

Israeli-Soviet Relations

1953–1967

From Confrontation to Disruption



Yosef Govrin

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YOSEF GOVRIN

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Typeset by Vitaset, Paddock Wood, Kent

*To my wife Hanna and our children Leora and David
with love*

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Abbreviations

CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
GA	General Assembly of the United Nations
Maki	Miflagah Komunistit Israelit, Israeli Communist Party
Mapai	Mifleget Po'alei Erez Israsel, Israeli Labor Party
Mapam	Mifleget ha-Po'alim ha-Me'uhedet, United Workers Party
MFA Arch.	Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive
MK	Member of Knesset (Israel Parliament)
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization

Letter to the Reader

Dear Reader,

I was First Secretary of the Israeli Embassy in Moscow when the Soviet government informed the government of Israel, on Saturday 10 June 1967, of its decision to sever diplomatic and consular relations with Israel following the results of the Six Day War. This announcement was the culmination of Soviet political support – in addition to massive military support – for the Arab countries in their fight against Israel.

That day at noontime I was walking from our residence at the Sadovo-Samotechnaya to the Embassy of Israel on Bolshaya Ordinka Street. It was a lovely sunny day. My heart was torn in two. On the one hand, I felt extremely happy to know that my country – Israel – had been able to defeat the Arab countries who had threatened, in so many declarations, to destroy us. On the other, I could only assume – at that stage – that the victory of Israel's Defense Forces had been achieved at the very heavy price of many dear lives of young soldiers and officers, who were dreaming of living in their Homeland in peace and security, like any other normal people on this earth, their futures awaiting them, and now they had left behind deep pain and profound grief in the hearts of family and friends.

Walking through the central streets of Moscow I encountered many cars with loudspeakers informing the public of the Soviet breach of relations with Israel. For a moment it seemed as if the Soviet Union was declaring war against Israel. Indeed, from that moment on the Soviet Union stood completely at the side of Israel's enemies, on bilateral and international levels. In fact until then,

between Israel and the USSR, there had never been a conflict, either territorial or military. On the contrary, historic social and cultural ties connected both nations. True, there were ideological differences – the Soviet Union fought against Zionism, with no reason, and rejected, categorically, Israel’s pleas to let Jews living in the USSR emigrate to Israel. Yet, from that to the breach of diplomatic relations was a long distance. Moreover, the breach constituted an act which weakened the international system of relations rather than strengthening it.

Upon reaching the street where the Embassy stood, I could hardly make my way through. Hundreds, if not thousands, of workers, brought in from all the different enterprises in Moscow, blocked the entrance to the Embassy. They were carrying anti-Israeli slogans, shouting every few minutes ‘Doloy [Down] with Israel’; the most humiliating slogan was the one comparing Israel to Nazi Germany.

I went up to the second floor of the building and, together with the rest of our staff, looked through the wide windows at the outrageous mob outside the gate. It was a frightful scene, as if they were going at any moment to penetrate into the courtyard and then into the building itself. It was hours before they left, but not before we were instructed several times by the Protocol of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs to pull down our flag. And we did so, at sun set, singing our national anthem, ‘Hatikvah’ (‘The Hope’).

On 18 June 1967 we locked the building (handing over the keys to the Dutch Embassy which represented our interests in the Soviet Union during the entire period of the breach in relations, 1967–1989) and left Moscow for home.

From then until now, nearly 30 years have passed. I served at various posts in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem and in our Foreign Service abroad. The last positions I held abroad were as Israel’s Ambassador to Bucharest, during the Ceausescu era (Romania was the single country in the Communist bloc not to have severed its relations with Israel following the Six Day War), and lately as Israel’s Ambassador to Austria and to the UN organizations in Vienna as well as non-resident Ambassador to Slovakia and Slovenia.

After my return from Bucharest, I was appointed Deputy Director General of the Ministry for East Europe. We were then engaged in the process of renewing our diplomatic relations with

the east European countries. It was in this capacity that I returned for the first time to Moscow, in September 1990, as head of the Ministry's delegation, for talks held with officials of the Soviet Foreign Ministry in preparation for the renewal of Israeli–Soviet relations.

It was only natural that I returned to the premises of our Embassy building, where an Israeli consular delegation had been operating from 1989. Excitedly, I went up to the second floor to the same window looking out over Bolshaya Ordinka, where I had stood watching the mob outside who shouted humiliating slogans against Israel when the Six Day War ended. Now I saw through the window hundreds of men and women all along the street – just as then – but lining up quietly, waiting to get an entry visa to Israel, mostly for permanent residence.

A year later, I revisited Moscow along with my colleague and friend (we had served together as First Secretaries in Moscow until 1967) Judge David Bartov to participate at a reception given by A. Levin, Consul General (later Ambassador) of Israel in the USSR on the occasion of the renewal of Israeli–Soviet relations. The invited Soviet guests, hundreds of them, were joyful over the resumption of contacts, as if 23 years had not separated us.

