

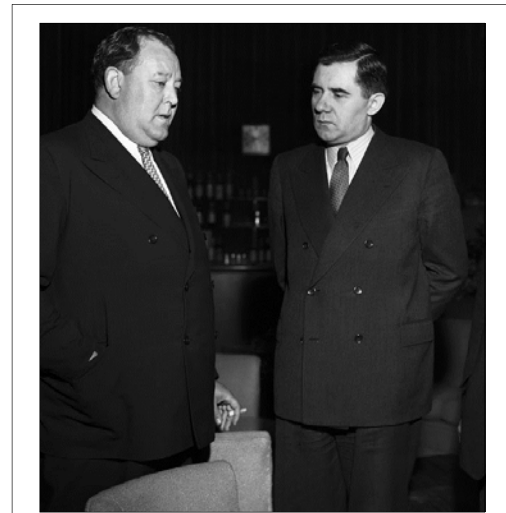
The Unsung Cold War Role

by Shammai Siskind

Israel played a unique role during the Cold War. Unlike most countries, which functioned as satellites or proxies of the United States or the Soviet Union, it had to fend off enemies both directly on its borders and over the distant horizon. The new state was surrounded and vastly outgunned and outnumbered by enemies that vowed to wipe it clean off the map, just a few short years after the Holocaust. Its intelligence community responded accordingly.

Origins of a Schism

Israel was forced into an antagonistic relationship with the Soviet Union almost immediately after its founding though Moscow was one of the few world powers that threw its weight behind U.N. Resolution 181 of November 29, 1947, which called for the partition of Mandatory Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state.¹ In a landmark speech, the Soviet ambassador to the U.N. Andrei Gromyko urged the world organization not to regard the Jewish people's desire for its own state with indifference: "It would be unjust not to take this into consideration and to deny the right



Soviet ambassador to the U.N. Andrei Gromyko (right) meets with Secretary-General Trygve Lie, New York, May 1947. Speaking to the General Assembly on the establishment of Israel, Gromyko declared "the right of the Jewish people to realize this aspiration."

of the Jewish people to realize this aspiration," he stated emphatically.² Moreover, the socioeconomic outlook of the Zionist leadership at the time was closer to the Soviet outlook than to that of the

¹ ["Resolution 181 \(II\). Future government of Palestine."](#) U.N. General Assembly, New York, A/RES/181 (II).

² Andrei Gromyko [remarks](#), "[Seventy-Seventh Plenary Meeting Held in the General Assembly Hall at Flushing Meadow, New York, on Wednesday, 14 May 1947, at 11 a.m.](#)"

capitalist West. So much so that President Truman was sufficiently alarmed to dispatch a special envoy to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion in November 1948 to ascertain that Israel was not going to become a “red state.”³

Intelligence about Moscow’s strategy, weapons shipments, and politics was more urgent for Israel than for any other Western state.

Despite this, anti-Zionist sentiment had been brewing within the Soviet leadership well before the emergence of Israel. Vladimir Lenin himself allegedly saw the Zionist project as a form of bourgeois colonialism.⁴ And while these views gelled during Joseph Stalin’s rule, in the immediate wake of World War II, the Soviet dictator supported the Zionist struggle for statehood as a means to undermine Britain’s position in the Middle East. By the early 1950s, however, having realized that Israel would not become a Soviet-type socialist state and recognizing the Arab states’ far greater geostrategic, geopolitical, and economic importance, Moscow took an increasingly anti-Israel line.⁵ Soviet support for the Arabs moved from the diplomatic to the material in 1955 when Moscow signed a large-scale arms deal with Egypt (via Czechoslovakia) that included heavy weapons platforms such as MiG-15 fighters and T-34 battle tanks.⁶

Similar deals with other Arab states including Syria followed, many substantial in size and in scope.⁷ Over time, the Soviets became the firm patrons of the pan-Arab

war against Israel and a clear and existential danger to the Jewish state.

All this forced Israel into a unique role on the West’s side in the Cold War. The American mainland was an ocean away from the USSR. Even the West European nations benefited from robust borders, including the occupied eastern European nations that acted as a buffer. And while the threat of all-out war loomed over the world, it was always a worst-case doomsday scenario. Israel, on the other hand, surrounded and outnumbered by hostile states, faced a never-ending threat of direct confrontation with its Soviet-backed enemies. A desperate need for intelligence about Moscow’s strategy, weapons shipments, and internal politics was far more urgent for Israel than for any other Western state.

