



**PART ONE**

*What to Do about Nasser's Egypt*

SEPTEMBER 1955 TO JULY 26, 1956

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**TIMELINE OF PUBLIC EVENTS**

- FEBRUARY 1955** Israeli raid on Egyptian Gaza.
- MARCH 1955** Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia publicly agree on military cooperation.
- APRIL 1955** Anthony Eden succeeds Churchill as British prime minister.
- APRIL 1955** Baghdad Pact announced: military cooperation of Britain with Iraq, Turkey, and Pakistan.
- APRIL 1955** Bandung conference of “nonaligned” nations, hosted by Indonesia. Egypt, India, and China play prominent parts.
- JULY 1955** Big Four Summit in Geneva of U.S., Soviet, British, and French leaders.
- SEPTEMBER 1955** Soviet bloc announces massive “Czech” deal to transfer arms to Egypt.
- SEPTEMBER 1955** U.S. president Eisenhower has a heart attack and is hospitalized.
- OCTOBER 1955** Big Four foreign ministers meet in Geneva.
- OCTOBER 1955** Iran joins Baghdad Pact.
- NOVEMBER 1955** Moshe Sharett steps down and Ben-Gurion again becomes prime minister of Israel, also defense minister.
- DECEMBER 1955** Israeli forces conduct a raid into Syria. UN Security Council adopts resolution criticizing Israeli action.
- JANUARY 1956** Eden visits Eisenhower in Washington.
- JANUARY 1956** New “Republican Front” coalition government takes power in France, led by Guy Mollet. Algerian war escalates.
- MARCH 1956** After British pressure to join Baghdad Pact, Jordan expels British military advisers.
- APRIL 1956** Israel-Egypt border fighting raises threat of war; UN secretary-general Dag Hammarskjöld mediates UN truce supervision.
- JUNE 1956** British forces complete their withdrawal from the Suez Canal Zone, as agreed to with Egypt in 1954.

## PART ONE

# MOSCOW

CAROL R. SAIVETZ

In 1955 the Soviet Union took the strategic initiative to reset the future of the Middle East and its place in the global Cold War. But in Moscow, among those running the country, the maneuvers with Egypt were part of a much bigger and more dangerous game much closer to home. To outsiders, it might seem that the basic parameters of the Cold War—the division of Europe, German rearmament, the Korean stalemate, and the nuclear standoff between the two superpowers—were hardening. But the USSR was still undergoing a prolonged succession struggle. Following the March 5, 1953, death of Joseph Stalin, several potential rulers struggled for power.

At issue among the contenders for power were such questions as the following: Should we end the Stalinist reign of terror? Should we reorient Soviet investment from heavy industry to the consumer sector? What shape should the global competition between the United States and the USSR take in the thermonuclear age?

Where and how to wage the Cold War became an especially critical issue in the succession struggle. Within those discussions, how much assistance to provide to potential allies in the Third World assumed an increasingly prominent place.

## STALIN'S DEATH AND THE SUCCESSION STRUGGLE

The earliest challenger for Stalin's mantle was Lavrenti Beria, the chief of Stalin's security services. All accounts of the period make it clear that Beria intended to use his position as head of the secret police apparatus to assure his rise to the pinnacle of power, but Beria's ascendancy was short-lived. He was arrested on June 26, 1953, and, ultimately, shot.

The second contender was Vyacheslav Molotov, the foreign minister. A doctrinaire Stalinist, he firmly believed that war between the capitalist and communist systems was inevitable. He described U.S. foreign policy as "preparations 'for a new world war—a war to restore the world domination of capitalism.'"<sup>1</sup> Molotov remained a significant force in the foreign policy debates until he was replaced as foreign minister in June of 1956.

The third candidate, Georgi Malenkov, had been Stalin's heir apparent, but within weeks of the leader's death he gave up the post of party secretary and retained only the premiership.<sup>2</sup> In his speech at Stalin's funeral, Malenkov stated: "There are not contested issues in U.S.-Soviet relations that cannot be resolved by peaceful means."<sup>3</sup> Approximately a year later, Malenkov elaborated. A new world war, he asserted, "given modern weapons, would mean the destruction of world civilization."<sup>4</sup> The then premier argued that Moscow's possession of nuclear weapons would incline the West toward cooperation out of fear of Soviet retaliation.<sup>5</sup> His views found little support among the other members of the Politburo at the time, and he was dismissed from the premiership in February 1955.

