

## The Soviet Union and the creation of the state of Israel

Gorodetsky, Gabriel

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# **The Soviet Union and the Creation of the State of Israel**

Prof. Gabriel Gorodetsky

Incumbent of the Rubin Chair for Russian Studies

Tel Aviv University

Visiting Professor at the Center for Applied Policy Research

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The vote of 29 November 1947 at the General Assembly of the United Nations in favour of the creation of the State of Israel is often glorified as a humanitarian gesture, a universal expression of remorse and repentance for the Holocaust. Likewise, the crucial Soviet support of the State of Israel is associated with the common struggle of the Russian and Jewish peoples against Nazi Germany. The Soviet stand is particularly striking considering the consistent negative attitude of the regime to Zionism, and the overt pro-Arab line taken by the Kremlin during the Arab riots of 1929 and 1936, denouncing the Yishuv as the ally and tool of British imperialism<sup>1</sup>

The shift in the Soviet attitude, from blatant antagonism towards Zionism to an effusive support, is often associated with the German attack of the Soviet Union on 21 June 1941. It is argued that the ties, established by Moscow with both world Jewry and the Yishuv in Palestine, reflected in the first place the need to enlist the support of the world Jewish community to the Russian war effort. The war, it is suggested, provided the Russians with new opportunities to “find a way to extensive circles in the Western world in order to gain maximum support for its struggle against Nazi Germany”.<sup>2</sup> The logical conclusion is therefore, that “the overriding desire to defeat Germany remained the common goal of both parties throughout the war years”.<sup>3</sup> It is hardly surprising therefore that the common struggle against fascism through the establishment of a Jewish Anti Fascist Committee in Moscow in April 1941 and a V-League in Palestine, and the contacts established with the leaders of the Yishuv are strictly examined within this context and are assumed to be the single Soviet objective<sup>4</sup>. The obvious temptation is to assume that the common struggle against Fascism, the awakening of Jewish consciousness in Russia (through the activity of the committees) and the Soviet recognition of Jewish contribution to the war effort, created the congenial atmosphere for the Soviet drift towards a support of the State of Israel.

And yet, it is well established that all endeavors of the Jewish Anti Fascist Committee to embark on a road of its own were frustrated by the Kermlin. Attempts by the Committee to regenerate its activities in the wake of the war, by enlisting sympathy of “progressive” Jewish public opinion in the West in support of Soviet aims, were discouraged by the government in Moscow.<sup>5</sup> Those organizations were in fact strictly prohibited from expressing "any views" on international politics in general and "on the question of the Jewish State of Free Palestine" in particular. Their objective, in line with dozen of akin organizations, such as the Trade Union Congress in England or the International Red Cross, was confined to exert pressure on the Americans and British to extend material aid to Russia.<sup>6</sup>

The opening of the Russian archives show the far more complex circumstances which led to the Soviet recognition of the State of Israel and further demonstrate that the activities of the committee and the contacts with the Yishuv had little in common and served differing purposes even if at times the objectives seemed to overlap. Put in a nutshell it has been commonly believed that the Nazi onslaught on Russia brought the Jews and the Russians together. It may therefore come as a surprise that the initial and significant encounter with the Russians, which drew their attention to the potential asset of the Zionist movement, occurred prior to the German invasion of Russia – paradoxically at the height of Soviet Russia’s collaboration with Nazi Germany under the aegis of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. Stalin, wrongly assuming that the end of the war was imminent, was striving to improve his political standing in the anticipated peace conference, which he hoped would readdress the European balance of power. In that respect the future of the British empire, which he perceived to be Russia's main adversary, assumed a special significance.<sup>7</sup>

Virtually no relations had existed between the Jewish Agency and the Soviet Union in the decade preceding the outbreak of war. In Autumn 1940, the Jewish Agency for

Palestine set up a special committee whose task was to deal with the fate of the Jews from Poland, the Baltic countries and Bessarabia, the territories which had been absorbed by the Soviet Union. However, their efforts to send a special delegation to Moscow were abortive.<sup>8</sup> An astute observer of international politics, Chaim Weizmann, the President of the World Zionist Organization, seemed to have perceived the genuine aims of Soviet policy. In early 1941 he opened up a channel of communication with the ubiquitous Soviet ambassador in London, Ivan Maisky, greatly exceeding the immediate and short-term agenda set by the committee. In their first meeting at the end of January 1941, Weizmann alerted Maisky to the possibilities which would open up for the Russians in the region were they to cooperate with the Jewish Agency. As would become customary for the Yishuv leaders Weizmann elaborated *ad nauseam* the socialist features of the Jewish settlements in Palestine, harping on Soviet ideological predilections and hoping to drive a wedge between the Russians and the Arabs on the one hand and the Russians and the British on the other hand. To impress his interlocutor he commented wryly that the British Mandatory administration "called us communists..., and the Russian government regarded us as counter-revolutionaries". Like his associates in the Zionist movement, Weizmann seemed oblivious to the subsidiary role which ideology played in Stalin's political game.

