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THE NEAR EAST CRISIS: THE SOVIET ROLE AND SOVIET MEDIA REACTIONS
SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF HOSTILITIES

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Three weeks after the eruption of the current crisis in the Near East, as tension and confusion mounted, an Izvestia commentator, looking at the sky for premonitory signs, saw "black crows circling" (1). How justified his apprehensions were then was shown two days later. Fighting broke out along the UAR-Israeli border at dawn on June 5..

Recovering from their initial surprise, Soviet propagandists soon realized that their first task was to prepare the public for the possibility of an Arab defeat. On June 6 in the afternoon, Radio Moscow began broadcasting reports based upon Israeli as well as Arab communiqués. At the same time, commentators were careful to avoid treating the statement issued by the Arab High Command that it had proof of interference on the side of Israel by US and British aircraft. In this connection it is interesting to note that the statement was apparently mentioned only once by Radio Moscow's home service (2), a few times by Moscow's Arabic and other foreign services, but never by the English services for Britain and the US. Subsequent references to the alleged Anglo-US backing of Israel were in general terms. Did anyone blunder in mentioning the matter at all? It is not possible to say, but it was noticeable that Soviet media in the days that followed - perhaps as a precaution against repeating the error - adopted a strikingly colorless tone. The only exception was Pravda, in which it was still possible to glean some useful, if faint, indications of what was passing in the minds of Soviet propagandists and those who advised them during the second act of the Near East crisis.

While full of vituperation for the Israelis and their alleged Anglo-US protectors, Soviet propaganda media were careful to remind the public the first day of the conflict in the Arab world that the USSR government, in its statement of May 23, had stressed that the organizers of aggression would face "not only the united strength of the Arab countries but also a firm riposte to aggression from the Soviet Union and all other peace-loving states" (3). At the same time, Arab ambassadors in Moscow held a press conference for Soviet correspondents at the Algerian embassy, where the Moroccan ambassador, in the name of his colleagues, read a statement "expressing the gratitude of the Arab countries for the support given by the Soviet government and people in the just cause of the Arabs." Only the

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TASS service in English reported this strange gathering (4). However, the real feelings of the Arabs, which had been carefully concealed from the Soviet public up to this point, made it increasingly urgent for Moscow to state its attitude more precisely.

It now set out in earnest to explain why Nasser's discomfiture had not caused it to wince. This it did to the accompaniment of maximum publicity for the marathon performance of Fedorenko in the Security Council and for protest meetings throughout the USSR, designed primarily, it seems, to rally support for Soviet policy.

A statement issued by the Soviet government in the afternoon of June 5 (5) had not revealed any substantial departure from the line taken since the beginning of the crisis. In fact, it limited itself to stating explicitly what was already implicit in the statement of May 23. Until June 5, the Soviet Union had been actively seeking in the Security Council the recognition of the status quo created by Nasser's unilateral action. Now it indicated that Soviet action in the UN would aim first at a return to the status quo ante. To this end, it demanded an immediate and unconditional cease fire and the withdrawal of Israeli troops to the positions they occupied before June 5. In addition, it demanded the condemnation of Israel as an aggressor. For the rest, it stated: "The Soviet government reserves the right to take all steps that may be required by the situation." Next day Soviet media reported warm support from Damascus and Beirut for the "just position" of the Soviet government. At the same time Igor Belyayev in Pravda reminded the "UAR and the other Arab nations" that the USSR firmly stood on their side. But he added: "Nobody can doubt it one minute" (6) - the first veiled hint of disagreement between Cairo and Moscow.

In fact, Soviet policy was already being judged with increasing severity in many parts of the Arab world. On 9.6.67 Boumedienne came out publicly against the Soviet attitude. In this grave situation any course of action chosen by Moscow was fraught with far-reaching consequences for the whole socialist camp in its relations with Arab countries. Considerations of this sort may have prompted the Soviet leaders to seek the approval of other ruling Communist parties for their policy. A meeting of ruling parties took place in Moscow on 9.6.67. Brezhnev, whose predilection for "unity of action" and an "agreed line" was made very plain at the recent conference at Karlovy Vary, must have derived some satisfaction from the results of the Moscow meeting. The generally uncooperative attitude of Ceausescu was, perhaps, compensated by Tito's eagerness to approve the Soviet line lock, stock and barrel. The meeting quickly produced a declaration. It confirmed a reference to "unity of action" and stressed that "today more than ever" this had to be shown "by all peace-loving and progressive forces" (7). Otherwise the document said little that was new. The socialist countries fully and completely backed the "just struggle" of the Arab countries and would "help them to repel aggression and defend their material independence and territorial integrity." It would be unrealistic to suppose that far-reaching decisions were taken at this hastily convoked conference. The declaration suggests only that "views were exchanged concerning the measures required to halt the

