

 **Article REVIEW**

Galia Golan. “The Soviet Union and the Outbreak of the June 1967 Six-Day War.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8.1 (Winter 2006): 3-19.

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Published by H-Diplo on 4 April 2007

Galia Golan has long stood out as a fair-minded, well-informed student of Soviet policy in the Middle East. The 1967 crisis has been studied in detail by many scholars, including Ms. Golan, and she has done all of us a service by going back to one of the most puzzling aspects of Soviet policy in the lead up to the war – namely, the provision of inaccurate intelligence about Israel’s mobilization of nine or so brigades on the Syrian border. In fact, Israel had not mobilized. But the Egyptians, upon receiving the news – through several channels – did mobilize their troops and sent them into Sinai. This was the fateful move that started the crisis moving at top speed toward war a few weeks later.

Several theories have been offered to explain the Soviet action. David Kimche, representative of the conspiracy minded, sees the Soviets as deliberately sparking a war that they hoped to benefit from. In short, this was a deliberate disinformation game. A few fragments of intelligence fell into American hands around the time of the war that suggested the same thing. A well-informed Soviet colleague of mine once stated that he believed that Moscow had indeed sought to provoke the 1967 war, but he was eventually given access to the internal documents (many of which Ms. Golan has now reviewed) and he came to the conclusion that they had not done so.

How then to explain the false intelligence? Perhaps in the aftermath of the false intelligence on WMDs in Iraq in 2002 it is easier to accept the proposition that great powers are not always well informed, that different factions select different pieces of a complex reality and give them prominence in their decision making.

What we do know, and what the Soviets must also have known in early May 1967, is that Israel was giving serious thought to another strike against Damascus. According to Michael Brecher (but never subsequently confirmed by any Israeli scholar as far as I know), the Israeli cabinet met on May 7 and decided that if Syria did not stop its provocative behavior of supporting armed Palestinian groups attacking Israel from Syrian territory, Israel would carry out a “limited retaliatory raid”. On May 12, 1967, Israel’s head of military intelligence gave a background briefing in which he said that if Syria did not back off, Israel would take a “military operation of great size and strength.” This led to a headline in the *New York Times* the next day saying that Israel was contemplating military action to topple the regime in Syria.

With all of this going on, the Soviets must have also been picking up rumors of imminent military action. In fact, the documents that Golan examines show that the Egyptians had passed along such rumors to the Soviets – and perhaps these were then recycled back to them, in a classical case of “blowback.”

We also know that Nasser told people after the war that it was the Soviet warnings that led him to take action. But within days of the mobilization, he knew that the information about Israel having mobilized nine brigades was false. But by then he was seeing his popularity in the Arab world soar as he moved toward confrontation with Israel.

For the remainder of the crisis, as Golan notes and as U.S. diplomats at the time reported, the thrust of Soviet policy was to try to prevent the outbreak of war.

Golan's review of the evidence helps to dispel some of the most dramatic accounts of Soviet grand strategy that see a deliberate set of moves aimed at provoking war. The Soviets were used to playing on the tensions of the Middle East to advance their purposes, but based on the evidence now at hand Golan seems correct in concluding that war was not their goal in 1967.

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