But Weizmann seems to have deliberately left out of the report to Jerusalem the most significant part of the talk. "Palestine", he tried to allure Maisky, "has no market for her oranges - would the USSR take them in exchange for furs?" Oranges for furs was merely the bait for a long-term strategy, which would come to fruition in 1947, of enlisting Soviet political support for the creation of a Jewish State. To avoid the inevitable pitfalls in future cooperation Weizmann was even prepared to sacrifice Soviet Jewry which he expected to be fully assimilated in twenty or thirty years. He pinned his hopes on the 6-7 million Jews living in Germany, the Balkans and Poland. He recognized of course that were Germany to win the war those Jews would "simply

perish". But the prospects of a British victory posed serious challenges to the Zionist leadership. Here Weizmann certainly won Maiskii's attention by making the fairly blunt observation that:

*The British - and especially their colonial administrators don't like Jews... in Palestine there are big and complex problems. It's true that the Palestinian Arabs are the guinea pigs the administrator is used to, but by contrast the Jews reduce him to despair. They are discontented with everything, they ask questions, the administrator constantly feels that the Jew is looking at him and thinking to himself: You think you are intelligent but maybe I'm twice as intelligent as you are. This turns the administrator decisively against the Jews, and he begins to praise the Arabs. Things are quite different with them: they don't want anything and don't bother anyone.*

He clearly tried to impress on Maisky that British victory, though obviously desired by the Yeshuv, seemed to hold bleak prospects for its political aspirations. Weizman's scheme envisaged the rescue of central European Jewry, with Soviet help, to be followed by a "move of a million Arabs who are now in Palestine to Iraq, and to settle four or five million Jews from Poland and other countries on the land where these Arabs were." The major problem was, he threw the gauntlet at Maiskii, "how do we obtain this land?"<sup>9</sup>

There is no denial that the resort to Russia came more naturally in the wake of the German invasion on 22 June. In a second meeting with Maisky in September Weizmann made a blunt overture, seeking to forge a new alliance by suggesting that in England "the Jews are not given any opportunity to express their attitude to the war, and in Palestine

the British hinder the formation of Jewish troop units".<sup>10</sup> These overtures were by no means fortuitous. A month later Ben-Gurion himself met Maisky and, like Weizmann, went out of his way to demonstrate his empathy for the Soviet experience, notwithstanding the fact that he had been known to be a notorious opponent of the Bolshevik revolution. Rather awkwardly he insisted on presenting himself as "the representative of Jewish labour in Palestine" who only "happened to also be the chairman of the Jewish Agency" for eight years. He then went on to impress on the Russians that Labour, though "not a communist movement", was "the leading group in the Jewish community in Palestine... the main colonizing factor in Palestine". Though Zionism was "a matter of life and death" for the movement, he told the rather bemused Maiskii, it was also "very serious" about its socialist aims, and the proof was the successful construction in Palestine of a "nucleus of a socialist commonwealth". Ideological lip service paid, Ben-Gurion now reverted to his main concern: the Soviet attitude towards Palestine in the future. Regardless of the calamity which had befallen the Red Army, he envisaged Russia to be "at the least one of the three leading powers which would determine the fate of the new world". Consequently, he wished to impress Stalin with the tremendous strides which the Jews had made in Palestine. Hoping, like Weizmann, to create a rift between the Russians and the British, he insisted that regardless of Britain's policy in Palestine the Jewish community had evolved into "the only organized labour movement in the whole of the Middle East", a fact which was "not without some importance to the international labour movement". He finally produced the bait by elaborating the Yishuv direct contribution to the war effort.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that the Russians were not easily swayed by the generous offer of material support and seemed to be much more concerned with the political repercussions of these fresh contacts on their future standing in the region. Indeed all attempts to foster relations with Moscow through direct assistance to the war effort proved to be abortive. An offer made in Ankara by Eliahu Epstein, Head of the Middle

East Division at the Political Department of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, to send a team of doctors with field hospitals to the Eastern Front was turned down by the Russians. Incidentally, Epstein too did not miss the chance of educating the Russians about the "Yishuv's social composition" and lecturing "at length on the labour movement in Palestine and on its achievements in various spheres". It should be emphasized that the offer of assistance merely served as a pretext for establishing a new political platform as became obvious in Epstein's conversations with Vingoradov, the prominent Soviet ambassador in Ankara:

*... over the years Russia had adopted a mistaken political orientation towards those circles in Palestine and in the neighbouring countries who had quickly been revealed as agents and henchmen of Nazism. I dwelt on the clericalist, reactionary social background of the mufti and his gang and on the anti-democratic character of the Arab national movement in its various manifestations in Palestine and in the neighbouring countries.*

Epstein went on to describe the mighty economic potential of the Zionist settlement in Palestine which, he argued, had not yet been properly exploited and which "in certain circumstances might also prove beneficial to Soviet Russia."

The Soviet ambassador went out of his way to convey the gist of Soviet foreign policy, denying that his country had ever cultivated "a negative attitude towards Zionism (!), and if they persecuted Zionists it was because they had exceeded the bounds of permissible political activity in Soviet Russia; ... Soviet government policy pursued a *realpolitik* and that their attitude towards religion could serve as an example of their considerations for elements which they had formerly dismissed".<sup>12</sup>

Weizmann persevered in his efforts. He continued to address long letters to Maiskii and even extended his efforts to Washington, where in May he met Litvinov, the Soviet



ambassador and former Commissar for Foreign Affairs. On those occasions he drew up "three of the most fundamental aspects of the Soviet social philosophy" which he believed to be embodied in the Zionist "national system" in Palestine: the economic structure based on collective welfare rather than on individual gain, the planned economy and the fact that "the vast majority of adherents of Zionism have close personal and family relations with the USSR, and a peculiar interest in, and special sympathy with, its people". His reference to Russia's future role in the region became more open with the "brilliant" successes of the Russians on the battlefield. These, he wrote to Maiskii, would "contribute to lifting the pall of darkness now hanging over a distracted world, and that the forces of progress and freedom will then unite in order to undertake the work of reconstruction which will lie before them."<sup>13</sup>