Intelligence Priorities Take Shape

Against this backdrop, Israel engaged in diligent intelligence-gathering operations aimed at Moscow and its clients, which produced vital insights into Soviet military doctrine, weapons systems, and strategic policy. For the next four decades, Jerusalem focused its energy in two areas, both inextricably bound and connected.

First was the acquisition of detailed specifications about Russian-made weapons in the hands of Israel’s enemies. Washington

³ Efraim Karsh, *Fabricating Israeli History: The “New Historians”* (London: Cass, 1997; 2nd rev. edit.), p. 188.

⁴ Ziad El Jishi, “Marx, Lenin and Trotsky’s Anti-Zionist Positions on the [Jewish Question](#),” *Anti Imperialista*, June 27, 2001.

⁵ Efraim Karsh, “Israel,” in Yezid Sayigh and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The Cold War and the Middle East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 156-85.

⁶ Guy Laron, “Cutting the Gordian Knot: The Post-WWII Egyptian Quest for Arms and the 1955 Czechoslovak Arms Deal,” The Wilson Center, Washington, D.C., Feb. 2007, p. 16.

⁷ Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), p. 13.

needed to know the Soviet strengths during the arms race to counter its warheads and delivery systems.⁸ Jerusalem, on the other hand, needed intelligence about its Arab enemies' capabilities to be able to defeat them even with its inferior tools and its limited access to weapons. Because it could only purchase arms from a small number of nations, France being the most notable until 1967, then the United States,⁹ Jerusalem faced a qualitative as well as a quantitative disadvantage against its neighbors, many of which were armed with some of the most advanced Soviet weapons systems.

Second, the Israelis made a determined effort to share intelligence about Soviet capabilities and intentions with its allies in order to undermine the Kremlin and strengthen the West. This second mission was more than a byproduct of the first; it was an independent objective that required substantial effort and risk-taking, especially from on-the-ground agents.

Khrushchev's Secret Speech

Thanks to Israeli intelligence, Nikita Khrushchev's famous "secret speech" made its way to the West, marking a turning point in the Cold War.

Ruling the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964, in February 1956, Khrushchev delivered a speech to a closed session of the twentieth Congress of the Communist Party, during which he spent four long hours delivering a scathing critique of the Stalinist era, his predecessor's cult-like leadership style, and the systematic repression inflicted



Victor Grayevski, a Jewish Polish journalist, provided a copy of the "secret speech" by USSR chairman Nikita Khrushchev to Israeli intelligence, which passed it to the CIA, marking a turning point in the Cold War.

on the Soviet people during the previous decades.¹⁰ Transcripts of the speech were highly classified and delivered only to key offices within the Communist bureaucracy in Europe. And while rumors of the speech's existence abounded, its content remained elusive to Western intelligence agencies until the Israelis produced it.

The Soviet Politburo sent a copy to the first secretary of the Polish Communist Party. After it arrived, a Polish Jewish journalist named Victor Grayevski uncovered it upon returning from a trip to Israel, during which he had decided to immigrate there.¹¹ His girlfriend worked in the party office, and he asked her if he could borrow the transcript. He then delivered it to Yaakov Barmor, the Israeli official and Shin Bet agent who had helped arrange Grayevski's

⁸ Herman Kahn, *Thinking about the Unthinkable* (New York: Horizon Press, 1962), p. 167.

⁹ Guy Ziv, "Shimon Peres and the French-Israeli Alliance, 1954-9," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Apr. 2010, p. 408.

¹⁰ *The New York Times*, [Apr. 6, 1989](#).

¹¹ Yossi Melman and Dan Raviv, "[The Leak of the Century](#)," *The Washington Post*, Mar. 27, 1994.

travel to Israel. Barmor photographed the transcript and sent the photographs to Israel.

Israeli intelligence realized at once what could happen if the speech were made public. Mossad chief Issar Harel told Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, "If it's authentic, it's an atomic bomb." On the advice of his intelligence officials, Ben-Gurion sent a copy to the U.S. administration, which just a few years earlier had agreed to cooperate with Israel on intelligence matters.