On 13 December 1991, the Soviet Ambassador to Israel, A. Bovin, presented his credentials to the President of Israel, H. Herzog, at a very solemn and exciting ceremony, since it was the first time after more than 24 years that a Soviet Ambassador had done so in Jerusalem. A fortnight later, the Soviet Union dismembered itself into 15 independent republics, the red flag was taken off the Kremlin and the Ambassador automatically became the Representative of Russia. It so happened that he was the last Soviet Ambassador to have presented his credentials and that this was the last time the Soviet anthem was played at such an occasion anywhere in the world. And so, it seems that the last ceremonial requiem to the USSR was held in Jerusalem, between the hoisted flags of Israel and the USSR.

Fortunately, Israel's relations with Russia and the other republics of the former Soviet Union are speedily developing both in volume and content. We are building together relations of friendship and co-operation between our nations toward a common future of peace and security free of interbloc confrontations.

This process began during the Gorbachev era and continues to

this day.

Israeli–Soviet relations constitute a most dramatic chapter in the history of Israel’s foreign policy. I also dare to think that they constitute no less a turbulent chapter in Soviet policy in the Middle East, directly and indirectly related to British policy as well, particularly from 1948, starting with Israel’s independence up to the ‘Suez Campaign’ and later.

This study fills a gap, which had not thus far been extensively or academically treated in the historiography of Israeli–Soviet relations. It was first published in Hebrew by the Magnes Press of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1990, and in 1994 it appeared in Russian translation in Moscow through ‘Progress’ Press. Thanks to the publishers Frank Cass & Co. English readers the world over will be able to become acquainted with the subject until additional studies will appear.

I do hope that readers and researchers will find this book interesting, not only because it constitutes a source of abundant information and references related to Israeli–Soviet relations but also as a basis for political conclusions to be drawn from this chapter of history which left a very strong imprint on the mutual relations between the two countries for over 40 years.

One day, when the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs will open the Soviet Archives of Foreign Policy to the period dealt with in this book, the reader no doubt will have access to additional material reflecting this dramatic chapter (though I believe that the basic picture will remain basically unchanged). Until then, and well afterwards, this book will fulfill its mission in eliminating the ‘blank spots’ in the history of Israeli–Soviet relations.

Respectfully,
Yosef Govrin, Ph.D.

Preface

THIS BOOK deals with the period ranging from the first severance of Israeli–Soviet relations in the last stage of Stalin’s rule through their renewal, shortly after his death in 1953, to their being severed again under Brezhnev’s rule, in 1967. This period – the longest in the annals of Israeli–Soviet relations – is extensively examined with regard to two parallel processes:

1. Development of trade and cultural relations accompanied by a harsh political dialogue and limitation of the number of Jewish emigrants permitted to leave the USSR for Israel.
2. Confrontation areas that led gradually to the severance of diplomatic relations following the Six Day War in 1967: on the one hand, Soviet policy in the Middle East aimed at forming a united Arab anti-Western front against Israel’s wish to entrench its security and independence with Western assistance, in face of Arab threats to Israel’s existence and, on the other hand, Israel’s struggle for Soviet Jews to have the right to emigrate to Israel and the right to preserve their cultural and national heritage – thus clashing with Soviet ideological interests.

The subject of Israeli–Soviet relations has always been in the forefront of public interest in Israel: first, owing to the significant USSR support extended to Israel during the early stages of its independent existence and the drastic shift in this stance, from the beginning of the 1950s, to siding with Israel’s enemies – a change then fateful for Israel’s survival; secondly, because of Israel’s growing concern for the fate of Soviet Jews; thirdly, because of the hope that Israeli–Soviet relations would be restored to their former splendor.

This book is the first academic attempt to research this chapter in Israeli–Soviet mutual relations between 1953 and 1967 and to assess the roots of the confrontation between the two countries against the background of the political and ideological motivations of each *vis-à-vis* the other. This work is based on a doctoral thesis carried out under the supervision of the late Prof. Shmuel Ettinger and Prof. Yaacov Ro'i.

This work was preceded by Dr A. Dagan's book *Moscow and Jerusalem* (English; 1970) which contains a wide, varied selection of important historical documents on the period of Israeli–Soviet relations from their inception in 1948 until their rupture in 1967, and by Yaakov Ro'i's doctoral thesis, 'Israeli–Soviet Relations, 1947–1954' (in Hebrew). Taking up the historical narrative after the period covered by Dr Ro'i and carrying it through to the June 1967 break in relations, this present study offers the first survey of:

- (a) the whole ensemble of problems as they manifested themselves in relations between the two countries on the bilateral plane;
- (b) the role of Israeli foreign policy alongside that of the Soviet Union in the formation of the system of mutual relations and then in its breakdown;
- (c) the inception and development of the campaign fought on behalf of Soviet Jews;
- (d) the degree to which the Jewish factor alongside the Middle Eastern one influenced the course of the development of mutual relations.

THE BILATERAL PLANE

On the bilateral plane a detailed account is given of the scale of commercial and cultural relations, and the issue of emigration from the Soviet Union and eastern European countries is examined. A distinction is made between situations in which the Soviet Union supported emigration from the eastern European countries to Israel as a function of its readiness to strengthen Israel's demographic potential and those in which it refrained from doing so as a result of Arab pressure.

