

## CHAPTER 4

### *The Soviets Enter the Middle East*

The machinations of Soviet diplomacy in the Middle East make it abundantly clear that the Russians have serious intent in terms of permanent policy-making in that area. However, to get a truer picture of Soviet ambitions one must place USSR involvement within the context of a much broader Soviet and Russian foreign policy.

The entire history of Czarist Russia is marked by consistent efforts to find a warm-water port, particularly on the Mediterranean. The penetration of the Middle East also has stood high on the list of Soviet priorities. Only since the Geneva Conference of 1955 and, more particularly, since the Czechoslovakian-Egyptian arms deal have these ambitions been realized. As long ago as 1940 the Russians entered into secret protocol agreements with the Axis powers which stated that "The Soviet Union declares that its territorial aspirations center south of the national territory of the Soviet Union in the direction of the Indian Ocean." This in itself is but the continuation of a yet older Soviet theme in the Middle East. As far back as the First Congress of Peoples of the East some thirty-seven years ago, the Russians had already enunciated their strident theme of anticolonialism. Whereas the implementation of a policy in keeping with this approach remained relatively dormant, its eventual emergence in the form of a new Soviet imperialism has always been imminent.

The degree to which the Russians have successfully entered into an area which in the past seemed closed to them can be traced to major psychological as well as political and economic reasons. To the peoples of the Middle East, as in Asia generally, the Russians have appeared as comparatively disinterested and unselfish benefactors. In their manifold relationships with the new sovereign states of Asia the Russians have gone to great pains to indicate their desire simply to help these new peoples establish political freedom and economic viability. Time and again Russian headway was made by offering Asian nations what they desired; no direct gifts were proffered but so-called business deals almost amounted to phi-

lanthropies. Because in tendering aid and trade they have been oblivious to the rules of economics but fully aware of the rules of politics, each deal has created much good will at relatively low cost. Perhaps the most vital consideration in Soviet success has been the very absence of Russian power in the Middle East for so long a period of time. As a result, the Russians entered the arena untainted by the epithet "colonial imperialists." While the Western powers have a long history of intervention in the affairs of Arab and Asian nations and have thus built up a tremendous reservoir of ill feeling, the Soviets by comparison often appear to native nationalists as innocent and as disinterested as they claim to be. There has been also, unfortunately, an American record of offers of aid with political or military strings attached, which tended to confirm pre-existing nationalist suspicions of the United States as nothing better than a replacement for the recently ousted Western European "imperialists." The combination of these factors with those described above pertaining to the rise of Arab nationalism led to the emergence of a common goal for the Soviets and Arab nationalists in the Middle East. A simple definition of this goal would be the elimination of Western power in the Middle East and Africa.

Soviet aims can perhaps be better understood by briefly analyzing the series of steps employed to realize them. The first aim may be seen in the formulation of a policy which the Soviets hope will lead to the breakup of Western concessions in the oil fields (see pages 29-30).

The second can be stated in negative terms as the prevention of the establishment of a combined Middle Eastern-Western collaborative defense organization. By the end of 1955 this goal was achieved for all practical purposes, as we have seen. Until the recent revolt which deposed the pro-Western government, only Iraq, among the Arab countries, retained any major ties with the Western powers.

The third goal can be described as the eventual dismantling of Western military bases in the Middle East. This aim likewise seems well on the way toward realization.

The Arab attitude in regard to the fulfillment of these aims was perhaps best stated by Moscow's strongest ally in the Arab World, President Nasser of Egypt. At the conclusion of his work, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, which is in effect a prospectus for the future, he has this to say:

When my mind travels to the eighty million Moslems in Indonesia, the fifty million in China and the several other million in Malaya, Siam, and Burma and the hundred million in Pakistan, the hundred million or more in the Middle East and the forty million in Russia, as well as the other millions

in the distant parts of the world, when I visualize these millions united in one faith, I have a great consciousness of the tremendous potentialities that co-operation amongst them all can achieve: a cooperation that does not deprive them of their loyalty to their countries but which guarantees for them and their brethren a limitless power.

I now revert to the wandering role that seeks an actor to perform it. Such is the role, such are its features and such is its stage

*We and only we are impelled by our environment and are capable of performing this role* [Italics ours.]

It is doubtful that the Soviet Union is much concerned with either the national or international aspirations voiced in the above declaration. What is much more probable is that the Russians are very much interested in maintaining a constant "crisis" situation in the Middle East which would serve to embarrass and eventually dislodge Western influence. To the degree that Egypt, Syria, or others serve this purpose for Soviet foreign policy, the present Russian leadership can be expected to remain comparatively unconcerned with either the manifestoes of would-be Arabic Caesars, or for that matter with any of their local intrigues. The Egyptians seem to be aware of the Soviet attitude and quite willing to play the Soviet game so long as their own ambitions are realized at the same time. Thus we have Colonel Nasser explaining to *New York Times* correspondent Osgood Caruthers (April 1, 1956): "The Russians are very clever. They know what I want to say and they please me by saying what I want to say." Both the Russians and the Egyptians have also apparently learned that, in an era when any "minor war" might erupt into an atomic holocaust, prudential bluffing becomes a workable foreign policy. What the Russians hope to achieve is perhaps best stated by *U.S. News and World Report* (March 16, 1956):

If Russia succeeds in provoking an Arab-Israel war, a big area of strategic importance to the West is thrown into chaos. Western defense systems are broken or imperiled . . . Even if war is averted, Russia still stands to gain the regard of Arab countries as the only big power that gave them military aid . . . . Armies equipped with Soviet weapons become dependent on Soviet repairs, spare parts and ammunition. Russia thus sees a chance to infiltrate some of the very armies on which the West is relying for military support in event of war with Russia.

