

CHAPTER 1

## Historiography as Investigative Journalism

The truth of anything at all doesn't lie in someone's account of it. It lies in all the small facts of the time.

— JOSEPHINE TEY, *THE DAUGHTER OF TIME*

THE RESEARCH THAT RESULTED in this book has produced, against our own expectations, a challenge to the predominant views—in Israel, the United States, and the West—regarding the genesis and conduct of an event that has shaped subsequent history in the Middle East. Israel's lightning triumph, in the Six-Day War of June 1967, against the combined forces of its Arab neighbors redrew both the map and the international lineup in a regional clash that has figured constantly and often centrally on the global scene. It led, on one hand, to a series of further wars, and on the other to a succession of more or less successful peace agreements.

It established Israel, until then a neighborhood underdog of dubious viability, as a permanent presence with the sometimes inflated reputation and self-esteem of a regional power, and saddled it with the increasingly pernicious burden of occupation just as it crowned the achievement of restoring the historical Jewish homeland. It accelerated the emergence of the Palestinians as a separate Arab national identity, and propelled them into the forefront of a new genre of warfare that was to change the character of armed conflict worldwide, while creating the basis for its religious and ideological rationale. In sum, this brief and limited war took its place among the defining watersheds of the 20th century, alongside such immensely larger and longer developments as two world wars.

And yet, although the Six-Day War's consequences have been uni-

versally appreciated, its own character and origins—as we discovered—remained largely mysterious, and to the extent that they were explained, a major if not dominant factor was excluded or minimized. The crisis of May 1967 and the war that it sparked have been portrayed as primarily a local conflict, in which the parties were backed but also restrained, in a fairly symmetrical way, by their superpower patrons—the rival principals in the Cold War—which while jockeying for advantage in various arenas made sure not to let these frictions unleash a direct clash between them that might touch off a nuclear cataclysm. It was this basic assumption that we unexpectedly found ourselves disputing, on the basis of evidence that was hitherto unknown or disregarded.

We fell into this role of historical revisionists like Alice into her rabbit hole. In the course of our journalistic work in 1999, a routine scan of media from the former Soviet Union turned up a curious item of more than topical interest. In a Ukrainian daily, a former Soviet naval officer related how, on the first day of the Six-Day War in June 1967, on board a frigate in the eastern Mediterranean, he was ordered to prepare and lead a 30-man “volunteer” force for a landing on the Israeli coast. He went on to describe how the operation was repeatedly postponed until, on the war’s last day, it was activated—only to be aborted as the ship approached its destination.<sup>1</sup>

We looked at each other in disbelief, which grew as we consulted the authoritative historical works on the period. Not only, as Isabella’s editors at Israel’s newspaper *Haaretz* told her, had “none of our experts ever heard about this”; the suggestion that Moscow intended to intervene in the war seemed patently preposterous. According to accepted wisdom, although the Soviet Union did trigger the crisis by making false accusations that Israel was massing troops to attack Syria, Moscow then acted to contain the conflict and to prevent war; when hostilities did break out, the USSR cooperated with the United States to end them. The conventional narrative held that the Soviet leadership, scarred by its setback in the Cuban missile adventure and moving toward détente, had by 1967 evolved a cautious and responsible foreign policy. Although it was still competing with Washington for influence worldwide and in the Middle East, risking a head-on clash between the nuclear superpowers was out of the question, no matter how high the regional stakes.

Our journalistic instincts—as well as our personal memories of the

Six-Day War—dictated that this clue for such a radically different interpretation of our Middle Eastern generation's defining event had to be thoroughly investigated. Still, the first obstacle that Captain Yuri Khripunkov's account had to overcome was our own skepticism. We fully anticipated that a brief check would discredit both the source and the story, which we could then consign to our already brimming wastebasket of false leads.

Instead, our inquiry soon established that the narrator of this extraordinary version was eminently respectable and reliable. On the other hand, there were no hard facts documented in Israel or the West that could disprove his claim. We contacted Captain Khripunkov, now an educator and public figure in Ukraine, and held several long interviews, in which he insisted on his version and confirmed extensive further details—such as the target of his putative raid, the port of Haifa. He gained our trust in his veracity, and led us to take up the challenge that his disclosure embodied to Western historiographic orthodoxy.