Nikita S. Khrushchev, the fourth contender, was indignant that Malenkov had attempted to steal the role of reformer.<sup>6</sup> Khrushchev initially sought to carve out a position between Molotov and Malenkov. He rejected the Stalinist line—promoted by Molotov—that war between the two world systems was inevitable at the same time that he dismissed Malenkov's assertion that the West would come to the same sober assessment of the need to cooperate in the nuclear age. Early in 1955 Khrushchev was denouncing Malenkov for not being tough enough.

Then, after Malenkov had effectively been defeated (though he was still in the ruling circle), Khrushchev and Molotov turned on each other.<sup>7</sup> According to Khrushchev, Moscow's primary foreign policy objective should be to "convince" the West to cooperate.

Khrushchev's reliance on the deterrent value of nuclear weapons could allow him to declare, following the 1955 Geneva summit, that the USSR had stood

its ground with the West.<sup>8</sup> The summit had been convened to discuss Germany and disarmament. Although it was, as one scholar observed, conducted in an atmosphere of “superficial friendship and amiability,”<sup>9</sup> it accomplished nothing. Khrushchev’s attitude toward the summit and toward the West was summed up in his memoirs:

We returned to Moscow from Geneva knowing that we hadn’t achieved any concrete results. But we were encouraged, realizing now that our enemies probably feared us as much as we feared them. They rattled their sabers and tried to pressure us into agreements which were more profitable for them than for us because they were frightened of us. As a result of our own showing in Geneva, our enemies now realized that we were able to resist their pressure, and see through their tricks.<sup>10</sup>

An outgrowth of Khrushchev’s view of the nuclear standoff was the idea of “peaceful coexistence,” which he interpreted to mean a sharp ideological struggle between the East and the West. He could emphasize a nuclear buildup while cutting back on the huge size of Soviet conventional forces. This included a July 1955 troop reduction of 640,000 men and a further cut in May 1956.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, in the name of this ideological contest, he reached out to the newly decolonized states of Africa and Asia. In 1955, Khrushchev expanded his travels beyond Yugoslavia and the Geneva summit to include much-publicized trips to India, Indonesia, Burma, and Afghanistan. While in India, he proclaimed: “We say to the leaders of the capitalist states: Let us compete without war.”<sup>12</sup> He meant without a war between the superpowers. The Soviet Union simultaneously approved its first arms transfer to Egypt.

When the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) held a full congress, which did not happen every year, the occasion was always a landmark for setting out the party’s new policy line. The CPSU’s Twentieth Party Congress, in February 1956, was, therefore, a landmark occasion for Khrushchev to consolidate his leadership and articulate his line. In his formal speech at the congress, Khrushchev concluded that even prominent bourgeois figures must admit “there can be no victors in an atomic war.” And recognizing the dangers inherent in the nuclear age, he claimed: “We want to be friends with the United States and to cooperate with it for peace and international security.”<sup>13</sup>

Yet this enunciation of the need for “peaceful coexistence” and the noninevitability of war, in effect, shifted the locus of further conflict from Europe to the Third World. Khrushchev explained:

The forces of peace have been considerably augmented by the emergence in the world arena of a group of peace-loving European and Asian states which have proclaimed nonparticipation in blocs as a principle of their foreign policy. . . . As a result a vast "peace zone," including both socialist and nonsocialist peace-loving states in Europe and Asia, has emerged in the world arena.<sup>14</sup>

During the congress Molotov did not oppose Khrushchev directly; in fact, he admitted shortcomings in the performance of the Foreign Ministry.<sup>15</sup> Yet even as he acknowledged the emerging nuclear parity between the United States and the USSR, he urged the Soviet Union to remain vigilant about the West. "Of course, insofar as imperialism exists, there is a danger of a new world war, not to mention other military conflicts."<sup>16</sup>

Dmitry Shepilov, soon to succeed Molotov as foreign minister, more clearly echoed Khrushchev's views. He devoted much of his speech to describing the ideological battle between capitalism and socialism being fought in the Third World. According to the future foreign minister:

One of the characteristic features of our epoch is the combining of socialist revolution in individual countries with a mass struggle of "all the downtrodden and discontented. . . ."

Communists are opponents in principle of sectarian narrowness. They advocate that the efforts of all kinds and varieties of mass movements of the present day must be merged into an anti-imperialist stream. The great aspirations of all the downtrodden peoples, whether they be the peoples of the Arab, Asian or Latin American countries . . . will find their realization in the struggle against social oppression, against colonialism, in the struggle for peace and democracy.<sup>17</sup>

The reference to "sectarian narrowness" was a coded attack on those within the party who opposed Khrushchev's outreach to neutralist, noncommunist Third World states.