Also scrutinized is the Soviet Union's double standard of conduct in its relations with Israel as compared to its conduct towards other

countries with which its relations were tense. The Soviet Union, it is well known, upheld the principle of universality of relations (having been itself the target of blockades and sundered relations in the early years of its existence), while it cut off relations with Israel twice. No other country the size of Israel received as much attention from the Soviet communications media in the form of criticism bordering on vilification, or was subject to such gross attacks as those voiced against Israel during the period under review. The Soviet Union questioned no other country's legitimate right to exist as it did Israel's.

THE MIDDLE EAST PLANE

I analyze the confrontation of Soviet policy in the Middle East (defined in the Soviet political vocabulary as 'a region situated in proximity to the southern borders of the USSR'), aimed at getting Western influence out of the Middle East by forming a united Arab anti-Western front, and Israel's wish to entrench its security and independence with Western assistance in face of the Arab countries' growing strength with Soviet assistance and their threat to Israel's existence. From the point of view of Soviet policy, Israel had a double role: it stood as an obstacle in the way of eliminating Western influence in the Middle East, but it was also an instrument for strengthening the Soviet foothold in the Arab countries by exploiting the Israeli-Arab conflict in order to further the USSR's aims in the Middle East.

From the point of view of Israel, the Soviet Union was on the side of enemies bent on its destruction (although the USSR never went back on its recognition of the State) and was therefore seen not only as a factor strengthening the Arab countries' aspirations to wipe out Israel but also as the main obstacle to the promotion of peace in the region.

THE JEWISH PLANE

I discuss the gap between the theoretical approach and the pragmatic one in Soviet policy towards the Jewish minority in the USSR. Israel's activity among Soviet Jews is reviewed and its influence on

the process of national revival among them is assessed. This assessment embraces the beginning of the struggle for the cause of Soviet Jews, its defined goals and the way it was led, its institutionalization in Israel and abroad, and the expansion of its activities.

Israel's fight for the cause of Soviet Jews, fostered by the Jewish national awakening in the Soviet Union itself, was seen by the Soviets as a campaign to blacken the name of the Soviet Union internationally, as part of the East–West confrontation. In Soviet eyes, Israel was putting itself at the head of the Jewish world in an attempt to drag it into acting on behalf of Israeli political, national and social interests, and not only at the head of a Jewish Diaspora in the west but also of the Jews in the Soviet zone of influence. Israel for its part saw defending persecuted Jews in the world as a national obligation, neglect of which would rob the State of its *raison d'être*. As one of the few countries in the world that do not belong to any bloc in the international arena, it was 'the natural thing' for Israel to turn to its Jewish allies to help buttress its independence. This aspect of the relations between the two countries is also treated here in historical perspective.

A certain difficulty in carrying out this research has been the impossibility of studying documents in the Soviet archives which might throw additional light on motives for Soviet decisions in shaping policy regarding Israel. As there was no prospect of the Soviet Foreign Policy archives being opened to foreign researchers in the foreseeable future – even at present (1996), access to Soviet Foreign Policy Documents is quite restricted, and in the best case quite selective – I had no choice but to base research on open Soviet sources, which do in fact afford faithful enough sources on Soviet policy, whether openly stated or not. These open sources are the Soviet press, official statements and the concurrent political commentaries, interviews with Soviet leaders by Soviet and foreign journalists, and verbal communications to Israeli and Western leaders and diplomats by Soviet leaders. This study is supplemented by an analysis of the Soviet government's Notes to Israel and by the reports of Israeli diplomats in the Soviet Union on their conversations with Soviet representatives as well as their interpretation of developments in Israeli–Soviet relations. Use has also been made of documents of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. Interviews with Israeli personalities who were active during the period under review were

also an important source of information, as were Knesset debates, discussions in the Israeli press, and statements and memoirs of Israeli statesmen who shaped Israel's foreign policy as a whole and policy with regard to the Soviet Union in particular.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to: the late Prof. Shmuel Ettinger and to Prof. Yaacov Ro'i who encouraged me to publish the Hebrew edition of this book; to the late Katriel Katz, Israel's last Ambassador to the USSR before the 1967 severance of relations, with whom I served harmoniously as First Secretary of the Embassy during 1964–67, for his genuine support in publishing this book in Hebrew; to my colleague and friend David Bartov, one of the prime movers in the struggle for Soviet Jewry and who has been engaged for many years in their cause, whose invaluable support and untiring encouragement contributed to the publication of this work (in Hebrew and Russian). My appreciation is also given to the director general of the Hebrew University's Magnes Press, D. Benovici, under whose auspices this book appeared in Hebrew.

My very profound gratitude goes to my late mother Zadcanit Hurvitz (*née* Lerner), who spread the Zionist idea and the teaching of Hebrew in the Diaspora and later taught in Israel and who trudged alongside me on a long road of hardship in our struggle for survival and redemption, and to my late father, David Hurvitz, who shaped my early childhood but fell as a victim of Nazi executioners during the Holocaust, while still a young man, and who did not live to see the Day of Victory over Nazi Germany nor Israel's independence. It is from both of them that I acquired Hebrew as my mother tongue and my deep attachment to the Jewish people in Israel and in the Diaspora.