The ongoing research project that resulted from this initially random discovery has changed and filled our lives. Its pace and directions have almost always been determined by the unpredictable input of source material. It began in the closing phase of Russian president Boris Yeltsin's heyday, when Soviet archives supposedly became accessible—a process that has been gradually reversed under Vladimir Putin, to the extent that it ever occurred. Despite clichés about “newly opened Soviet archives,” the most significant documentation is still under lock and key. We were told privately by a former Soviet middle-rank official that “as long as the Israeli-Arab conflict is unresolved, the relevant documents will remain in the operational file”—that is, classified.

But even when and if such papers are released, they are most likely to be inadequate and even largely unreliable. Their problematic character is illustrated by a recently published anecdote, which relates to an area that is also central to this study: nuclear weapons. In 1961, two young officials were charged by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko with drafting a memorandum to the Communist Party's Central Committee to demonstrate the necessity of resuming nuclear tests, which—the weapons designers claimed—was essential for developing new missile warheads.

The young diplomats decided . . . to base the memorandum . . . on those submitted by two ministers. . . . They . . . stressed that

the USSR had developed new and effective types of nuclear arms, which urgently needed testing. . . .

Gromyko was really livid. . . . “What were you thinking when you wrote this?!” he shrieked. . . . “This is a his-to-ri-cal docu-ment! Thirty years will elapse, the archive will be opened, histo-rians will come there, and what will they read? That it was the USSR which initiated the arms race? That it violated the mora-torium and restarted nuclear tests?” . . . And he began to dictate: “Write that . . . the American imperialists are secretly prepar-ing a series of high-powered nuclear tests . . . and afterwards state that in view of these facts, the Soviet government consid-ers that it is compelled to take the necessary measures. . . . That’s how it should be written!”<sup>2</sup>

Gromyko’s outburst might well be kept in mind by anyone tending to attribute exclusive or unconditional veracity to Soviet—or other—archival material. Besides the reminder that even in-house papers must be discounted for propaganda, it illustrates another frequent character-istic of such documents: What they impute to the adversary is often a mir-ror image of the writers’ own intentions or deeds. While this falls short of constituting positive evidence, it can be a valuable clue in which di-rection to look.

Where operational instructions are concerned, we also found that the accounts of numerous Soviet participants refer to orders that were transmitted only orally down the chain of command. It is entirely pos-sible that few corresponding documents ever existed, as even the last So-viet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, learned when he tried in vain to find the formal resolution to invade Afghanistan, which was adopted less than a decade before he took office.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, such documentation that does exist may have been de-signed to conceal or distort the facts rather than to record them. The de-cisions to make the most crucial moves may never have been recorded in the first place, or the documents may be suppressed indefinitely—not to mention the option of falsifying them at creation or upon release. This book offers a series of examples of such attempts, in the United States and Israel as well as the Soviet Union.

Therefore, the lack of official papers about the Soviet role must not

prevent a serious though cautious effort to establish the facts. One thing that we have learned in this study is that an inflexible requirement for archival documents as the sole, or even the main, fount of truth implies that entire chapters can quite easily be excised from history. Absence or paucity of archival evidence cannot be posited as eliminating any scenario; conversely, when such evidence does exist, it must be treated as critically as any other type. As a rule, for example, marginal or passing statements made in such documents are more trustworthy than the writers' main thrust. When the subject of study has been carefully and systematically covered up, no detailed, explicit expositions are to be expected, but rather a haphazard scattering of bits and pieces, often as incidental phrases in otherwise tedious texts.