The Kremlin reacted cautiously. On 31 August, 1942, a Russian delegation headed by Sergei Mikhailov, the first secretary of the Ankara embassy, arrived in Palestine and met the leadership of the Yishuv. Their interest in Palestine, however, remained negligible. Faithful to the spirit of collaboration with their Allies, they continued to press for Arab-Jewish reconciliation. But each of the new encounters brought home to Moscow the increasing disillusionment of the Jewish population with the British Mandate, intensified by the issue of the White Paper of 1939 which curtailed Jewish immigration to Palestine. In the absence of a Soviet diplomatic presence in Palestine, such fact-finding tours became instrumental in laying the foundations for the future. Indeed, the guests seem to have been most impressed with the vitality and strength of the Yishuv. Mikhailov expressed "his amazement at the Jews' achievements here, saying that this was beyond anyone's dreams". Moreover the Russian guests were told that it "would be to their advantage to introduce extensive Soviet activity in Palestine on behalf of their country and their regime".<sup>14</sup>

The turn of the tide in the war in summer 1943, increased the Russians concern about their international role in the post-war world. Though still committed to cooperation with the West, Stalin's suspicion of British aims deepened and was further magnified by the bitter controversy over the second front. The first direct attempt to determine the Jewish plans for Palestine was made by Litvinov, on the eve of his recall to Moscow. He tried to elicit from Nahum Goldmann, member of the Jewish Agency Executive and its representative in Washington, whether any understanding had been reached with Britain and the State Department "about postwar plans for Palestine and whether the British were still courting the Arabs".<sup>15</sup> The growing tension with the West and the need to plan for post-war reconstruction led Stalin to recall Maisky as well. The two were appointed as deputy ministers for foreign affairs. Well versed in European affairs they were entrusted with the planning of the peace conference. Litvinov was replaced in Washington by the thirty-five-year-old Andrei Gromyko, who was immediately faced with an urgent plea by Goldmann for Russia not to "remain indifferent to the problem of Palestine and the problem of the Jews of Europe". Recognizing the stature of the Soviet Union as a great power, he urged the Russians "to take a position on the solution of the Jewish problem and the settlement of the Palestine question".<sup>16</sup>

Before leaving London, Maisky was briefed by Weizmann about conversations he had held with Roosevelt in June. It was then that the Russians learnt that the American President had proposed to Churchill to convene a Jewish-Arab conference to settle the Arab-Jewish problem. Fully aware of the Soviet apprehension of a dictated arrangement, Weizmann made full use of the information to goad Maisky into seeking direct Soviet involvement. Despite his notorious caution, Maisky this time expressed confidence "that the Soviets would support them".<sup>17</sup> On his way to Moscow, Maisky spent three crucial days in Palestine as a guest of the British mandatory administration. It gave him a unique opportunity to gain a first-hand impression of the viability of the Zionist movement in Palestine and the capacity of the country to absorb a considerable

Jewish immigration. His meeting with Ben-Gurion and other leaders of the Yishuv in Ma'ale HaHamisha and the exemplary kibbutz of Kiryat Anavim left a tremendous impression on him. For Ben-Gurion the transformation in the Soviet stance was "a revelation"; he could "hardly believe" it. Subsequently Ben-Gurion submitted to Maisky a long memorandum highlighting the emerging Jewish dominance in the region. In follow-up meetings in the Soviet legation in Cairo Moshe Shertok, director of the Jewish Agency's Political Department, submitted more precise data. He clearly wished to convince the Russians that by the end of the war the Jews would control the economy and "gain political domination" in Palestine by establishing a majority of two million Jews to one million Arabs. Hence the efforts to enlist Russia's support would become more pronounced. Maisky indeed compiled a long report for Stalin upon his return which apparently opted for support of a Jewish State.<sup>18</sup> Golda Meir, a prominent leader of the Yishuv and later Foreign Minister, recognized the significance of the visit. Her impression was that Maisky was determined "to know whether it was possible to do something in this country, so that when the time came, when they would have to express an opinion on the Jewish problem and on Palestine, he would have first-hand knowledge. We had the feeling that this visit was of great value".<sup>19</sup>

The Russians remained on their toes to ensure that they were not excluded from any peace arrangement. From the Zionist perspective, the groundwork pursued diligently throughout the war, and the association of the Palestinian leadership first with Nazi Germany and now with Britain, was starting to pay dividends. When Goldmann met one of Stalin's closest associates, Umanskii, at that time ambassador in Mexico, it was apparent that although the Russians had not yet "taken a formal position" the old animosities with Britain and mutual suspicions were resurfacing fast. Umanskii expressed his fears that Britain might steal a march and consult the Russians only after an agreement had been reached with the Americans. He vouched the Russians were bound to "stand up against both". However, to ascertain that the Yishuv might indeed

provide Moscow with a trump card, he once again wished to learn about the prospects of Jewish immigration to Palestine and the settlement plans. He and Goldmann minutely surveyed the numbers of Jews surviving in the territories now under Soviet control, country by country, finally reaching the figure of a million. Clearly, the most effective way for the Russians to intervene directly in the region was by facilitating Jewish emigration to Palestine from the East European countries now under their control. Consistent with the line pursued since Weizmann's first meeting with Maisky in 1941, no claim was made on Soviet Jewry, considered lost to the Soviet state.<sup>20</sup>

Soviet relations with the Arabs remained extremely precarious. In Moscow the creation of the Arab League was believed to have been "incited and supported by the British in so far as it suits their plans to reinforce their influence in the Middle East and to establish a barrier against any possible penetration of Soviet influence there". Their precarious political state meant that Arab unification could occur only "under the aegis of a ruling power", which at present was Britain.<sup>21</sup> Relations with the Jews were more complex. On the one hand the prospects of cooperation seemed bright. Soviet ambassadors kept conveying assurances from the Jewish leadership that they preferred the Big Three to be involved in a final agreement "rather than only a British guarantee". They appeared quite resolute "not to orient the Jewish state towards only one group."<sup>22</sup> But the close ties of the Yishuv with American Jewry threatened eventually to tilt their loyalties toward Washington. It was therefore advisable to refrain from making "any statements in support of the idea of creating a Jewish state". The Soviet position on the eve of the Yalta conference was therefore one of "wait and see", to be determined finally by the degree of cooperation of the Allies. The pretext for their involvement in the region appeared to be confined to the "return of all Russian property" in Palestine, especially that of the Russian church.<sup>23</sup>