Yosef Govrin

Introduction

WHEN THE Palestine Question was brought up before the UN General Assembly in May 1947, the USSR made a surprising move by departing from its hostile attitude towards Zionism, a stance well known from the 1920s in the USSR itself as well as in the communist world. Andrei Gromyko, head of the USSR mission to the UN, in his address delivered in the plenary meeting of the Assembly, on 14 May 1947, proposed to establish an independent, democratic Jewish-Arab state in Palestine. Should that prove impossible to implement, owing to deteriorating relations and irreconcilable differences between the Jews and the Arabs, he then suggested that the territory of Palestine be partitioned into two independent states: one Jewish, the other Arab.¹

The position of the USSR regarding the right of the Jews to their own state in Palestine – as expressed by its representatives in the UN debates during 1947 – was based on the following arguments:

1. The aspirations of a considerable part of the Jewish people are linked with Palestine and its future, as well as to the administration which will govern it. The Jewish people, like the Arab people, have historical roots in Palestine – the Homeland of these two peoples.
2. The suffering and sorrow which were the lot of the Jewish people in the Nazi-occupied areas, having been subjected to almost complete physical annihilation, cannot possibly be described. The fate of the Jewish people continues to be tragic since hundreds of thousands of Jews are wandering about in various countries of Europe, searching for a means of existence and for shelter.
3. The fact that the countries of Western Europe were unable to ensure the defense of the basic rights of the Jewish people and to

safeguard it against the violence of the fascist executioners explains the aspirations of the Jews to establish their own state. It would be unjust to deny them this right.

4. The partition of Palestine into two separate states will be of deep historical significance, since this decision will satisfy the legal claims of the Jewish people, hundreds of thousands of whom remain without a land and without a home.

5. The decision to partition Palestine is not aimed against either of the two peoples living in Palestine. On the contrary, the decision is congruent with the national interest of both peoples – the Jews and the Arabs.

This forcefully expressed position of the USSR had a decisive influence on the crystallization of the UN General Assembly resolution on 29 November 1947 regarding the Partition of Palestine – a decision which brought about the end of the British Mandate in Palestine and the declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel on 15 May 1948.

The Soviet position revealed no identification with the Zionist vision. Two new principles, however, could be discerned in the USSR's position at that time:

(a) the recognition of the Jewish people's historic connection with Palestine – the Land of Israel, as called by Jews the world over throughout the centuries;

(b) the right of the Jewish people to establish their own independent state, which would absorb tens of thousands of Jewish refugees, survivors of the Holocaust.

Thus, two national interests coincided here: the Soviet interest in pushing the British out of the region – one of its main reasons for supporting the partition of Palestine – and the Jewish interest in establishing an independent Jewish state in the Land of Israel.

MAIN LANDMARKS IN ISRAELI-SOVIET RELATIONS FROM THEIR ESTABLISHMENT IN 1948 TO THEIR BREAK IN 1953

The USSR recognized the State of Israel, *de jure*, on 18 May 1948, and was the first to accord full recognition to the newly born state. Recognition was accorded following a note addressed by Israel's

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Moshe Shertok (later Sharett) to V. Molotov, USSR Minister of Foreign Affairs, on 16 May, in which he requested the Soviet government's official recognition of the State of Israel and its provisional government. Shertok expressed his hope that this recognition would 'strengthen the friendly relations between the Soviet Union and its peoples' and 'the State of Israel and the Jewish people of Palestine'. On this occasion, Shertok also expressed the 'deep gratitude of the Jewish people of Palestine shared by the Jews throughout the world, for the firm position adopted by the Soviet delegation to the UN which advocated the establishment of a sovereign and independent Jewish State in Palestine, and for its unfailing support of this position, in the face of all the difficulties, for the expression of sincere sympathy to the Jewish people who suffered in Europe at the hands of the fascist butchers and for the support of the principle which stipulates that the Jews of Palestine are a nation which has the right to sovereignty and independence'.²

In according official recognition by the USSR government of the State of Israel and its provisional government on 18 May 1948, V. Molotov expressed the hope that the 'creation of their own sovereign State by the Jewish people will promote the strengthening of peace and security in Palestine and in the Middle East' and the Soviet government's 'confidence in the successful development of friendly relations between the USSR and the State of Israel.'

18 May 1948

Kol Haam ('Voice of the People'), the Israeli Communist Party organ, notes in its editorial that in view of the USSR's recognition of Israel, relations between the USSR and Israel should rest 'on the basis of friendly relations, cooperation and mutual assistance'. The paper also called upon Israel to create an alliance with the USSR which should secure Israel's independence against the imperialists' attempts at subjugation of Israel and the opening of possibilities to receive practical support in our war (meaning the war imposed then on Israel following its Independence Declaration, when seven Arab armies invaded its territory aiming to conquer it and negate the existence of Israel). *Kol Haam* concluded the article by saying that in order to consolidate peace in the world 'Israel should not

demonstrate the same attitude toward warmongers as to peace lovers'.³

In those fateful days the USSR stood by Israel's side both in the UN – where it sharply condemned the Arab armies' invasion into Israel's territory and called for their immediate withdrawal (27–28 May, during the Security Council's debates) – and in the granting of military assistance, through Czechoslovakia, that was of utmost importance in rebuffing the invading armies. In exchange for its political and military assistance, the USSR expected that Israel would side with the USSR in its confrontation with the west.