In retrospect, we really should not have been as astonished as we were to find out, as we traced the trail of footnotes from one publication to its predecessor, how limited a foundation of sources served to erect the entire edifice of conventional historiography on the Soviet role in the Six-Day War. With little factual evidence available, histories of Soviet action in the Middle East had to be largely deduced from supposed policy principles—that is, *a priori*, from the top down. As a leading authority in the field, James Hershberg, recently put it: “For decades during the Cold War, scholars of Soviet policy toward the [1967] war were reduced to the equivalent of reading tea leaves from propagandistic *Pravda* articles and turgid communiqués, and distilling more delectable but sometimes dubious press leaks and defector exposés.”<sup>4</sup>

The best of the early writers on the subject, working at the height of the Cold War, honestly hedged nearly every statement with such caveats as “it appears that . . .” or “it cannot be ruled out that . . .” But when quoted and re-quoted in subsequent studies, the modalities were gradually dropped, and reasonable speculation based on available evidence became established and unassailable fact—although the evidence by this stage consisted largely, besides the aforementioned contemporary propaganda statements, of memoirs by political leaders and other obviously interested actors (such as the ubiquitously quoted Mohammed Hassanein Heikal, whom we frequently “caught” in outright falsehoods). This did not prevent our own method from being decried as unreliable when it leaned on numerous, cross-checked memoirs of the actual participants in military moves and diplomatic contacts, as well as on newly released documents

where possible—and, sometimes, on long-known but neglected evidence that did not conform with the prevailing concept.

Given this background, we soon gave up on reconstructing the theoretical framework of genuine—as opposed to declared—Soviet policy, in the Middle East and elsewhere. This meant abandoning any new attempt to extrapolate—as previous studies did—what the USSR *did* from what it purportedly *intended*. Instead, we resorted to a “bottom-up” approach: assembling as much detail as newly emerging sources could provide about the actual Soviet operations on the ground, in order to piece together from them the full operational plan, and leaving subsequent scholarship to reconstruct the policy goals. The eye-witness accounts that we have compiled revealed an astonishing number of facts that were previously unknown—not least because the corresponding Israeli and American documents, while perhaps somewhat more trustworthy than the Soviet ones, are hardly more accessible.

The result is thus emphatically not a systematic codification of Soviet policy or strategy. Rather, we view our role as that of rank-and-file look-outs returning from a front-line patrol with their observations of enemy troop movements. It is the generals’ task to process these reports into a constantly evolving overview. Military experience can teach historians what risks they assume in rejecting factual reports that contradict their theoretical concept, as one academic colleague did when he dismissed our findings: “We *know* what Soviet policy was, and your allegations don’t fit in, so they can’t be true.”

Likewise, this book makes no pretense at chronicling the entire crisis and war of May–June 1967. On the contrary, it attempts to glean the numerous cases in which Soviet involvement was manifested, so that they can be assembled into a unifying framework and timeline, instead of merely being mentioned sporadically and lost in the multitude of other detail—as they were in previous histories. One result is, for instance, that the Jordanian front is dealt with only tangentially, as Soviet involvement there was minimal. This does not mean that we attach exclusive significance to the Soviet element in causing or conducting the war; it undoubtedly combined with a range of other factors. What we seek to address is the underestimation of the USSR’s role that has resulted from treating all these Soviet-related incidents as discrete and minor, rather than systematic and cumulatively decisive.

Although the events dealt with here have had lasting impact on the region and the world, we would like to stress that this study has no present-day political agenda. As a reviewer of our first paper observed, it does demonstrate that 21st-century nostalgia for the supposed stability of the Cold War is largely illusory; that the Cold War's main actors were nowhere as knowledgeable, rational, and responsible as they seemed to be; and that the world escaped a catastrophic confrontation between them more often than the few occasions when this was widely recognized.<sup>5</sup> Some American scholars tend to dismiss our findings as a Soviet-school conspiracy theory, and we know that in the States, ineptitude theories are the default option. But after many years of debate between the Soviet- and American-trained halves of our family team, it dawned on us that the Soviet role in the Six-Day War is a prime example of the two approaches' convergence: an inept conspiracy.