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(Israeli) attack and to avert consequences endangering general peace." These measures may have included a decision to send Egypt new planes - 200, according to some reports - to boost the morale of the Egyptian population, which was said to be in a panicky state at that time (8). However, the possibility cannot be excluded that the new planes were already due to be delivered when the crisis was developing and had been held back out of a sense of caution.

Although it did not contain anything basically new, the declaration was a clear indication of a marked escalation of the Near East crisis up the scale of Soviet priorities. Pravda on 11.6.67 devoted its lead article to the declaration - the first of its kind to discuss the Near East situation since the beginning of the crisis. This article affirmed that the declaration was an expression of the USSR's faithfulness to its "international duty." Next day, Yuri Zhukov, Pravda's chief political observer, developed this theme, possibly for the benefit of Peking and Hanoi as much as for Cairo and Algiers. Zhukov recalled the role of the Soviet Union and of the socialist countries in the Near East, which, he said, was a "noble" one, adding that the USSR "has given, is giving and will give all necessary material assistance" to Arab countries. He went on: "The declaration... again confirms the unflagging fidelity of the socialist countries to Lenin's principle of solidarity with people struggling against imperialism.... Fraternal solidarity finds its expression in the aid given by socialist countries to the Vietnamese people struggling against US aggression. Fraternal solidarity finds its expression in the declaration of the socialist countries which indicates that they will do everything necessary to help the people of the Arab countries deal a decisive blow at the aggressor and to preserve their legal rights..." (9). Zhukov's reference to Lenin - the first apparently in a Soviet public pronouncement about the crisis - gave added weight to this statement which contrasted so forcefully Soviet assistance to Vietnam with pledges of help to Arab countries, leaving no doubt any more on the nature of Moscow's policy in the Near and Middle East at this stage of the crisis. At the same time, it showed clearly that Vietnam remained at the head of the list of Soviet priorities. To dissipate any doubt on this point, Zhukov in a Pravda editorial a few days later warned that the crisis in the Near East served only to create favorable conditions for an US blitzkrieg against the DRV.

If Soviet reports can be believed, the response in Arab capitals to the USSR's endeavors was by no means uniform. The damage caused to Soviet prestige in the Arab world had been great and to Pravda fell the task of cautiously lifting one corner of the curtain to reveal the extent of the setback to the Soviet public. We learn that anti-Soviet feelings had spread in the UAR, Syria, Algeria and also Lebanon. On 13.6.67 Primakov, the Cairo correspondent of Pravda, mentioned for the first time that "enemies of the people" had been feverishly busy in the UAR "sowing doubts about the support offered by socialist countries to the Arab people." For the first time also, Primakov spoke of the "dirty role" played in this by Chinese representatives in Cairo as well as by Chinese and Albanian radio stations. On the following day Primakov, trespassing on the

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territory of his colleagues in Damascus, quoted a Syrian newspaper for a report of activities of a "fifth column" in Syria which was allegedly engaged in fanning distrust of the USSR. On 16.6.67, Pravda quoted a Lebanese paper for the view that one of the main aims of imperialist plots in the Near East was to undermine Soviet-Arab friendship. In the same issue, Pravda carried a report from its correspondent in Algiers, Yu. Potemkin, saying that local reaction there had tried to use demonstrations of support in favor of the UAR on 9.6.67 for provocations against socialist countries.

But reports appearing in Pravda went further than this and by implication suggested that, in the case of Egypt, anti-Soviet feelings had also spread widely in ruling circles. Once again heavy reliance was placed upon Syrian and Lebanese press commentaries which showed Soviet initiatives in a favorable light. This contrasted vividly with an absence of quotations from Cairo commentaries. This absence is all the more surprising in view of the fact that the press is tightly controlled in all three countries. On 11.6.67 the nuances became more explicit. From Damascus, for instance, TASS reported that the June 9 declaration had been received with "great enthusiasm" whereas Primakov in Cairo reported that it had been "treated with great attention." Primakov also reported that Nasser had expressed his gratitude in very general terms to "peace-loving countries" for their support, but another dispatch in the same issue of Pravda indicated that newspapers in Beirut were stressing the significance of the support from "socialist countries" (10).