#### CHANGING VIEWS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

The Soviet leaders were clearly having intense debates, offstage, about how to deal with the forces of decolonization in the Third World. The central question was this: Should the USSR value relations with local communist parties higher

than those with nationalist leaders, or should it advance ties with nationalist leaders who were noncommunist or even leaders who killed or imprisoned local communists, just because they were anti-British or anti-French?

Nowhere was this question more squarely posed for the Soviet leadership than in the Middle East. For example, when in 1952 the Egyptian Free Officers Movement overthrew the monarchy and began demanding the withdrawal of British troops, official Soviet statements seemed to see no difference between the new military leaders and the former king. In fact, the 1952 edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* described the coup as follows: “On the night of July 23, 1952, power in Cairo was seized by a reactionary officers’ group connected with the USA.”<sup>18</sup>

Two years later, Soviet statements praised those Middle East forces opposed to the British-sponsored Baghdad Pact. In this it seemed that Soviet objectives and Nasser’s coincided, as the latter attempted to rally the Arabs against the proposed alliance. Indeed, in a paper prepared for Dmitry Shepilov’s trip to Egypt, the USSR vowed support for Egypt as it sought to “strengthen its state sovereignty and national independence.”<sup>19</sup>

When upheaval in Syria brought to power new leaders more sympathetic to Nasser’s position, Syria and Egypt declared their joint opposition not only to the proposed Turkish-Iraqi pact but to all other defense deals in the region. The Soviet Union, which had earlier signed an arms deal with Syria (late 1954), now officially announced its readiness to assist Syria in defending its independence and sovereignty. And in Egypt, the Soviet ambassador sounded out the Cairo government on its formal stance toward the West.<sup>20</sup>

In a statement issued on April 16, 1955, the Soviet Foreign Ministry definitively criticized the Baghdad Pact and promised to counter it.

The situation in the Near and Middle East has recently become considerably more tense. The explanation of this is that certain Western powers have been making new attempts to draw the countries of the Near and Middle East into the military groupings which are being set up as appendages to the aggressive North Atlantic bloc. . . .

[The basis of this policy is] the desire of certain Western powers for the colonial enslavement of these countries. . . .

As has frequently happened in the past, now, too, efforts are being made to cloak the aggressive nature of the Near and Middle Eastern plans of the United States and Britain with ridiculous fabrications about a “Soviet menace” to the countries of that area. . . . Upholding the cause

of peace, the Soviet government will defend the freedom and independence of the countries of the Near and Middle East and will oppose interference in their domestic affairs.<sup>21</sup>

But the USSR was concerned not only about Egypt and Syria.

If the creation of the Baghdad Pact was seen as a setback by the Kremlin, the rise of several varieties of home-grown socialism and the vehement anti-Westernism articulated by many Third World leaders were seen as opportunities.<sup>22</sup> In fact, Khrushchev urged those attending the Twentieth Party Congress “to work untiringly to strengthen the bonds of friendship and cooperation with the Republic of India, Burma, Afghanistan, Egypt, Syria, and other countries which stand for peace; to support countries which refuse to be involved in military blocs.”<sup>23</sup>

#### THE “CZECH” ARMS DEAL WITH EGYPT

Determined to redress the 1949 “disaster” in the war against Israel, the Free Officers looked to purchase arms for the Egyptian military. Nasser’s preference initially was to purchase arms from the West, but the 1950 Tripartite Declaration, in which the United States, Britain, and France agreed not to sell arms to the combatants in the Middle East, remained a major obstacle.

The Soviets and Nasser circled each other as they tried to figure out what kind of relations they should establish. Nasser told Soviet officials of his desire for modern weapons as early as 1953 and 1954. But Egypt’s decisive moves to create a military relationship came in February 1955, after the British helped create the Baghdad Pact and after an Israeli raid into Gaza on February 28, 1955, in which the headquarters of an Egyptian garrison were destroyed and thirty-eight soldiers were killed.<sup>24</sup> (Israeli officials claim the raid was in retaliation for Egyptian incursions into Israel through Gaza.)