In view of the threat as we have reconstructed it, not only to Israel but to American interests and influence, contemplation of Washington's performance in 1967 was not reassuring in terms of US capabilities. In that case, the botched Soviet-Arab plan, combined with a uniquely bold and successful Israeli strike, fortunately made up for the United States' belated and uninformed though aptly intuitive response. But the present American predicament in Iraq has again exposed the same pitfalls that US policy then narrowly escaped: faulty intelligence further slanted by political bias and weakened by bureaucratic delay and rivalry, as well as failure to allow for the adversary's different outlook and mentality, and preoccupation with a single arena to the exclusion of other foreign concerns.

On the Middle Eastern level, our work does confirm that the Six-Day War was definitely not premeditated by Israel for expansionist purposes. Rather, it resulted from a successful Soviet-Arab attempt to provoke Israel into a preemptive strike. Whether and how this should affect a regional settlement, or Israeli policy 40 years later, is a matter of interpretation based on political outlook, and is beyond the scope of this book—although proponents of all views are invited to test them against the factual findings here presented. The issues that may call for such reevaluation include a series of questions central to Israel's self-understanding and present posture.

One of these relates to Israel's nuclear stance, which was fixed shortly before the 1967 crisis and created—as we conclude—a major factor for

the outbreak of the Six-Day War, and was then put to its first test. Has it since proved its efficacy as the ultimate guarantee of the state's survival, and have its benefits justified the political and economic price? Is nuclear deterrence still viable, now that it has met with a potential counter from a fanatic regional adversary like Iran, which is ostensibly motivated by such implacable religious hostility that it might disregard the consequences to its own people of obliterating Israel? Or, conversely, has Israel's nuclear deterrence now become essential by reducing an imminent existential threat to a manageable balance of terror with an extreme but rational enemy—in which case the alarm about the Iranian menace is being exaggerated? And would Iran—as well as other Middle Eastern actors, with which, taken together, Israel might be hard put to maintain such a balance—have sought to wield their own nuclear clout if Israel had not done so first?

The latter question connects with another issue that is brought to the fore by the character of the Six-Day War as we explored it: Assuming even the best foreseeable prospects for peace, can Israel's security be assured without binding safeguards from a global power or powers, especially so long as some other power or powers may support a hostile challenge? If not, what concessions that may be demanded in return by the guarantor can and should Israel consider, even beyond those that may be dictated by its own enlightened self-interest?

As Israel's "enlightened self-interest" refers to the future accommodation with the Palestinians, the latter question again leads to an entire and complex set of issues. Our study found that the Palestinians, while providing a pretext for the other parties to act against Israel, played at most an irritant role in causing the Six-Day War. The war's results, however—the Israeli military occupation of a disenfranchised Palestinian population, in borders that Israel itself did not claim as permanent, and the Palestinians' resort to terrorist violence—gradually put them at center stage. Do the circumstances of the war justify their paying the territorial price that historical precedent has often exacted from the initiators of aggressive wars, particularly when they were also the losers? Even if so, would insisting on this reward redound to Israel's own long-term benefit? If the war established for most of the world (as we found it did for the USSR) the 1949 armistice lines as the benchmark for a settlement, instead of the

1947 partition lines—how permanent, justified, and worthwhile is this concept?

Finally, was the USSR's role in 1967 determined by its ideology and the Cold War context, leaving room for expectation that the post-Soviet regime in Moscow may perform as complete a policy reversal toward Israel as Stalin did twice? Or does the geopolitical position of Russia, under any political system, dictate the same Middle Eastern preferences, allowing for at most a correct relationship with Israel?

While both of us have definite (and not necessarily identical) opinions on these questions, they are not logical consequences of our study, and this book is not intended to promote them. It is limited to the task, prodigious in itself, of setting straight the historical record on a hitherto neglected issue. We have frequently compared this project to a 10,000-piece jigsaw puzzle, of which we receive a random five pieces in the mail every week. After seven years of laborious sleuthing, we have pretty much completed the easier part—the frame and the most prominent features of the main image—so that we can state with fair certainty what the big picture shows. But there are large parts that still have to be put together, and others that will almost certainly need to be rearranged. This is very much a work in progress, and it is our sincere hope that response to our book, critical as it may be, will stimulate the exposure of further elements and contribute to our own evolving concept as well as the collective understanding of this milestone in history.