Delivering the document required an operation all by itself as the Israelis worried about interception and leaks. To maintain utmost secrecy, intelligence officials preferred that the document be flown via diplomatic courier directly to Izzy Dorot, the Israeli intelligence liaison in Washington. On the U.S. side, only James Jesus Angleton, legendary head of counterintelligence at the CIA, would be allowed to see it.¹² The photographs reached the desk of CIA chief Allen Dulles by the middle of April 1956. He promptly informed President Dwight Eisenhower. After determining that the speech was authentic, the CIA sent it to *The New York Times* in early June of that year.¹³

Publishing the secret speech had a major effect on the Cold War. It contributed to the breakdown of relations between the Soviets and the Chinese between 1956 and 1966. The Chinese saw Khrushchev's attack on Stalin as a rejection of communist principles and branded him an ideological deviant.¹⁴

The exposure of the "secret speech" contributed to the breakdown of relations between the Soviets and the Chinese.

Meanwhile, the speech helped nurture the so-called Khrushchev Thaw, a modest improvement of relations between Moscow and the West.¹⁵

Operation Diamond

Israel's subsequent efforts to obtain Cold War intelligence were more methodical, its contributions to its Western allies more sophisticated and substantial.

A case in point was the Hollywood-worthy saga of Mivtza Yahalom (Operation Diamond) undertaken by the Mossad to acquire a MiG-21, the most advanced Soviet fighter aircraft and one of the most state-of-the-art in the world. In 1963, Israeli agents in Tehran learned of an Iraqi fighter pilot, Munir Redfa, who was considering leaving Iraq after years of discrimination within the military due to his Christian roots.¹⁶ A Mossad agent contacted him, and after building a relationship, convinced him to meet with more senior officials.

In a meeting with government agents in Israel, Redfa agreed to fly his MiG to Israel in return for \$1 million in payment plus smuggling of his family out of Iraq. Within a few weeks after arriving in Israel, Israeli Air Force (IAF) pilots used his aircraft in a number of test flights. They analyzed the jet's strengths and weaknesses and flew it against their own fighters. They mastered the aircraft, marveling at its speed and maneuverability. This proved invaluable during the June 1967 Six-Day War when

¹² Yossi Melman, "Trade Secrets," *Haaretz*, Mar. 9, 2006.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ "Sino-Soviet Split," National Cold War Exhibition, Royal Air Force Museum, London.

¹⁵ "[The Khrushchev 'Thaw'](#) (1953-1964)," Territory of Terror, Memorial Museum of Totalitarian Regimes, Lviv, Ukraine.

¹⁶ Reuven Weiss, "[The Blue Bird Legend](#)," *Ynet* (Tel Aviv), May 29, 2007.

Egypt and Syria were both armed with MiGs.¹⁷

A month later, Israeli authorities loaned the MiG to their U.S. counterparts, who were able to evaluate the plane themselves¹⁸ under the “Have Donut” program housed at Area 51 in Nevada. In addition to the technical specs gleaned from the aircraft, U.S. personnel also had a chance to peruse the training and tactical manuals delivered by Redfa, which no doubt substantially aided U.S. efforts to counter Soviet air power. The transfer of the MiG 21 was a major boost in U.S.-Israel defense relations and helped pave the way for the acquisition of F-4 Phantom fighters by the IAF.¹⁹

Operation Rooster 53

Later, Israel’s intelligence contribution evolved even further with a lesser-known episode, Operation Rooster 53, as perhaps the best example.

Rooster 53 was planned during the War of Attrition, the years-long (1967-70), low-grade conflict between Egypt and Israel attending the Six-Day War. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) used Egyptian radars it had captured during the earlier war to counter



Oren Rozen

In 1969, the Israelis captured Soviet radar from the Egyptians and handed it to Washington, aiding the United States in gathering important intelligence on USSR capabilities.

enemy threats. In response, the Egyptians brought in new radar technology from Moscow.

By the fall of 1969, the Egyptians had placed new P-12 Soviet radar in Ras Gharib, on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Suez. Upon discovering it, Israeli military planners vowed to destroy the radar. Plans for an aerial strike were drawn up and approved, but shortly before takeoff, the attack was canceled. An even better plan was on order: a daring ground raid and the extraction of the equipment to Israel.²⁰

Securing Ras Gharib was easy enough. Two heavy Sikorsky CH-53 helicopters dropped a unit of paratroopers near the base, and they quickly overwhelmed the light security contingent. Transferring the seven tons of machinery was the hard part. The Israelis partially dismantled the station and

¹⁷ Bill Norton, *Air War on the Edge: A History of the Israel Air Force and Its Aircraft since 1947* (Milbank, S.D.: Midland Publishing, 2004), p. 382.

¹⁸ Thornton D. Barnes, “[The MiGs of Area 51](#),” Area 51 Special Projects, Dec. 10, 2019.

¹⁹ Weiss, “[The Blue Bird Legend](#).”