Though the Palestine issue was not raised officially at the Yalta Conference, unofficial talks led to an understanding that the British evacuation of Palestine would be preceded by some sort of international trusteeship. The Soviet perception of international affairs in the wake of Yalta was that allied unity should be preserved after the war. They anticipated that the "Big Three" would be able to work harmoniously as a global police force, operating within the framework of a peacetime Grand Alliance, demarcating Soviet and Western spheres of influence. But the spheres of interest overlapped, as they had done in the 18th and 19th centuries. They were not confined to Eastern Europe, but also included oil concessions and spheres of influence in the north of Iran, control of the Turkish Straits and the strategic bearing of Palestine.

Indeed the report of Litvinov's commission on post-war reconstruction, which followed the Yalta Conference did not reveal any genuine Soviet interests in the region beyond the desire to be on a par with Britain and the United States. The preparatory work done by the Zionist leadership continued to produce dents in the Soviet outlook on the region. Litvinov described "the considerable achievements of Jewish colonization" in terms which could only compete with the pamphlets produced by the Yishuv itself: "a large part of the uncultivated land has been turned into fertile fields, marshes have been drained, the breeding-grounds for malaria have been destroyed, there has been much afforestation, health care has been improved, some industry has been developed, such as processing diamonds and extracting and treating chemical deposits from the Dead Sea", and so on. But notwithstanding the enthusiasm it is worthwhile noting that when he came to analyse the Arab-Jewish conflict the grim conclusion was that there were no viable "plans or projects for the solution of this complex Palestine problem".

Stalin's attention was increasingly diverted to the region by the growing American involvement, which was believed to be motivated by the wish to secure the free flow of Saudi oil. The British reluctance to abandon Palestine was attributed to their strategic

need to guard their strategic assets, particularly the approaches to the Suez Canal. Soviet interests, it seemed, could be best protected by a transferral of Palestine "to the collective trusteeship of the three states - the USSR, the US and Great Britain". It is worth noting that, given the insoluble nature of the conflict, the Russians preferred to overlook the political repercussions of the trusteeship.<sup>24</sup>

The further Stalin felt excluded from the regional peace arrangements, the closer he was pulled into direct involvement. The early warning signs were Truman's comments to the *New York Times* on 17 August 1945, in the wake of the Potsdam summit meeting. Truman admitted that the future of Palestine had been the subject of talks with Churchill. "There was nothing", he insisted, "that the Generalissimo could do about it anyway." The Western Powers had rejected Molotov's proposal, made during the foreign ministers' meeting in Moscow in December 1945, for Russia to evacuate Iran if England evacuated Egypt and Palestine. At the beginning of 1946, Aleksei Shchiborin, the Soviet Minister in Cairo, was recalled for a whole month of discussions in Moscow. Together with Daniil Solod, Chief of the USSR Mission in Syria and Lebanon, he was entrusted with Palestinian affairs. He too made a thorough tour of Palestine, and returned ever more convinced that a solution without Soviet participation would be to their disadvantage. The chill was swiftly creeping back into Anglo-Russian relations. Shchiborin hoped the British would remember that Palestine was "situated not only on the route of British imperial communications, but also on the sea routes to various ports in our own country". Litvinov's Reconstruction Committee, committed to reconciliation with the West, was receiving a kiss of death.<sup>25</sup>

In March 1946 Truman granted \$400 million in aid to Greece and Turkey to withstand Soviet pressure. Stalin complained to the American Ambassador in Moscow, General Bedell Smith, that the United States was colluding with Britain against the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> A month later the Anglo-American Committee of Enquiry for Palestine was set

up, leaving the Russians out in the cold. However, the hostile attitude of the Arabs and the ambivalent Jewish reaction to its recommendations (to permit the immigration of 100,000 Jewish DPs to Palestine in 1946 while rejecting the idea of either a Jewish or an Arab state) resulted in strong Arab and Jewish protests. The conclusion of the Jordanian-Turkish Pact in early 1947, together with the Turkish-Iraqi plans for the establishment of a Turkish-Arab bloc, further pointed to a deliberate scheme to create a strategic environment under British domination. The continued British presence in the region had become totally unacceptable for the Russians.<sup>27</sup>

The Jewish boycott of the conference convened in London by the British Government in December 1946, to discuss the creation of an autonomous region in Palestine under a federal framework, also drew them closer to the Russians. Although the Arabs rejected the plan, fearing that it might lead to partition, their cooperation with the British continued.<sup>28</sup> The Jewish Agency was quick to seize the opportunities provided by the bitter confrontation. The Russians had at last been dragged into the conflict "on a par with the other Middle Eastern issues over which [they] and England are at loggerheads, such as Libya, Italy, Greece, Turkey, and so forth". There were clear signals of increasing tensions between the Americans and the British regarding both the fate of the 100,000 DPs and the future of the Mandate, which the Russians were keen to exploit. In fact, the DPs have become hostages, their fate serving as the main leverage for undermining the British Mandate and also for driving a wedge between the Americans and the British.<sup>29</sup>

Soviet opposition to a unilateral British solution was now certain. Moreover, the fact that the Russians had no firm position on the nature of the solution opened new opportunities, principally in the transfer of the issue to the Security Council. Epstein, in Washington, was duly briefed:

*Not only is there no reason to expect Russian policy to be hostile to us, there are grounds for thinking it will be friendly. Not out of sympathy to us or out of hatred towards the Arabs, but in order to settle political accounts with England. If anyone is liable to lose, it is first of all the Arabs and the English. The former will have to accept Russia's supervision, and the latter its participation in all matters relating to the East. Legitimate supervision and legitimate participation. Supervision which may undermine the entire political and social structure throughout the Arab East, and participation that may limit even more the evolution of self-government in the Arab East.<sup>30</sup>*

The impasse reached in the two rounds of the London Conference led Bevin to propose a five-year trusteeship which would prepare the ground for statehood later on. In a way it was a compromise between the British and the Arab points of view, barring the idea of a partition. Bevin wrongly assumed that the Jews would be as reluctant as the Arabs to raise the matter at the United Nations, mostly because of Truman's hostile attitude. The main opposition, however, emerged from the Chiefs of Staff, who feared that a multilateral trusteeship would "effectively destroy [the British] strategic position in the Middle East". They further expected the Russians to use it as a vehicle to infiltrate the region. On 18 February he informed Parliament of the decision to refer the matter to the United Nations.<sup>31</sup>

The referral of the Palestine issue to the United Nations compelled the Russians to define their rather diffuse ideas. In early March the Near East Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry prepared guidelines for the special Soviet delegation to the United Nations. Appraising the course of the London Conference and the 27th World Zionist Congress in Basel (of 9 December 1946), the Committee noted that neither



side in the conflict favoured the idea of international trusteeship promoted by the Russians. They deemed it necessary to preempt the British, whom, they suspected, were "looking for new ways of enabling them to go on governing Palestine with the approval of the United Nations" rather than evacuating the region. Rather than a genuine move the referral of the issue to the United Nations was in their opinion "a very adroit diplomatic manoeuvre". Typically for Stalin at this stage, he was slow to come to grips with the emergence of the United States, rather than Britain, as Russia's mortal enemy. "Truman's efforts to carry out his own policy in the Eastern Mediterranean," as a prominent Soviet diplomat argued, "have proved to be timid, ill-timed and unsuccessful. Truman is not distinguished by far-sightedness, nor by a statesman's breadth of view. His actions reflect the habits of a minor civil servant, who is used to counting the change left over in the morning for fear that the cook might have cheated him, but who has happened to land in a high position without losing any of his habits."<sup>62</sup>

To combat the British plot, a four-point plan was adopted by the Kremlin. Its core was an unequivocal call for the termination of the British Mandate and the withdrawal of British troops from Palestine. This part of the policy had been and remained a consistent feature of Soviet policy, fluctuating only in degree since 1941. The next two points were a novelty. They were in fact tactical rather than strategic and therefore would remain fluid. For the first time the Soviet Union made a clear stand on the political future of Palestine and the Jewish question, to which it hoped to harness the support of the United States and perhaps Britain. They advocated the creation of "a single, independent and democratic Palestine" whose citizens would "enjoy equal national and democratic rights". They opposed immigration of Jews to Palestine, assuming that the Jewish problem could be best solved through the democratization of Europe and the eradication of the roots of Fascism. The memorandum was adopted verbatim as the Kremlin's policy, apparently seeking a common denominator with the Americans while displaying a marked indifference to both the plight of the Jews and the nature of the

political settlement in Palestine. But the days of the memorandum were numbered. The four points already reflected ambiguities and uneasiness concerning the role of the Powers and the United Nations, characterizing the transition from the spirit of the Grand Alliance to the Cold War, about to erupt in full force.<sup>33</sup>

While many would argue that Churchill's Fulton "iron curtain" speech was the first shot fired in the Cold War, it is more likely to have been Truman's speech to the Congress on 12 March. His aim was to raise financial aid for the Greek and the Turkish governments, ostensibly under threat. Though the Soviet Union was not mentioned by name, it was clear that the real target of Truman's speech was communist subversion. The idea of a global defence against Soviet expansionism was taking shape. "The language of power and force," Truman argued, "was the only discourse Soviet leaders understood and responded to." It took Stalin another month to digest the implications of the speech, as he was still driven by a perspective of cooperation with the West.<sup>34</sup>

Gromyko entered the preliminary procedural meetings of the United Nations armed with the March guidelines. However, the debate on the the formation of the Special Committee of Enquiry on Palestine reinforced the Soviet suspicion a collusion between the United States and Great Britain, in an attempt to join forces in preventing an elaborate discussion of the essence of the Palestine question. He gained a strong impression that both countries were employing delaying tactics. The work of the Committee would provide them with sufficient time to "reach an amicable agreement between themselves about the fate of Palestine, and they would try to reconcile the initial positions which they had held prior to UN analysis of the Palestine question". Truman's containment policy was now examined in Moscow against the background of developments in New York. The Russians may well have also been influenced by the serious deterioration in the domestic situation in Palestine between February and July 1947, when terror gained the upper hand.

On 28 April, the day on which the Special Session of the General Assembly convened, Gromyko received a new directive which entirely reversed the earlier one. He was suddenly asked to change the line and emphasize the "unparalleled disaster and suffering" inflicted on the Jewish people during the war. This was merely a prelude to a dramatic change in the Soviet attitude towards the solution on the ground. While the urge to terminate the Mandate remained the axis on which Soviet policy rotated, Gromyko was instructed to "consider various projects for meeting Jewish needs, bearing in mind two possible alternatives: the first was the creation of a dual Arab-Jewish state with equal rights for Jews and Arabs". The other, questioning the viability of the first, suggested that if Jewish-Arab relations deteriorated, a proposal should be put forward in support of "the partition of Palestine into two independent states - Jewish and Arab". But a subsequent telegram from Molotov explained that the first proposal of a dual state was merely motivated by "tactical considerations". Molotov wished to avoid the inevitable impression that Russia was now taking the initiative in the creation of a Jewish state, though that option, as he explained, "better conveys our position". Gromyko was further asked to press for a hasty transfer of the 100,000 DPs into Palestine. Obviously conceived to be a Trojan horse. The suspicion of Anglo-American collusion was further reinforced when George Marshall briefed the press on 6 May. In reply to a question whether the United States had a clear position on the Palestine issue, Marshall said that the question would not arise until Palestine was included in the system of UN trusteeship. But he inflamed already mounting Soviet suspicions when he saw fit to add that the transference of a League of Nations mandate to a UN trusteeship was "a voluntary rather than automatic act".<sup>35</sup>