30 May 1948

The greetings sent by the Moscow Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee to the President of Israel, Dr Chaim Weizmann, stated:

The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR is sending you, and through you to the Jews of the State of Israel, ardent congratulations on the occasion of the Jewish State's establishment. Reactionary forces that serve imperialism continue their dark activities, trying to suppress the people's aspiration for freedom and independence. But we believe in the victory of progress and democracy. We hope that only this way the young Jewish State will succeed to overcome all the disturbances and will thus occupy its worthy place among nations who fight for real democracy and peace throughout the world ... The Jewish people acquired for the first time in its entire history of suffering, a truthful defender for its rights, its interests, the USSR, a friend and defender of all nations.⁴

27 June 1948

Tel Aviv and Moscow officially announced the exchange of official Envoys between their respective states. Mr P. Yershov was appointed the USSR's Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Israel (the USSR Legation opened in Tel Aviv on 10 August 1948) and Mrs Golda Meyerson (later Meir) was nominated Israel's Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the USSR (the Israeli Legation in Moscow was opened on 6 September 1948).

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15 July 1948

The Ukrainian Representative at the UN Security Council sharply condemned Count Folke Bernadotte's program (which recommended transferring territories in the Negev and Galilee to the Kingdom of Jordan), defining it as a program aimed at the liquidation of Israel.

26 August 1948

At a farewell reception held in Tel Aviv by the Friendship League with the USSR, in honor of Mrs Golda Meyerson on the eve of her departure to Moscow as Israel's plenipotentiary Minister, Mrs Meyerson declared:

We have to develop understanding and mutual friendship with the USSR. I wish to set up a direct and close relationship with Soviet Jewry. I would like to work with them in a friendly manner and receive in turn friendship from them. I would have liked that out of this direct connection, we should get also to a good relationship with the USSR Jews.⁵

15 September 1948

Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Zorin told Mrs Meir:

A Jewish question exists and will exist only in those States which do not advance towards Socialism. From there Jews will emigrate to Israel and it is Israel's role to absorb them ... Even after a large immigration, many Jews will still remain in the capitalist countries and for their well being it is essential to fight not only for the State but also for democratization all over. In each state there are active progressive forces and the very creation of Israel is none other than an expression of these forces' influence. It is not by chance that the democratic states were the first to recognize Israel. It is our hope that Israel will follow the road of progress.⁶

21 September 1948

An article in *Pravda*, the organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), signed by the Jewish-Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg – member of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee directorate in

Moscow and one of the most important spokesmen of the Soviet press during World War II against the Nazi invaders – sums it up as: Israel, yes! To Jews' emigration from the USSR to Israel, no!

Here are its main points:

The Soviet Union stood by Israel's side in its war against the Arab invaders. Now, however, Israel is facing another invasion, less alarming, less dangerous – that is the invasion of American capital. US programs of military bases and installations are the danger threatening Israel. Israel is a capitalist state. Its leaders are not representatives of the working class. 'The Jewish Question' will be resolved in each place as a result of social and spiritual progress. The solution of the Jewish question doesn't depend upon Israel's military successes but upon the victory of socialism over capitalism. The interconnection among Jews is anti-Semitism. 'This is solidarity of the offenders and embittered.' It isn't to the credit of Zionism that more Jews are flowing to Israel, but as a result of anti-Semitic persecution ... These Jews didn't come to Israel to find wealth but a right to human dignity. The Soviet Jews are proud of their country and regard it as their homeland. Neither do they want the Jews of eastern European countries to emigrate to Israel. They sympathize with the struggle of Israeli workers, but every Soviet citizen realizes that the problem isn't related only to the national character of the State but also to its social regime.⁷

This article marked the beginning of the USSR's turn in its attitude towards Israel. (In days to come Ehrenburg will argue in his memoirs that this article was dictated to him.) Its publication was intended to warn Israel that it should not allow itself to be influenced by American capital, which could lead to the loss of its independence, and that it should not encourage Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel, which would result in political confrontation between Israel and the Soviet authorities and among Soviet Jews themselves.

5 October 1948

The military attaché of the Israeli Legation in Moscow discussed with Soviet military authorities the subject of military co-operation

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with Israel with regard to: (a) short- and long-training of commanders; (b) supply of arms from German loot; and (c) air and sea delivery bases.

After a month, Mrs G. Meir (Meyerson) and Mr M. Namir, Counselor of the Legation, submitted a detailed list of military equipment – required by Israel – to the Head of the Middle East Department of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His reaction was somehow reserved. He was said to be afraid that the matter would become publicly known, ‘whilst the UN prohibits the supply of arms to the conflicting sides.’ He added, ‘This matter will not only be inconvenient for us, but will also make your situation more difficult. My Arab friends have an advantage, geographically speaking: they have depots in their vicinity and they would be able to act publicly and extensively, whilst they are compelled now to act clandestinely and in a limited manner.’⁸

24 November 1948

The Soviet Union presented a draft resolution, in the third (political) committee of the UN General Assembly, demanding the immediate withdrawal of the Arab armies which had invaded Palestine.⁹ The USSR representative, Kisselev, declared that Israel was born as a result of an armed fight for freedom and independence.¹⁰

29 November 1948

Comment made by I. Ehrenburg to M. Namir in Moscow:

Soviet Jews fought against Hitler, not only because of his anti-Semitism, they shed their blood in defense of this country and this regime to which they are wholeheartedly devoted and will never give up their Soviet citizenship.

