

**“Israeli imperialists”:
The Soviet «anti-Israel» campaign of 1967**

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Abstract

The paper discusses the so-called «anti-Israel» campaign which the USSR started after the Six Day War between Israel and the Arab countries. The focus of the analysis is on the connection of this campaign and the general dynamics of the Cold War. The paper introduces the main lines of propaganda that sought to frame the Israeli victory and Israeli policies as those of an «imperialist» state.

Keywords: USSR, Israel, Cold war, soviet propaganda, Six Day War

Introduction

The Six Day War between Israel and the Arab bloc — Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Algeria — lasted from June 5 to 10, 1967. During this time, the Israeli army was able to seize a territory 3.5 times larger than the pre-war area of Israel². The victory of Israel in this unprecedentedly fast and successful war was perceived both by the people of Israel and the citizens of other countries sympathizing with them as “the biblical miracle of our time.”³

The specificity of the perception of the Six Day War by Soviet Jewry, according to some historians⁴, was due to three factors: the openly anti-Israel policy of the USSR, the silencing of the "Jewish memory" associated with both the Holocaust and the post-war anti-Semitic campaigns in the Soviet Union, and the policy of the Soviet leadership,

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² Shestidnevnyaya voyna (The Six-day war) // Jewish Electronic Encyclopedia. URL: <https://eleven.co.il/state-of-israel/arab-israeli-conflict/14808/>

³ *Ben-Yakov H.* (ed.) *Shestidnevnyaya voyna i evreiskoe dvizhenie v SSSR*. M.: Akademicheskaya seria, 2008. p. 19.

⁴ See *Blum A.V.* *Evrejskij vopros pod sovetskoy cenzuroy. 1917—1991*. Spb.: Peterburskaya iudaika, 1996; *Kostyrchenko G.V.* *Tajnaya politika Khrushcheva. Vlast', intelligenciya, evrejskij vopros*. M.: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 2012.

which combined internationalist rhetoric and pandering to anti-Semitism in the domestic sphere. As a matter of its openly anti-Israel policy, on June 10, 1967, the Soviet Union and a number of Socialist countries broke off diplomatic relations with Israel (to be resumed only in 1989-1991). It is worth recalling that the Soviet Union *de facto* strongly influenced the policy of the "Socialist countries" in the bipolar structure of the world of the 1960s, and that in the Soviet press the Arab–Israeli conflict was depicted as a reaction of "progressive" countries to the policy of an "aggressive" and "Pro-American" state.

In the late Stalin era in the USSR, there took place trials with an overtly anti-Semitic background – e.g. the infamous “case of the doctors”, also known as the trial of the “doctors-killers” and “doctors-saboteurs” in Soviet propaganda – which caused the indignation of the world community.⁵ After Stalin's death, the “doctors' case” was discontinued, but Stalin's successor Khrushchev did not condemn the anti-Semitic campaigns of the late 1940s and early 1950s. As noted by Russian historian Arlen Blum, "...despite some shifts, the attitude of the authorities to the Jewish question has changed very little even at the "height of the thaw." In the era of the thaw, the reference to any issue that was perceived as "Jewish" was still subject to more or less severe censorship, as Soviet authorities saw it as best to avoid a discussion of this topic altogether. In the ensuing Brezhnev era, thus, "...anti-Semitism as an eternal and faithful tool of politics was still used..."⁶

The purpose of my research, which exceeds the framework of the present article, was to identify the networks of key actors, ideologies, events and objects that were involved in the transformation of Soviet cultural policy after the Six Day War and had a direct impact on it. In this article, I concentrate mainly on the propaganda elements of official Soviet commentary on the Six Day War.

Coverage of the Six Day War in Soviet press and official rhetoric

Before the Six Day War, the Soviet press sought to describe Arab-Israeli relations in a neutral tone. Thus, when President Nasser of the UAR (United Arab Republic) in late May 1967 decided to close the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli ships, and Syria began recruiting

⁵ *Ben-Yakov H.* (ed.) *Shetidnevnyaya voyna i evreiskoe dvizhenie v SSSR*. M.: Akademicheskaya seria, 2008. p. 352.