The final development in this episode occurred in mid-June. A dispatch from Primakov, which Pravda carried on 14.6.67, recounted a curious story about an article that was said to have appeared in the semi-official newspaper Al Akhbar. This article had criticized the Soviet Union and, according to Primakov, a leader of the Arab Socialist Union (Egypt's sole legal political party) had told him that the author had been bribed to write it by reactionaries. In the same dispatch Primakov mentioned that an Al Ahram article had stressed that the USSR had always "stood for the fulfillment of the Arab countries' rightful demands" and that this represented the Egyptian view on the question. Primakov also reported that, at a recent meeting, the Egyptian government had expressed its high appreciation of the "position of friendly countries, governments and peoples which stood and are still standing by us and which support us materially and morally." The absence of an explicit reference to socialist countries in this expression of appreciation would seem to imply that the views of Al Ahram were still far from being shared by all members of the Egyptian government. At any rate, what is important is that Al Ahram's was the first article to appear in an Egyptian newspaper that set the Soviet position in a favorable light that Primakov could report home. The article was given great prominence by Soviet news media. And it is also pertinent to note that from this point on implied criticism of the Soviet Union's position appears no longer to have presented a problem to Soviet correspondents.

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Pravda on 15.6.67, for instance, reported that Moscow's demand for a special session of the United Nations General Assembly had been given wide publicity in newspapers in Cairo as well as in Damascus. On the following day, it reported Ryad's statement to AFP that Egypt and the USSR were "linked by a close and very solid friendship" - the first such favorable comment on Soviet-Egyptian relation by an Egyptian official to be recorded since June 5. Moreover, one senses from the pages of the Soviet press from mid-June onward that the wave of anti-Soviet feeling among the peoples of Egypt, Syria and Algeria was now under control. A TASS dispatch from Damascus, printed in Pravda on 15.6.67, mentioned that the anti-Soviet campaign had failed to mislead people, while another dispatch, carried by Pravda on 17.6.67, suggested that the "demagogic slanders of the imperialists and the Chinese splitters" had been exposed by the Baath party, the CP and the working class (11). On the previous day, Pravda reported that attempts to fan suspicion of the attitude of the socialist countries had failed. In the same issue of the paper, a dispatch from Primakov in Cairo indicated that explanatory work on the significance of Soviet aid to Egypt was being carried out at the lower levels of the Arab Socialist Union - an unusual revelation which points up the magnitude of the setback to Soviet prestige in Egypt as a result of the USSR government's attitude during the Israeli-Egyptian conflict.

Prestige is certainly an important element of Soviet influence in the Near East, but it is not all. This influence also depends to a great extent on the permanence of the political and social structures of the Syrian and Egyptian regimes. Reports from Damascus and Cairo published in Pravda convey the impression that during the short period following the military collapse these structures had been dangerously threatened by intrigues of "reactionaries" and that anxiety had been great in Moscow about the ultimate fate of Nasser's regime. The situation seems to have settled quickly in Syria with the arrest of Selim Katum, the author of the anti-government coup of September, 1966, who had returned from exile in Jordan to form a government (12). But in Egypt it has not been so easy. Primakov, in a dispatch published in Pravda on 13.6.67, said that the "whole Egyptian people" had risen "in defense of its revolutionary government." But he added: "It would be wrong to think that the reaction has laid down its weapons and has renounced further attempts at achieving 'changes' in the UAR." But another dispatch in Pravda on 15.6.67, implied that the "artful designs of the reaction" had been smashed completely by the Egyptian people.

One is struck in reading these dispatches by the role attributed to the masses and the working class. As Primakov explains it: "This will, no doubt, affect all that takes place in the country in the near future. This is the key to an understanding of all that has already begun to take place in the UAR" (13). These crucial sentences may throw some light on Moscow's current intentions in Egypt. What, in fact, has begun to take place, one may ask? Primakov's answer is that the military has been reshuffled, and western reports indicate that this may mean the end of the old military caste in Egypt, the main obstacle to further "democratization" of the regime (14).