The State of Israel should understand that in the USSR there is no Jewish problem and that the Soviet Jews should not be bothered and that all attempts at attract them to Zionism and emigration should cease. Otherwise, it will encounter sharp resentment, both on the part of the Soviet authorities and amidst Jews themselves. The State of Israel will then be the loser – this he said ‘is my friendly advice’. You

are stuck in a region of pure Anglo-Saxon influence. Your situation will never permit you to be in complete solidarity with the Soviet Union! Who knows? The notion should not be discounted that in a time of crisis we shall find ourselves on both sides of the front as enemy camps.¹¹

16 December 1948

The Soviet weekly *Novoye Vremya* complained that Israel was ungrateful to the Soviet Union, that it had adopted an anti-Soviet attitude in her policies, ‘in spite of the constant support extended by the USSR to the Jewish State’.

19 December 1948

The Soviet Union voted in favor of Israel’s admission to UN membership. The proposal was rejected in the absence of a sufficient majority.

7 February 1949

The first Soviet protest note to Israel’s Legation in Moscow on account of two allegations.¹²

1. The Legation is engaging itself in sending letters to Soviet citizens of Jewish nationality, encouraging them to leave the Soviet Union, abandon their Soviet citizenship, and emigrate to Israel. Since this act is illegal and does not correspond to the status of a diplomatic Legation, the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs is proposing that the Israeli Legation cease this activity.
2. The Legation is distributing an informative bulletin contrary to the existing regulations in the Soviet Union. The Legation is being requested to stop doing so.

13 February 1949

The Soviet Ambassador to the USA, Panyushkin, commented to Israel’s Ambassador in Washington, Elath, that Israel might join the Marshall Plan:

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The Soviet Union has no intention of asking Israel to join the bloc of countries that it is heading, but it does ask Israel to remain independent in its foreign policy and free from foreign influence and rule.¹³

20 March 1949

TASS, the Soviet news agency, quoted the General Secretary of the Israeli Communist Party, Mr Shmuel Mikunis, as having said that the American loan given to Israel would fortify imperialist positions and would permit the Anglo-Saxon superpowers to control Israel's economic sovereignty.¹⁴

20 March 1949

The Knesset's Declaration of Basic Principles stated that Israel would be loyal to the UN Charter and to friendship with all peace-loving nations, in particular the USA and the USSR.

14 April 1949

Mrs G. Meir commented to Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Vishinsky in Moscow upon her visit to bid farewell at the conclusion of her mission as Israeli Minister to the USSR:

We are determined to lead a neutral foreign policy, to not be driven by any bloc nor to join any group of countries aimed against this or any other world factor, nor against the Soviet Union, especially ... We decided to maintain neutrality, this is the will and aim of all responsible factors who are leading our State ... We have taken a firm decision to safeguard our independence and not to allow any military bases on our territory to England or any other party ... We shall not deviate from our Foreign Policy principles, which are: the non-adherence to any organisation oriented against the Soviet Union whose friendship with us is in our basic interest ... We have a coalitionary government, and although there are workers' parties outside this coalition, the majority of workers are represented in the government whose aim is to build Israel as a Socialist State.

In this conversation, Mrs G. Meir requested (a) trade credit from the USSR; (b) expeditious treatment of Israel's application for arms from the Soviet Union; and (c) the exertion of Soviet influence upon Romania and Hungary to permit Jews from those countries to emigrate to Israel.

Vishinsky reacted very positively to these assurances of Israel's neutrality; responded encouragingly to the idea of increased trade with Israel; refrained from supplying Soviet arms to Israel; and argued that permission for emigration from neither the Soviet Union nor the eastern European countries would be granted because Jews were an element faithful to the communist regime and were therefore important to the process of its consolidation.¹⁵

5 May 1949

The Soviet representative to the UN demanded Israel's admission as a member of the UNO without any further delay and condemned the foot-dragging demonstrated by certain countries in this regard.

11 May 1949

Israel was admitted as a member of the UNO thanks to vigorous Soviet support. After the vote the Ambassador of Poland noted,

The period of sentimental interest in the fate of Israel has come to an end. An era of cooperation based on mutual interest is beginning. The Jewish people advancing along peaceful and progressive lines can rely on the assistance of Poland, the Soviet Republics and the People's Democracies of Europe. Israel will doubtless remember that those countries have been its true friends at the troubled time of its emergence ... neither should [it] be forgotten that Israel is deeply indebted to the working classes. Poland will watch the future of Israel with sympathetic interest.¹⁶

7 July 1949

M. Namir presented his credentials as Minister Plenipotentiary of the State of Israel to the President of Supreme Soviet.