The change of heart is astounding. The implementation of the original agenda would not only have dealt a death-blow to Jewish aspirations, but would have changed entirely the history of the Middle East. Gromyko's speech on 14 May should be read in the light of

these revelations. The Russians had succeeded in referring the Palestine issue to the United Nations and in forging an effective coalition against the continued British presence in Palestine. The political programme for Palestine which advocated partition was surely part of the scheme, creating the favourable conditions for a hasty withdrawal of the British from Palestine. The Soviet coup took all the participants by surprise. The British and Americans believed that advocating partition was only a Soviet device to ensure the creation of a dual state. The Jewish Agency, unaware of the catastrophe it had avoided, took the credit for the change, attributing it to their meticulous preparatory work. But to the delegates in the United States, it was obvious that the change was a result of a "coincidence of interest and attitude". In Stalin's impressive arsenal of realpolitik manoeuvres, placing Russian interests above all, support of the Jewish State was neither the first nor the last marriage of convenience.<sup>36</sup>

The Marshall Plan, or the European Recovery Program, announced by US Secretary of State General George Marshall in a speech at Harvard on 5 June, was, from the Russian point of view, a confirmation of the soundness of their policy. The initial Russian reaction was ambiguous. They were naturally tempted by the economic incentives offered by the States, which theoretically did not exclude Russia. But it shortly became clear that the plan aimed at restoring the European economy in order to forestall communist subversion in the Continent. The Paris conference of the Foreign Ministers in July convinced Stalin, as Molotov stated on 2 July, that the plan was aimed at dividing Europe and that peacetime alliance was no longer an option.<sup>37</sup>

The impression gained in Moscow, preceding the General Assembly in the autumn, was that the British, aided by the Arabs, had done everything possible to "hinder the work of the committee and diminish its authority". They entrenched themselves even deeper in their support for the partition plan.<sup>38</sup> In their now amicable communications with the

delegates of the Jewish Agency, the Russians openly admitted that "it was as much in Russia's interest as in our own that we achieve independence in Palestine".<sup>39</sup>

It thus emerges that the die had already been cast in May 1947. The dramatic vote of 29 November would certainly not have taken place if the Russians had not made their dramatic *volte-face* in the spring. It was left to Creech-Jones, the British Colonial Secretary, now isolated, to inform the UN General Assembly on 26 September of the British decision to withdraw their forces from Palestine. He repeated that statement on 16 October, after the Americans and Russians had come out in favour of the solution. The brilliant Russian move made both the Americans and the British take a back seat.<sup>40</sup> The prime incentive for the Russians was to see an immediate end to the Mandate and to the presence of British troops there. And yet, though the driving force behind Stalin's policy was expediency, transient opportunities and Russian national interests, there are abundant signs that the switch was viewed as heralding a long-term association with the new Jewish State. Before the final meeting of the General Assembly, Vyshinskii, who now joined the delegation, was instructed from Moscow, in unequivocal terms, that "to consult the Jewish opinion on all important questions concerning Palestine. In particular, this must be done on the matter of Jerusalem, for which it will be necessary to introduce a special statute which will safeguard the interests of the three religions." The effective preparatory work done by the leaders of the Yishuv in the preceding five years, to convince the Russians of the viability and strength of the emerging state, not to mention its socialist leaning, now bore fruit. Vyshinskii was told not to "be alarmed by a large minority of Arabs in the Jewish state, provided that it is less than 50 per cent. This situation will not threaten the existence of an independent Jewish state, since the Jewish element in the state will inevitably increase."<sup>41</sup>

Stalin was an unscrupulous but rational *real-politician* whose policies served well-defined geopolitical interests. His support for Israel in 1947-48 was a direct outcome of

the exigencies of the ongoing Cold War, rather than reflecting concern for the plight of European Jewry in the Second World War. This was absolutely clear to the Zionist leadership from the outset. The reality of the divisions into two camps, and the circumstances which led to the creation of a state positioned on such a crucial strategic crossroads, meant that Ben-Gurion's hopes of adhering to a non-aligned position was unrealistic. A couple of weeks prior to the vote, a leading member of the delegation of the Jewish Agency was summoned to Dean Rusk, the director of the United Nations section of the State Department, and future Secretary of State. Rusk, who during the war had served as a Colonel on Marshall's staff, received him in the Foreign Secretary's suite of his New York hotel. He warned the Jewish Agency in unequivocal terms, for their "own good", to:

*... avoid any appearance of a tie-up with Russia. People were puzzled by Russia's stand in favour of partition; by the novelty of what seemed to be a pro-Zionist policy. Now there was this talk behind the scenes of Jewish displaced persons gathering at Constanza in the Black Sea and sailing for Palestine from the Russian zone - a circumstance we ourselves might regard as reflecting a humanitarian attitude by the USSR, but which others might interpret as a Great Power manoeuvre, in which the displaced persons were pawns, to embarrass the Anglo-American grouping. Mr. Rusk advised us to look into the effect on the United States and the western world of any special link being attributed to the Zionists and the Soviet Union.<sup>42</sup>*

