5 Assistance from the Soviet Bloc to the Warring Parties in Palestine

THE USSR’S MIDDLE EAST POLICY AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In the ‘Big Three’ summit meetings of the Second World War, Churchill and Roosevelt agreed to various territorial and statutory concessions requested by Stalin. In return Stalin recognized the Middle East (he even mentioned Palestine) as within Britain’s sphere of influence. But the dynamics of the Cold War which followed undermined these agreements. The shock in Western democracies at the way in which Communist dictatorial regimes were enforced by the USSR in East Europe, Soviet attempts to plant satellite ‘republics’ in Northern Iran, together with Soviet demands for territorial and statutory concessions from Turkey and involvement in Communist insurgence in Greece, all helped turn the Middle East into the first theatre of the Cold War. When early in 1947 the British exchequer was unable to support the British exertion to contain the Soviets in Iran, Turkey and Greece alone, the United States, which earlier acted firmly to force the Soviet withdrawal from Iran, came to Britain’s aid by launching the Truman Doctrine of March 1947. From the Soviet angle, however, these acts looked like a threat to the USSR defences at her soft underbelly. Moscow reacted with an ever-more aggressive strategy, verbally anyway, aimed at undermining the British position in the Middle East from within. One means of attaining such a goal was to support peoples and groups which tried to get rid of the British rule.

One arena in which the Soviets ran these campaigns was the UN. Having been themselves forced by the Security Council, early in 1946, to pull out of Iran, the Soviets took revenge at the same forum and enhanced the evacuation of the British and French troops from Syria and Lebanon shortly afterwards. In May 1947, the USSR delegation tried to persuade the special UN Assembly to vote for the immediate termination of the British mandate in Palestine and on the occasion Gromyko read an astonishing speech in which he recognized the Jewish...
right for an independent state in Palestine, alongside a Palestinian Arab state. In August, the USSR supported the Egyptian case against Britain at the Security Council and during the Palestine debate at the regular Assembly in the autumn, the Soviets turned champions of the partition of Palestine. In committee, they even resorted to cooperation with the USA, in order to push the partition resolution through. In this part of the world they generally viewed the UN as a useful tool to serve their ends and were careful not to block the work of the Security Council on Middle Eastern matters. They never cast their veto on any issue pertaining to Palestine, up until March 1954, except once, on the entrance of Transjordan into the UN.

THE USSR AND THE PALESTINE QUESTION UNTIL 1948

In 1948, Soviet influence on Middle East politics was meagre. There was a general suspicion and estrangement towards Communism amongst the ordinary people of the Arab world, and local Communist parties were small and, in most countries, illegal. Soviet diplomatic representation was almost a disgrace for a superpower: the USSR had only three legations in Arab capitals, Cairo, Beirut and Baghdad, all served by small staff and low-ranking officials. In the mandatory Palestine too, the Communist party was legalized only in 1942 and Soviet influence was small, both in the Arab and the Jewish sectors. And although the prestige of the USSR in the Yishuv was in the ascent during the last part of World War II, due to the Red Army's role in defeating Nazism, the large majority of the public, including that which espoused Socialist ideas, rejected the Soviet 'Revolutionary' version. Even most Marxist-minded members of the Yishuv, kept away from the Communist Party. At the beginning of 1948, various Zionist-Marxist factions amalgamated into the United Labour Party, Mapam, which in fact regarded itself 'part of the World of Revolution'. But Mapam continued to lament 'the tragic contradiction', whereby the USSR refused to recognize Zionism as 'the true Jewish national movement self-determination'. The Soviet position following Gromyko's statement of May 1947 was hoped by Mapam to be the beginning of the removal of that 'tragic contradiction', but this is not how the Soviets viewed it. For them the establishment of a Jewish state had been merely an opportunistic, tactical manoeuvre. Mapam was nothing but an embarrassing ally. It is doubtful that they ever contemplated taking