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9 August 1949

The USSR representative to the UN, Tsarapkin, demanded the liquidation of the UN staff control over Palestine, the dissolution of the Conciliation Commission, and facilitation of direct negotiations between the conflicting parties – Jews and Arabs – without UN interference, or outside pressure.¹⁷

5 December 1949

Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs, M. Shertok (later Sharett), declared, 'Israel's foreign policy is "a non-aligned" policy in distinction to "neutral". Permanent ties with Soviet Jewry are impossible at present, because of the Russian authorities' rejection for reasons which I don't want to judge.' He stressed the fact 'that Israel will refrain from identifying itself with any of the sides involved in the cold war between the blocs'. He also added that Israel would not participate in any imperialistic program.¹⁸

19 April 1950

The Permanent Representative of the USSR to the UN, J. Malik, presented to the General Secretary of the UN, a Note, stating:

It has become clear now that the General Assembly's resolution of December 1948, determining an international regime in Jerusalem satisfies neither the Jewish nor the Arab population in Jerusalem itself and in Palestine as a whole. In such circumstances the USSR government sees no possibility for continuing to support the said resolution. The USSR government is confident that the UNO will succeed in finding a solution to the problem of Jerusalem that will be acceptable to the Arab and Jewish residents.¹⁹

23 May 1950

Prime Minister David Ben Gurion made the following statement at a Mapai (Labor party) convention in kibbutz Afikim:

The Soviet Union has promised national equality to all nations inhabiting its territory and has kept her promise. But

the Jewish people in the Soviet Union do not have a school of their own, nor a newspaper, neither in Hebrew nor in Yiddish. There is no anti-Jewish discrimination in the Soviet Union, and anti-Semitism is prohibited, but the Soviet regime has not succeeded in understanding the uniqueness of the Jewish problem. The Jewish people who have succeeded to build their independence will not give up the right of any Jew to immigrate to Israel and join the builders of the Homeland. We demand from the Soviet Union that the right be given to Jews who inhabit the USSR to join with us and participate in the building of our independence. Let us send from here our greetings to the Jews of Russia and let us tell them: Our/Your hope has not been lost, and to the Soviet Union we shall appeal with the call that the opportunity be given to every Jew in the USSR – who so desires – to take part with us in our creativity. Let us not despair and let us live with the knowledge that there are still many Jews in the world who are with us in spite of all the misfortunes. Let us hope that the day will come when they will, with total freedom, be able to join us in our enterprise.²⁰

25 May 1950

Israel welcomed the ‘Tripartite Declaration’ (American-British-French) concerning the supply of arms and security guarantees to Israel and the Arab states (in the face of very sharp Soviet criticism).

3 July 1950

Israel condemned the North Korean aggression towards South Korea (for which it was sharply criticized by the USSR).

20 August 1950

Prime Minister D. Ben Gurion made the following statement at the Labor Party (Mapai) convention:

The [Israeli] government always objected to having its foreign policy defined as neutral. We are not neutral regarding the

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supreme question of mankind in our days. Peace and war. No people is so eager to safeguard peace as the Jewish people, and we therefore cannot be neutral towards those deeds that determine peace or war.²¹

4 October 1950

Korean War. Foreign Minister M. Shertok opposed the Soviet draft resolution at the UN calling for the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea. Israel announced that it was dispatching medicines to South Korea.²²

30 October 1950

Israel's representative at the UN joined those opposing a Soviet draft resolution concerning a peace treaty and the prohibition against the use of atomic weapons.

9 January 1951

At the UN the Soviet Union rejected the proposal of Israel's mission on the question of Korea (a seven point program presented by Israel's head of Mission at the UN, Mr A. Eban) demanding the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from Korea.

20 May 1951

The USSR abstained on a draft resolution presented by the Western bloc at the UN calling for condemnation of Israel for having bombed El-Hama and for an order demanding the cessation of the draining of the Hula Sea.

21 November 1951

In a note addressed by the Soviet Union to all the Middle East countries, including Israel, the USSR Minister of Foreign Affairs, A. Gromyko, denounced the US plan to set up an Allied Middle East Command. He warned that any country which would join the Command would bring about a deterioration in its relations with the USSR.²³

8 December 1951

In its reply to the government of the USSR, concerning the Middle East Command, the government of Israel noted that Israel was not invited to join the Command. It was informed, however, about the plan to set it up, but was at the time assured that there was no aggressive intention behind its establishment. It also mentioned that there were no foreign military bases on its territory (as the Soviet press claimed at that time) and that Israel aspired for peace to prevail with its neighbors.

On this occasion Israel called upon the USSR to permit Soviet Jewish emigration to Israel.²⁴

9 December 1951

Israeli–Soviet trade negotiations were concluded concerning the exportation of 5,000 tons of citrus fruit from Israel to the USSR.

1 March 1952

An agreement was signed regarding the exportation of 50 tons of bananas and 30,000 boxes of oranges from Israel to the USSR.

6–12 April 1952

Israel participated at the International Economic Conference held in Moscow and negotiated on the exportation of citrus fruit from Israel to the USSR in exchange for importing agricultural machinery from the USSR.

19 May 1952

An Israeli–Soviet agreement was signed on the exportation of 50,000 boxes of citrus fruit from Israel to the USSR, in exchange for which Israel would import oil products from the USSR. Negotiations were also held regarding the purchase of crude oil and grain from the USSR.