Gromyko's speech in October paled in comparison to his speech in May. The foregone conclusion allowed the Russians to maintain a relatively low profile in the conflict. For Gromyko it was far more important to emphasize the recognition of Russia's position as

a major power whose voice had to be heard in any major international arena. He went out of his way to emphasize that Russia did not have any "direct material or other interests in Palestine", but was "interested in the question of Palestine because it [was] a member of the United Nations and because it [was] a Great Power that bears, just as do other great powers, a special responsibility for the maintenance of international peace."<sup>43</sup>

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is an outcome of the joint publication of the Russian and Israeli Foreign Ministries of the documents related to relations between the two countries edited by G. Gorodetsky, J. Freundlich, D. Yaroshevky, Y. Ro'i, Stegny *et.al.*, *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 1941-1953* (2 vols.)(Cass, London, 2000) (998 pp.). Y. Ro'i, "Soviet contacts with the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine and with Zionist Leaders, June 1941-February 1945", *Shalem*, No. 1, p. 527 (in Hebrew)

<sup>2</sup>Y. Ro'i, "The USSR and the Middle East: The Case of Palestine in World War II", *Cahier du monde russe et soviétique*, vol. 15, no. 3-4 (July-Dec. 1974), p. 375

<sup>3</sup>J. Hen-Tov, "Contacts between Soviet Ambassador Maisky and Zionist Leaders during World War II", *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1978), pp. 46-47

<sup>4</sup>S. Redlich, *War, Holocaust and Stalinism* (London, 1995), p. 21

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 22-28 and 87.

<sup>6</sup>Archives of the Russian Foreign Ministry (hereafter AVP), F.07, OP.4, P.29, D.30, LL.2-5, A. Lozovskii to V.M. Molotov, 22 May 1943.

<sup>7</sup>See G. Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (Yale, 1999).

<sup>8</sup>The Central Zionist Archives (hereafter, CZA) J89/26 and N. Goldmann (Washington) to the Jewish Agency, Sept. 1940.

<sup>9</sup>Weizmann's version in Weizmann Archives, and Maiskii's in AVP RF, F.017A, OP.1, P.2, D.8, LL.17-19.

<sup>10</sup>AVP RF, F.059, OP.1, P.352, D.2404, LL.158-9, I. Maiskii to V. Molotov, 2 Sept 1941.

<sup>11</sup>Ben-Gurion Archives, Record of a meeting with Maiskii, 9 Oct 1941.

<sup>12</sup>AVP RF, F.0118, OP.4, P.3, D.1, LL.2-3, S. Kavtaradze, head of the Russian Middle Eastern Department, to Deputy Foreign Minister A.Ia. Vyshinskii, 31 Dec 1941 and 25 Jan 1942, and CZA S25/486, Epstein to M. Shertok.



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<sup>13</sup>Weizmann Archives, Weizmann to Maiskii, and AVP RF, F.0129, OP.26, P.2, D.143, L., Litvinov on meeting with Weizmann, 2 Mar 1942.

<sup>14</sup>CZA J89/125, Excerpts from the Diary of I. Ben-Zvi, Chairman of the Jewish National Council (Va'ad Leumi), 31 Aug 1942.

<sup>15</sup>CZA A245/507, Report by N. Goldmann on meeting with M. Litvinov, 24 Mar 1943.

<sup>16</sup>CZA Z6/2262, Report of a meeting between N. Goldmann and A. Gromyko, 23 Sept 1943.

<sup>17</sup>Weizmann Archives, and *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, Ser. A. Vol. XXI, p. 39, Meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive (in London), 14 Sept 1943.

<sup>18</sup>Unfortunately not found so far in the archives. CZA S100/40, Ben-Gurion's Report to the Meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive, and Ben-Gurion to Maiskii, 21 Dec; AVP RF, F.017, OP.1, P.4, D.39, LL.58\_9 (8 Aug); AVP RF, F.0118, OP.7, P.4, D.4, L.1, A. Sultanov's report on a meeting with M. Shertok in Cairo, 4 October 1943.

<sup>19</sup>Roi, p. 53.

<sup>20</sup>Y. Roi, *Soviet Decision Making in Practice*, pp. 22-3.

<sup>21</sup>Musa Abu-Ali, speaking on behalf of the newly founded Arab League with the Soviet representatives in Cairo, was unwittingly reinforcing Moscow's impression of the military and numerical might of the Yishuv. He further elaborated on the disunity in the Arab camp, which cast doubt on their ability to challenge the Jews in Palestine. AVP RF, F.0118, OP.7, P.3, D.2, LL.1-4, A.F. Sultanov to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 11 Oct 1944.

<sup>22</sup>On this see CZA: Z6/2253, Report on Goldmann's meeting with K. Umanskii, 15 Aug 1944.

<sup>23</sup>AVP RF, F.0118, OP.7, P.4, D.5, LL.26-28, and AVP RF, F.012, OP.6, P.81, D.177, LL.1-6, I.V. Samylovskii (director of the Near East Department) and A.D. Shchiborin (the Minister in Egypt) to V.G. Dekanozov, 25 November 1944.

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<sup>24</sup>AVP RF, F.07, OP.12A, P.42, D.6, LL.29-38, Litvinov's Memorandum of the Commission for Preparation of Peace Agreements and Postwar Settlement, 27 July 1945. Y. Roi, *Soviet Decision Making in Practice*, pp. 374-5 and 386-7 mistakenly assumes that the Russians wished to exploit the opportunities provided by the war to ensure their incursion into the Mediterranean. Their objective was actually confined to the definition of sphere of influence, ensuring their control of the Black Sea region and therefore remained pretty much indifferent to the courting of the Jewish leadership in Palestine. It would likewise be a mistake to assume that the Russians were seeking reconciliation between the Arabs and the Jews anticipating the ultimate struggle with British imperialism "from the long-term standpoint of a Soviet penetration into the Middle East, a feeler in the search for the weak points of the imperialist system".