²⁰ “The War of Attrition: [Operation ‘Rooster](#).” The Jewish Virtual Library, Chevy Chase, Md.

attached pieces to the choppers.²¹ One craft was forced to conduct an emergency landing—luckily in Israeli territory—due to the sheer weight. Both loads were eventually brought to a secure location. Experts assessed them and developed new electronic warfare tactics to overcome Egypt’s radar system before handing the equipment to Washington.²²

With Operation Rooster 53, Israeli planners forfeited their immediate strategic considerations in favor of intelligence gathering on Soviet capabilities. Intelligence collection was a top priority now. The capture of Soviet equipment and the sharing of it with allies continued to be a feature of Israeli military operations against Arab states. During a counteroffensive in the second week of the October 1973 Yom Kippur War, Maj. Gen. Ariel Sharon’s division seized an Egyptian SA-6 surface-to-air-missile battery, and Jerusalem shared that, too, with its U.S. ally.²³

Exposing Missile Secrets

While the technical details of Soviet weapons were valuable to the West, Moscow’s missile capabilities—where they were located and what they could do—trumped everything else. The West vied with

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this as Moscow intensely guarded even the minutest details of its delivery systems. For a while, Washington had to compensate with its own

technical innovations. The U-2 spy plane, for instance, exposed Soviet assets from 70,000 feet, most famously during the Cuban Missile Crisis.²⁴ But the Soviets substantially undermined the plane’s effectiveness when they moved their arsenals underground in the mid-1960s.²⁵

A lack of human assets with information about Soviet missiles plagued U.S. intelligence for three decades. Washington was flying blind, but that changed in the early 1970s when the Israeli intelligence community began delivering groundbreaking information to U.S. administrations.

According to all elements of the U.S. intelligence apparatus, information received from the Israelis was unique in its detail and the subjects it shed light on, areas that for years were obscured from the West. Based on the intelligence provided, Washington was able to draw a detailed and fairly accurate picture of the structure and deployment of a substantial part of the Soviet Union’s strategic missile divisions.²⁶

How did the Israelis pull it off? Retracing the exact steps of clandestine activities is difficult, but one can reconstruct

21 Donald J. McCarthy, *The Sword of David: The Israeli Air Force at War* (Barnsley, U.K.: Pen and Sword Books, 2003), p. 130.

22 “The War of Attrition: [Operation ‘Rooster.’](#)”

23 Raphael Ofek, “[Israel’s Intelligence Contribution to US Security](#): The Cold War Years,” The Begin Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, paper no. 751, Feb. 26, 2018.

24 Joseph Caddell, “[Discovering Soviet Missiles in Cuba](#): Intelligence Collection and Its Relationship with Analysis and Policy,” *War on the Rocks* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 19, 2017.

25 Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, “Nuclear U.S. and Soviet/Russian Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, 1959-2008,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Jan. 2009, p. 68.

26 Raphael Ofek, “[Israeli Intelligence in the Cold War](#),” *Israel Defense*, June 3, 2014.

what likely transpired based on information made public after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Israeli agents who understood the Soviet bureaucracy in Eastern Europe became keenly aware of a major flaw in the system. The tendency to hoard information—itsself a symptom of an obsession with secrecy—created an information glut in which untold numbers of paper-form military records were filed and stored. The more this information multiplied, the harder it became to keep track of. At the same time, Israeli spies managed to obtain the identities of several former members of the Soviet military and security establishments who had intimate knowledge of their government’s missile capabilities. When these people were no longer in their positions—which undoubtedly meant the authorities paid less attention to them—it was easier for Israeli agents to convince them to share their technical knowledge. This was where Israeli intelligence reached its Cold War peak and aligned most closely with the intelligence goals of the West.

Conclusion

For many years, the Soviet ballistic missile threat was relatively low on the list of Israel’s immediate security priorities. After all, Moscow’s weapons were not aimed at Jerusalem or Tel Aviv but at New York and

Washington. Israel had always been more interested in the MiG fighter’s maneuverability and the T-class tank’s endurance. So the effort to collect data on Soviet missile capabilities marked an important shift. Israeli intelligence moved from tactical concerns to a broader strategic narrative as Jerusalem understood that its long-term security interests were achieved not by narrow intelligence collection but by undermining the country that acted as the patron and arms supplier of its enemies.

And while the Cold War is over, and Israel no longer finds itself trapped between two rival superpower blocs, it continues to provide first hand and invaluable lessons on waging war and preserving national defense.

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