8 December 1952

Pravda denounced the ‘incitement campaign of the Zionist leaders’ against the Slansky Trials in Prague, whereupon the Secretary of

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the Czechoslovak Communist Party was accused of weaving a plot with Israel as well as Zionist and Jewish organizations to overthrow the communist regimes in Czechoslovakia and its neighboring countries. (Slansky, of Jewish origin, was executed. With the passage of time, the Czechoslovak post-communist government rehabilitated him and exonerated him from the charge of treason.)

13 January 1953

The ‘Doctors’ Plot’ was announced in the Soviet media. A large group of Jewish doctors were accused of attempting to poison Stalin, according to instructions they had, allegedly, received from Jewish and Zionist organizations. (The group was expected to be sentenced to death; after Stalin’s death, the charges were dropped.)

19 January 1953

In his Knesset speech, Israeli Foreign Minister M. Sharett made the following statement concerning the ‘Doctors’ Plot’ and the Soviet media’s claim that they were Jews:

The State of Israel will not remain silent in the face of an attempt made by any power to defame the name of the Jewish people and of a danger threatening masses of the Jews wherever they may be.

The government of Israel has always regarded friendship with the USSR as one of the pillars of its international position and as a precious asset for the entire Jewish people. It views with deep sorrow and grave anxiety the malignant course of hatred against Jews officially adopted in the USSR, which must arouse most vehement indignation and condemnation on the part of Israel and the Jewish masses throughout the world ...

The government of Israel will denounce in the UN and on every other platform the campaign of incitement conducted in the communist countries against the Jewish people, and the abomination directed at its authoritative organizations and will warn of the dangers threatening the well being of millions of Jews in these countries. The government of Israel

will continue to demand even more vigorously, the right of all Jews who aspire to Zion to be permitted to emigrate to Israel.²⁵

9 February 1953

A small bomb was hurled at the Soviet Legation in Tel Aviv. Three Legation employees were slightly injured by the explosion.

The President and the Prime Minister of Israel, in fact the whole government and Knesset, expressed their deep regret at the incident, condemned it and promised to catch the criminals and bring them to court.

13 February 1953

The government of the USSR informed the government of Israel of its decision to break off diplomatic relations with Israel.

17 February 1953

Prime Minister D. Ben Gurion expressed in the Knesset his amazement and deep concern in view of the Soviet decision to sunder diplomatic relations with Israel.

NOTES

- 1 Speech by Andrei Gromyko, 14 May 1947, in the United Nations General Assembly, First Special Session 77 Plenary Meeting, Vol. 1, pp. 127–35.
- 2 *Kol Haam*, 18 May 1948.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*, 30 May 1948.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 27 Aug. 1948.
- 6 M. Namir, *Mission to Moscow* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1971) p. 52.
- 7 *Pravda*, 28 Sept. 1948
- 8 M. Namir, *op. cit.*, pp. 63–73.
- 9 General Assembly, Official Rec. 3rd Year, 1 Community. Doc. A/c 1/401, 25 Nov. 1948.
- 10 General Assembly, Official Rec. 3rd Session, Gen. Comm. 211 Meeting, 24 Nov. 1948, p. 741.
- 11 M. Namir, *op. cit.*, pp. 90–91.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 13 A. Dagan, *Moscow and Jerusalem* (London: Abelard and Schuman, 1970) p. 40.

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- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 15 M. Namir, *op. cit.*, p. 116–18.
- 16 A. Dagan, *op. cit.*, p. 44
- 17 Sec. Council, Official Rec. 4th Year, No. 37, p. 5, 9 Aug. 1949.
- 18 *Davar* (Heb. daily), 5 Dec. 1949.
- 19 Gen. Assembly Official Rec. 5th Session Suppl. No. 1, 8, 6, 19 April 1950.
- 20 *Davar*, 23 May 1950.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 20 Aug. 1950.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 4 Oct. 1950.
- 23 A. Dagan, *op. cit.*, p. 59–60.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 59–60.
- 25 *Divrei HaKnesset* (Knesset Verbatim), Vol. 13, p. 493.

Part 1

From severance of diplomatic relations in February 1953 to their renewal in July 1953

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1 • Ideological and psychological aspects of the USSR's decision to sever its relations with Israel

THE CAUSE AND BACKGROUND OF THE BREACH

ON 9 February 1953 a small bomb was thrown on the Soviet Legation in Tel Aviv. The ensuing explosion damaged the building and wounded three Legation employees. This event was used by the Soviet government as a pretext for informing the Israeli government of its decision to sever Soviet–Israeli diplomatic relations.¹ The USSR regarded the blow to its Legation in Israel as a by-product of the angry manifestations against it at that time in Israel, both among the public and in the government, in consequence of anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist accusations which were manifested at the Prague Trials and in the case of the ‘Doctors’ Plot’ in Moscow.

In the notification transmitted to Israel’s Legation in Moscow on 11 February 1953, the Soviet government placed the responsibility for the criminal act on the government of Israel basing its argument ‘on the well known and indisputable facts concerning the engagement of Israel’s government representatives in hostile acts of systematic incitement against the USSR’.

The USSR also stated in its notification² that

the apologies expressed by the President of Israel and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the condemnation of the act and the promise they made to find the criminals and punish them, ‘are in contradiction to the acts of incitement’ against the