⁶ *Blum A.* *Evrejskij vopros pod sovetskoy cenzuroy. 1917—1991*. Spb.: Peterburskaya iudaika, 1996. p. 119.

volunteers for its people's army, Soviet newspapers described the impending conflict as "a tense situation in the middle East."⁷

However, from the first day of the war, everything that happened in the Middle East began to be interpreted as a "criminal act of Israeli aggression".⁸ This phrase will become the central cliché of the beginning anti-Israel campaign. In addition, in the first days of the war, June 6-7, the press divides the inhabitants of Israel into "ruling circles" and "progressive forces": "Deep anxiety and indignation of all Soviet workers caused the aggressive actions of the ruling circles of Israel, unleashed at dawn on June 5 in war against the peoples of the United Arab Republic..."⁹ reported the "international" strip of a Soviet newspaper on the 7th of June. To this message is immediately added an appeal to the "working and progressive forces of Israel", where they are called upon "to encourage their government to stop the war and embark on the path of negotiations, which are the only way to a solution that guarantees the interests of the peoples."¹⁰

I have identified three general lines in the Soviet propaganda after the Six Day War: "Israel as a weapon of American imperialism", a comparison of the Six Day War with World War II, and elements related to anti-Zionist agitation. In this article, I will focus on the analysis of the first line of propaganda mentioned.

One of the most commonly available cultural forms preserved after the 1967 anti-Israel campaign is the numerous cartoons published in the pages of Soviet newspapers at the time. A typical plot was the image of a military person in Israeli form, shown as being in one way or another supported by "uncle Sam", the personified image of the United States (see in *Figure 1* below).

⁷ Polozhenie na Blizhnem Vostoke // Trud. 1967. May, 26. P. 4. In this paper, most newspaper quotes are quoted in the Trud newspaper due to the fact that the coverage of the events of the Six-Day War in the Soviet media was fairly uniform. The same headings and similar articles can be found in Izvestia and Pravda, for example. См, например: Osudit' agressiyu Izrailiya // Izvestiya. 1967. June, 9. P. 1; Okkupanty dolzhny ujti! // Izvestiya. 1967. June, 12. P. 5.

⁸ Sovershen prestupnyj akt agressii // Trud. 1967. June, 6. P.1

⁹ V zashchitu mira na zemle // Trud. 1967. June, 7. P. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid.



Figure 1: V. Chernikov «The “secret” springs of Israeli aggression», caricature, 1967.

The relationship between Israel and the United States was interpreted both ideologically (Israel as a "link of imperialism") and practically (Israel's victory would not have been possible without the material assistance of a number of "imperialist" States). In the first speech of Leonid Brezhnev about the Six Day War, delivered by him on July 5 in the Kremlin in honor of the graduates of military academies, both of these themes can be found. On the one hand, the Secretary-General speaks of the direct support of the "Israeli leaders" by the "imperialists of the West". On the other, in the rhetoric used by Brezhnev, Israel is included in the global confrontation between the two forces: "the essence of the Middle East crisis is the confrontation between the forces of imperialism and the forces of national independence, democracy and social progress."¹¹

Thus, all the specifics of the Middle East crisis are reduced and leveled. The territorial claims of Israel and the Arab countries are not so important, since they are only details of a larger historical process:

“And if we talk about the main reason for Israel's aggression against the Arab countries, it is – the desire of American and British imperialists to strike a blow to the national liberation movement

¹¹Osnovnye rechi i vystupleniya L. Brezhneva vo vtorom polugodii 1967 goda // RGANI. F. 80. Inv. 1. Unit 292. p. 7.

in the middle East, at any cost, to stop the movement of peoples on the path of social progress, to re-enslave the countries that have won such a high price of freedom and independence..."¹² .

Other interpretations of the conflict, emphasizing the specifics of the Middle East situation, are branded as manifestations of imperialist propaganda: "...the efforts of imperialist propaganda to portray this aggression as the alleged result of only national strife between Israel and the Arab countries are aimed at hiding its true causes, to disguise the class meaning of events,"¹³ Brezhnev said at the end of his speech.

It is important to mention that the ideological position of Brezhnev was common for Soviet official rhetoric, but it was not the only one. In the 1970s, Soviet intellectual Andrei Amalrik wrote an article titled «Ideologies in the USSR», and outlined six distinct ideologies which appeared after the Stalin era. The two most crucial of them were «neo-Stalinist Marxism» and «neo-Stalinist nationalism». Anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist connotations were part of the second one. As it can be seen from our analysis, the main part of the propaganda campaign was dedicated not to the Zionism or Jews but to the subject of «American influence». Understanding Israel not as a self-sufficient subject of politics, but as a "strike force" of the USA and Great Britain in the Middle East, was a manifestation of "neo-Stalinist Marxism", which interprets any international conflict in terms of the struggle of the progressive forces of the proletariat, pitting the liberated forces of the colonies against capitalist and colonial forces. However, as I have already noted, this line of propaganda was not the only one, and in other parts of the campaign against Israel elements of the other ideologies were also present.

