agency, but his detailed memoirs clearly indicate this was a cover for intelligence work.[28] Egorin, now deputy director of the Institute for Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, was mightily impressed by the sixty-nine-year-old, diabetic marshal.

> Zakharov developed, in Egypt, activity that would have befitted the peak of World War II. ... The marshal, always wearing the same green shirt and white beret, did his own reconnaissance by visiting units in the canal zone, where he approved neither of the forces' overall disposition nor of the hastily dug, shallow trenches. At one point he took a sapper's spade from an Egyptian soldier, and in short order dug a "full-profile" foxhole with his own hands, all in 40-degree [Celsius] heat.[29]

This personal example was more than symbolic, and would be inculcated as part of the doctrine for future offense as well as present defense. After the Yom Kippur War, Israeli General Ariel Sharon described a major problem that Israeli tanks faced while confronting masses of Egyptian infantry: "Every soldier who reaches any point, no matter how long he is to stay there, immediately digs in. It was most impressive to see the aerial photos, when one sees the advance of the Egyptian divisions: the area is full of ... round holes"—which increased the effectiveness of their shoulder-held anti-tank weapons.[30]

"Zakharov's headquarters [staff] in Cairo ... got no sleep for days on end but still could not keep up with all its commander's orders. No one knew how many hours per day the marshal himself slept."[31] This mystery was cleared up forty years later by Zakharov's interpreter: the marshal lay down in his car's back seat between stops.[32] He was clearly planning a complete overhaul not only of the Egyptian armed forces but of the Soviet presence within them. The existing "*kollektiv* of Soviet military advisers," which was now associated with Egypt's debacle, quickly felt his displeasure. As Egorin recalls,

> I heard vivid legends about the work of the military attaché's staff. Its chief, V.I. Fursov, was instructed to report to the marshal and present a briefing every day at 0400. Every night, the subordinates of Vladimir Ivanovich (who was called "Vi" for short) worked all night