<sup>25</sup>AVP RF, F.05, P.173, OP.3, D.5, L.7, Minutes of the Meeting of the Commission for Preparation of Peace Agreements and Postwar Settlement, 15 November 1945. CZA S25\486 and AVP RF, F.0118, OP.2, P.2, D.6, LL.6-10, Solod to Samylovskii, 3 Jan, Eisenstadt, Jewish Agency's representative in Cairo to Shertok, on meeting Russian representatives, 1 Jan 1946.

<sup>26</sup>Y. Roi, *Soviet Decision Making in Practice*, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup>AVP RF, F.06, OP.8, P.42, D.694, LL.1-4, and F.0118, OP.2, P.2, D.7, LL.9\_11, Memorandum by M.A. Maksimov and a memorandum to Dekanozov, 15 May 1946. The Russians certainly followed with grave concern Churchill's objections in the House of Commons, in July 1946, to a British withdrawal from Palestine which was a "jumping-off ground" protecting the canal zone. M. Cohen, *Palestine and the Great Powers*, pp. 132-3.

<sup>28</sup>M. Cohen, *Palestine and the Great Powers*, p. 198-9.

<sup>29</sup>David R. Wahl, the Washington secretary of the American Jewish Conference, who had been directly involved in the campaign to settle the DPs, noted that "it was the cooperation of the Soviet government in repatriating many thousands of Polish Jews which made it possible to build up the Jewish DP population now in Germany from 70,000 at war's end, to almost a quarter of a million at the present time, and certainly no one will gain say that it is the pressure of this large Jewish DP population which is of inestimable value to the Zionist cause with respect to increasing immigration to Palestine and building

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towards a Jewish majority in Palestine." Even if humanitarian considerations were indeed behind Soviet policy, the documents clearly show that overlooking the activities of the Zionists who organized the "brikha" (mass migration) from regions under Soviet rule to those controlled by the Americans was not accidental. ISA 93.03\2268\16., D.R. Wahl to A.H. Silver, 15 May 1947.

<sup>30</sup>CZA S25/485, E. Sasson (Jerusalem) to E. Epstein (Washington), 28 June 1946. On Ben-Gurion's support of this position see M. Cohen, *Palestine and the Great Powers*, p. 139.

<sup>31</sup>M. Cohen, *Palestine and the Great Powers*, pp. 217-8 and 222-4.

<sup>32</sup>AVP RF F.0118, OP.2, P.2, D.8, LL.107-9, Memorandum by M.A. Maksimov, on "A possible position for the USSR in discussion of the Palestine question at the United Nations", 12 April. See also B.E. Shtein to A.Ia. Vyshinskii (Moscow), F.07, OP.12A, P.42, D.6, LL.134-41. On Truman see I.V. Samylovskii to D.S. Solod (Beirut) AVP RF, F.0118, OP.2, P.2, D.8, LL.15\_26, and F.0118, OP.2, P.2, D.8, LL.104\_5, exchange between D.S. Solod and I.V. Samylovskii, 17 December 1946 and 26 March 1947.

<sup>33</sup>AVP RF, F.07, OP.12A, P.42, D.6, LL.130-3, "The Palestine Question (October 1946-1947)", a memorandum by M.A. Maksimov, deputy director of the Near East Department, and S. Nemchinov of the same department, to A.Ia. Vyshinskii, 5 Mar 1947.

<sup>34</sup>G. Roberts, *The Soviet Union in World Politics*, p. 22.

<sup>35</sup>AVP RF, F.018, OP.9, P.17, D.77, LL.25-8, memorandum by A. Timofeev on the Palestine Question, 23 Oct; F.059, OP.18, P.17, D.116, L.109, Molotov to Vyshinskii, 30 Sept and F.0118, OP.10, P.5, D.3. LL.1-8, N.I. Bakulin to I.Ia. Vyshinskii, 30 July 1947.

<sup>36</sup>CZA S53/12C, Circular of the Mapai Central Committee to its Emissaries Abroad, 29 May, and ISA 93.03\2268\16., D.R. Wahl to A.H. Silver, 15 May 1947. A new translation of the speech is in Israeli and Russian Foreign Ministries, *Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 1940-1967* (London, 2000), vol. I, pp. 189-92.

<sup>37</sup>G. Roberts, *The Soviet Union in World Politics*, pp. 22-3, 5 June 1947.

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<sup>38</sup>AVP RF, F.0118, OP.10, P.5, D.3. LL.1-8 and OP.10, P.5, D.3, LL.9-14, Memorandum by N.I. Bakulin (head of the Near East Department) to I.Ia. Vyshinskii, "The Upcoming Discussion of the Palestine Question at the General Assembly Session in September 1947", 30 July 1947.

<sup>39</sup>ISA 93.02/172/18 and 93.03/92/35, E. Epstein to the Executive of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, conversation with Mr. Mikhail Vavilov, first secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Washington and with S.K. Tsarapkin, 11 and 19 September 1947.

<sup>40</sup>M. Cohen, *Palestine and the Great Powers*, pp. 276-9.

<sup>41</sup>AVP RF, F.018, OP.9, P.17, D.77, LL.25-8 and F.06, OP.9, P.22, D.267, LL.12-13, Memorandum by A. Timofeev, on the Palestine Question, and V.M. Molotov to I.V. Stalin, 23 Oct, and 26 Oct 1947 (respectively).

<sup>42</sup>ISA 93.03/93/6, L. Gelber to the Executive of the Jewish Agency, 5 Nov 1947.

<sup>43</sup>*Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations*, pp. 242-7. Prof. Y. Roi, in his classic work *Soviet Decision Making in Practice*, p. 97, gave a perfect sense of the Russian objectives long before the archival material was available, though he could not possibly reconstruct the policy-making process.