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RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS OF ISRAEL AND ZIONISM: A REVIEW ESSAY

Aleksandr Bovin, an established journalist and former foreign policy advisor to Leonid Brezhnev, became the first Soviet and, very soon afterwards, the first Russian ambassador to Israel since the Soviet Union reestablished diplomatic relations with Israel late in 1991. Moscow had unwisely broken formal ties with the Jewish state back in June 1967. Gorbachev appointed Bovin ambassador to Israel because he was known for his pro-Israeli sentiment even during Brezhnev's rule when the Soviet Union had strongly supported the Arab side and maintained an extremely hostile view of Zionism. Bovin's account of his work in Israel from 1991 to 1997 certainly deserves the attention of Middle East specialists. It sheds light on how the modern Russian elite perceives Israel and Zionism.

Leonid Mlechin is also a distinguished Russian journalist. His book contains materials and sensational accounts concerning Israel's famous secret service - Mossad. During the Soviet period, Soviet sources treated Mossad as an enemy. It is interesting to observe how this perception changed, at least, among some Russian circles and Russia's public opinion.

During the stagnation period (this is how Brezhnev's epoch is currently called in Russia) Bovin could not openly express his sympathies for the Jewish state. However, with glasnost' and perestroika, new foreign policy thinking also came to the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev that resulted among other important repercussions in the eventual resumption of diplomatic ties with Israel. Because of his reputation as a liberal and a person with an even-handed approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Bovin received the job of ambassador to the Jewish state.

Bovin was already familiar with the Jewish state. In 1979 he headed the delegation of Soviet public figures at the time when diplomatic relations between the two nations were cut off. Bovin provided a reader with an interest-
ing account of that visit (pp. 49-52). Now he can freely write about this episode. It sheds more light on how the Soviet authorities perceived and treated Israel at the time. The Soviet delegation had to observe the following three limitations. Members of the Soviet team were not supposed to visit the occupied territories of Gaza, the West Bank and the Golan Heights. Meetings with Soviet émigrés as well as with officials were also off limits. Nevertheless, Bovin and his colleagues violated all three restrictions. Somebody wrote a report about their “improper behavior” in Israel. Nevertheless, no punishment was meted out. “Therefore, all was fine overall” (p. 51).

In this book, Bovin also discusses the Soviet policy towards Israel during the Soviet past, providing an interesting and provocative assessment alongside earlier unavailable information. He returns to the birth of Israel in May 1948 and summarizes the reasons behind the initial Soviet support for the establishment of the Jewish State (pp. 85-91). Bovin writes that the first Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion was an adamant admirer of Lenin. He quotes Ben-Gurion’s assessment of Lenin in which the founder of Bolshevism is called a great leader who possessed courage and intellectual bravery. Mlechin adds that in the summer of 1923 Ben-Gurion visited Moscow: he represented Palestinian toilers at an international agricultural congress. “He was enamoured with Lenin and believed that communism would save the Jews from anti-Semitism” (Mlechin, p. 176). Mlechin also states that a number of Hagana’s members (Hagana was the military organization of Palestinian Jews) visited Moscow and became die-hard communists (p. 175). Bovin points out that such views supportive of socialism and of the “first state of the workers and peasants” are characteristic for many leaders of Israel during its initial period of existence. Also, Israelis who originally came from Russia played a leading role in Israeli politics. The first four Israeli Prime Ministers and first four Presidents of Israel were born in Russia (p. 90). “Stalin wanted to use these sentiments toward socialism and attachment to Russia with cynicism which was typical of him. In other words, he wanted to ‘tame’ Israel” (ibid). Stalin hoped to use Israel in the struggle against Britain and the United States. Overall, Stalin wanted massive Soviet penetration to the Middle East (p. 89). Mlechin writes in his book that the U.S. Secretary of State was informed by the American Consul in Cairo in 1947 that the leaders of the Zionist military groups Lech’i and Irgun were closely associated with the Soviet mission in Beirut. Irgun’s leader Menachem Begin received funding from the Second Secretary of the Soviet mission Evgenii Podvigin. The U.S. intelligence reported from Paris that several leaders of Lech’i received military training using funds made available for them by the Soviet Union. In May 1948, the State Department acquired information that there were no less than 8,000 former Soviet servicemen fighting in the Israeli army. Also, Mlechin points out that it was likely that demobilized Soviet military commanders of