A specific example of how Russian and Arab nationalist demands often coincide can be seen in the demand for the nationalization of Middle Eastern oil fields. Egypt and Syria, neither one a major oil producer, were,

prior to their union, the most pro-Soviet of the Arab nations. Thus, even such acts as closing the Suez and cutting Syrian oil pipelines need not necessarily prove to be disastrous for the Western powers, since more than 80 per cent of Middle Eastern oil could be carried in tankers around the Cape of Good Hope. The Russians, therefore, have openly supported Arab demands for nationalization of the oil fields which would cut off the oil at its source. Needless to say the Soviet political support both in the United Nations and elsewhere of Egypt, Syria, and others in their attempts to eliminate Western might from the Middle East is another manifestation of this alliance (see Docs. 24, 41).

Against this background let us now examine the specific means by which the Soviets have entered the Middle Eastern scene. Their approach has been made on separate political, cultural, and economic levels. On each of these levels a relationship of friendly reciprocity has been established between the USSR, or its satellite nations, and members of the Arab bloc. For example, in terms of economic aid the following have either taken place or been promised:

1. installation of Egypt's first nuclear laboratory by the Russians;
2. construction of a new railroad in Saudi Arabia and steel plants in Egypt by the Poles;
3. purchase of Egyptian cotton by Russia, China, and Czechoslovakia (it was, in fact, the bulk purchase by Czechoslovakia of surplus Egyptian cotton which made possible the famous arms deal of 1955, see Doc. 17);
4. construction of oil refineries in Syria by the Czechs;
5. building of bridges across the Nile by the Hungarians;
6. construction work in Alexandria's harbor by the Bulgarians;
7. drilling for water in the Sudan by East Germans.

On the political level the Russians have either established or renewed relations with Yemen, Sudan, and Libya. In addition, there has been a general strengthening of the Russian diplomatic corps throughout the entire Middle East, with the moves of the Soviets being supplemented by the action of their satellites. Added to the growing number of Soviet diplomats is the veritable army of advisers and technicians on military and economic, as well as political matters. There has also been many a rumor concerning the presence of Soviet military missions, particularly in Egypt and Syria. More than one commentator has attributed the Anglo-French-Israeli attack upon Egypt in part at least to the fear of what the Soviet military technicians might achieve with the Arab armies. A further example of the great significance with which Soviet leaders now regard this

area is the public apology made by V. M. Molotov to the Twentieth Party Congress for not having paid proper attention in the past to the Middle East.

Recognizing the great susceptibility of the Arab leaders and people to public flattery, the Russians have given particular attention to the technique often referred to as "cultural exchange." Thus, at any time since the middle of 1955, the natives of Cairo and Damascus, in particular, but of other Arab lands as well, have had the opportunity of viewing ballets, soccer teams, movies, and cyclists on tour from Russia and the satellite nations. As a special treat one might even have attended the performances of the Peiping Opera Group. In addition, exhibitions and fairs were constantly being opened to the Arab public. There began, too, to appear an inordinately large number of new periodicals representing the ideology of the Soviet-Arab bloc. News reports emanating from Moscow radio and the Tass News Agency became regular features in Egypt and Syria. That the Soviets overlooked nothing in their attempt to win over mass Arab support can be seen in their wide use in all of their delegations of representatives of Moslem origin. It should be added, too, that in all of these undertakings the Soviets have readily availed themselves of the machinery of the Arab League. This in itself served to endear them to a vital element of the Arab leadership.

Much has been made here and in the public press of the Soviet inroads into Egypt. On pages 57-58 we will discuss further the 1955 arms deal. There are, however, some mitigating factors which should be considered. There is now some evidence of the existence within Egypt of groups which are fearful of the additional strain on Egypt's economy involved in military adventurism. There is also the possibility of restraint being exercised by those who have become an established bureaucracy in the new Egypt and see in Nasser's ambitions a threat to their own security. Above all, there is the historical record that when faced with a determined adversary (as, for example, Adenauer's inflexible policy of continuing war reparations to Israel, or Sudan's stubborn stand against merger with Egypt), Nasser has shown himself both reasonable and flexible.

The other great area of Soviet concentration had been Syria. The development there of the largest Communist Party in the Middle East can be attributed to its background of political immaturity combined with social and institutional instability. When one adds to this the additional combination of a restless and impoverished peasantry, a similarly discontented urban proletariat plus support of the majority of the Army's high command, it is little wonder that the extravagant appeal of the Commu-

nists found ready receptivity. One of the remaining paradoxes attendant upon the recent emergence of the United Arab Republic has been the relative eclipse of the Syrian Communist Party despite the general cementing of ties between President Nasser and the USSR (see page 24).

As one might expect, Soviet friendship with the Arab bloc has led to a corresponding attack on Israel. In the Soviet press and radio Israel is constantly attacked as an "aggressor," a tool of the "Western Imperialist Powers." The Arabs on the other hand are constantly portrayed as "peace-loving people" whose sole desire is to rid themselves of the domination of their former colonial masters. Only one familiar with communist jargon is aware of the extent of the Soviet attack, which in the Twentieth Party Congress singled out Israel alone among the nations of the world as being guilty of "fascization."

Against this background of political intrigue and raging nationalism, let us now proceed to a closer survey of the role in the Middle East played by the old-new nation of Israel.