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Further insights into Moscow's attitude were provided in the days following Nasser's cabinet reshuffle of June 19. The reshuffle was reported almost immediately by Radio Moscow with the comment that it "was aimed at strengthening internal unity." This remark echoed Western reports that the new government included people of all political hues, from left to right and friends as well as adversaries of the regime (15). But Radio Moscow added: "Many political observers consider the present period as the beginning of a new stage in the Egyptian revolution, a stage in which the activity of the popular masses increases and in which reliance is placed in the working forces of the people." Radio Moscow's comment was repeated word for word in a dispatch by Primakov, datelined Cairo 20.6.67, which appeared in Pravda on 21.6.67, and in another published by Izvestia on the same day. This would seem to confirm that Moscow had reached the conclusion at this point that the situation in Egypt now provided the regime with an opportunity of evolving towards more "progressive" forms and it is hardly surprising to learn that, according to some reports, the Soviet government has apparently expressed views in this sense to Cairo (16). For his part, Nasser is reported to be anxious to seek the support of the popular masses against the so-called military party, but how far his views on this matter coincide with Moscow's is not yet clear. All that is certain is that the Soviet leaders will have been most carefully briefed by Podgorny upon his return from Cairo.

Although during the period reviewed the attention of the Soviet leaders has been focused mainly on the situation in Egypt, they have also been very keen not to let go any profit that could be derived from the crisis elsewhere in the world. Pravda has suggested that it might indirectly help to obtain the recognition of the GDR by at least some of the Arab countries. For example, Primakov wrote in Pravda of 18.6.67 that the situation would "no doubt affect the attitude of Arab countries toward the two German states." But Moscow at the same time seems to be placing much hope on benefiting from the wave of anti-US feeling that has spread among the "popular masses" in the Arab countries in the aftermath of the conflict.

An observer trying to sum up his impressions of how Moscow gauges the possibilities at the moment, might well come to the conclusion that it is overestimating them. A good example of this, as we have seen, is contained in the dispatch from Primakov carried in Pravda on 16.6.67. In this, he not only noted the increasing role of the working classes in the Arab world (as shown in the strikes which had taken place in US oil concession areas in Saudi Arabia and the Lebanon) but also expressed the conviction that this "upsurge of revolutionary mood" would influence the result of the conference of Arab foreign ministers in Kuwait. But, as we know, the conference ended without producing any results. Is it that Moscow is witnessing with no misgivings the slow disruption of "Arab unity" in the face of Israel's continuing "aggression" at a moment when it is wholeheartedly engaged on behalf of the Arab countries to secure the condemnation of Israel at the UN? An article by Belyayev, frontpaged in Pravda on 19.6.67 quite clearly betrays

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that it has misgivings. "A pressing need for an Arab summit meeting in the nearest future," he says, "is stressed in Arab capitals" - and he adds that this "would, no doubt, reflect the process of the consolidation of the Arab states."

Miscalculation has led once to a near catastrophe in the Near and Middle East. It is to be hoped that this same miscalculation will not be made again.

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1. See CRD 318/67.
 2. RM, 6.6.67, 1300 CET. Egypt seems now to have also dropped this charge. An article by Al Ahram's chief editor on June 23 on US collusion with Israel does not mention it.
 3. RM in Arabic, 5.6.67, 1500 CET; RM in French to Africa, 5.6.67, 1700, 2100, CET.
 4. 6.6.67, 1407 CET.
 5. Text in Pravda, 6.6.67.
 6. Pravda, 6.6.67.
 7. Text in Pravda, 10.6.67.
 8. Monde, 20.6.67.
 9. Emphasis supplied.
 10. Emphasis supplied.
 11. Apparently the first mention of the role of an Arab CP in the crisis since 5.6.67.
 12. Pravda, 12.6.67.
 13. Pravda, 13.6.67.
 14. It is interesting to note that General Sidki Mahmud former chief of the Egyptian air force was the only general demoted mentioned by Primakov in connection with the intrigues of "reaction and the imperialists." According to Monde (23.6.67) Sidki Mahmud had been denounced in vain for years to Egyptian authorities by Soviet intelligence as an agent of the British Intelligence Service.
 15. Monde, 21.6.67.
 16. It is noteworthy that the "Declaration on the Situation in the Near East," said to have been adopted at a conference of Arab CPs sometime in May and published in Pravda on 2.6.67, stated, inter alia, that "Communists are, and remain, a necessary and effective force in the struggle against imperialism." There is certainly nothing in the current situation which could have led Soviet ideologists to imagine that this view does not hold true any more.

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