In the master plan of publications of the newspaper "Izvestia" regarding the "Israeli aggression", the question of "imperialist influence" was dealt with very often. This can be seen in the headlines of the planned articles: "Colonialism changes tactics"; "Eastern Mediterranean in the plans of the imperialists"; "Who do they serve?"; "NATO and imperialist aggression in the Middle East"; "Events in the middle East and the global strategy of American imperialism".¹⁴ In addition, the summary includes a reference to the "practical" or real basis of U.S.-Israeli relations, namely, oil (see the article "Behind the scenes of oil"¹⁵). The same line of propaganda was reflected in the letters of Soviet citizens to the "Pravda" newspaper: "...the State of Israel is an adjustable pawn on the big

¹² Ibid. p. 8.

¹³ Ibid. p. 7.

¹⁴ CK KPSS. Otdel propagandy. Proekty postanovlenij CK KPSS, zapiski otdela, pis'ma, kopii pisem, informacii, proekt doklada // RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 59. Unit 25. p. 131-133.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 132.

game-board of the imperialist powers, through which they conduct their oil policy, multiplying their dividends and gold reserves."¹⁶

The positioning of the Six Day War as a conflict of "imperialists" and "socialists", its transfer from the Middle East context to the global, bipolar setting, and its inclusion in the narratives of the Cold war allowed to connect the issue with the war in Vietnam. On June 21, the CPSU Central Committee issued a resolution on the policy of the Soviet Union in connection with «Israel's aggression in the Middle East». Almost at the very beginning of the resolution, we find reference to a reading of these two military conflicts as essentially one and the same struggle: "As the USA continues the predatory war in Vietnam, the aggression of Israel represents one more link in the larger chain of the policy of militant imperialist circles...".¹⁷

This comparison of the Six Day War and the Vietnam war is picked up in letters of citizens which were published in the central Soviet newspapers. In one letter, the Six Day War was described as a "screen" for American activities in Vietnam: "Yes, the imperialists really need a war in the Middle East. But how? Themselves, as an aggressor, it is impossible. They really got their face dirty in front of the public. The Vietnam War is not over. They needed a screen, but a special screen. They found it. The Zionists of Israel were a precious find for them."¹⁸ In another letter, titled "Stop the insanity!", retired Isaac Tsidelkovsky goes, from accusations against the Israelis, immediately to the example of Vietnam, not even trying to justify this leap of thought in logical terms: "An elementary study of the history of human development should make fools think about the future, they should think about it more at the helm of even such a small state as Israel... Here is an live example, which we all witness – the struggle of long-suffering Vietnam..."¹⁹.

The significance of the Six Day War was reduced not only by downplaying its role as another manifestation of the "imperialist aspirations" of the West, but also by the vocabulary used. As it can be seen from the above draft propaganda campaign and from the texts of articles in the Soviet press, Soviet ideologists and publicists carefully sought to avoid the term "war", replacing it with "aggression", since Israel in their optics

¹⁶ CK KPSS. Otdel propagandy. Proekty postanovlenij CK KPSS, zapiski otdela, pis'ma, kopii pisem, informacii, proekt doklada // RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 59. Unit 26. p. 79.

¹⁷ Postanovlenie Plenuma Central'nogo Komiteta KPSS, prinyatoe 21 iyunya 1967 goda o politike Sovetskogo Soyuza v svyazi s agressej Izrailya na Blizhnem Vostoke // Trud. 1967. June, 22. p. 1.

¹⁸ CK KPSS. Otdel propagandy. Proekty postanovlenij CK KPSS, zapiski otdela, pis'ma, kopii pisem, informacii, proekt doklada // RGANI. F. 5. Inv. 59. Unit 26. p. 119.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 140.

appeared not so much a state (that is, an actor capable of waging war) but as "an instrument" of imperialism or "a link... of global strategy".²⁰ The participants of the war on the Israeli side were described as a group, divorced from the Israeli people. The rhetoric concerning "Israeli militarism" ("voenschina"²¹) and "aggression" consistently rested on a separation of the Israeli "people" from the "ruling elite."

Conclusion

As outlined in this brief article, the main part of the anti-Israel campaign in Soviet propaganda was aimed at including the Six-Day war in a narrative situating it in terms of the bipolar structure of the Cold War, to thereby strengthen the campaign against the United States and, on the other hand, to reduce the specificity and the independent significance of the Six Day War, to thus also reduce the risk of the re-activation of the "Jewish question" within the USSR.

²⁰ Protokol № 28 zasedaniya Sekretariata CK KPSS ot 30 iyunya 1967 goda // RGANI. F. 4.Inv. 19. Unit 56. p. 154.

²¹ See: Nasilie izrail'skoj voenshchiny // Trud. 1967. June, 11. p. 1.