At a meeting in Burma, Nasser found a chance to complain to the Chinese foreign minister, Zhou En-Lai, about his difficulty in procuring arms because of the Western embargo. In response, Zhou asserted he thought the Russians would “be prepared to give a positive answer.”<sup>25</sup>

On May 21, Nasser met the Soviet ambassador to Egypt, Daniel Solod, at a reception. Nasser expressed his fear of another Israeli attack. Solod responded that Moscow had already said yes. Thus negotiations began in earnest.

As the deal was being worked out, Nasser reportedly asked whether the



USSR would be willing to establish a barter arrangement—Egyptian cotton for heavy artillery. The Soviet side agreed. In July 1955 Dmitry Shepilov, then ostensibly editor of the Communist Party newspaper *Pravda*, arrived in Cairo for a long visit. He was there not as a journalist but as Khrushchev's envoy, to nail down the agreement.<sup>26</sup>

Nasser and Shepilov apparently got along well. "We had doubts until you visited," Nasser's defense minister later told Shepilov. Among the issues discussed at the meeting was Egypt's treatment of local communists. Shepilov's response was that the incarceration of Egyptian communists was solely an Egyptian affair, and a favorable report was sent to Moscow. Shepilov, in an interview with a Russian academic expert on the Middle East, later explained: "I received a favourable impression of Nasser during my first trip, when I first met him. He was a very honest man who was really devoted to the Arab land and the Arab people."<sup>27</sup>

U.S. intelligence and diplomatic reports picked up the fact that Shepilov had offered first-rate arms to Egypt, including MiG jet fighter aircraft. Although the negotiations were secret, Nasser publicly announced the arrangement on September 27. The United States already knew of the deal. John Foster Dulles had told President Eisenhower: "It seems to be authentic that they [the Soviets] are giving a massive lot of arms to the Egyptians theoretically to be paid for by cotton."<sup>28</sup>

Nasser's spontaneous announcement left the Soviets with no choice but to acknowledge the deal. According to Soviet press reports, Nasser, in a speech in Alexandria, both reiterated his nation's goal of creating a strong national army and acknowledged that his requests for arms had been rebuffed by Western powers. He went on: "Recently we received a proposal from Czechoslovakia to supply us with the arms needed by our army on a purely commercial basis. . . . I immediately accepted this Czechoslovak proposal with gratitude."<sup>29</sup> An ironclad member of the Soviet bloc, Czechoslovakia was the instrument for a choice made in Moscow.

A couple of days later the USSR added its own official statement:

For its part, the Soviet government holds the view that every state has the lawful right to provide for its defense and to buy arms for its defense needs from other states on the usual commercial terms, and no foreign state has the right to interfere in this or to present any unilateral claims that would infringe the rights or interest of other states.<sup>30</sup>

Privately, on September 29, Nasser requested more Soviet help in relieving unwelcome pressure from the United States to annul the arms deal. Specifically, Nasser asked Ambassador Solod what the Soviet position would be if there were more threats from the United States. Nasser asked, according to the Soviet report: "Could Egypt count on the support of the Soviet Union in this fight [against the United States]."<sup>31</sup>

Solod conveyed Moscow's careful reply on October 1. The Soviet Union would not offer a defense commitment. It was just offering political and moral support. But it was ready to talk about sending more arms.<sup>32</sup>

The Egyptian request for arms had come at a propitious time in the rethinking of Soviet foreign policy. Sergei Khrushchev, Nikita's son, recalled that the Soviet leader at first had a difficult time making up his mind about the Egyptian leadership. He writes that while Khrushchev was not indifferent to the new Third World governments, especially those proximate to the USSR, he found Nasser's nationalistic slogans "doubtful."<sup>33</sup>

In his own memoirs, Khrushchev attributed the positive response to Nasser's request to the influence of Yugoslav president Josip Tito, with whom the USSR had just renewed relations after an eight-year rupture. He wrote: "Soon after the coup, when the Egyptians decided to try to oust the English, Nasser's representatives came to us with a request for military aid. . . . We agreed."<sup>34</sup>

### MOSCOW TILTS TOWARD THE ARAB CAUSE

To outsiders, the Egyptian-"Czech" arms deal opened the way for Soviet engagement on the Arab side of the ongoing Arab-Israeli dispute. Yet at the time, the Soviets still hesitated. As late as October 1955 the USSR still seemed reluctant to commit itself completely to the Arab cause. According to Dulles's account, Molotov told him "he was convinced that no aggressive purpose was in the minds of the Arabs and that if they should make an armed attack on Israel, they would be stopped by other nations through the means of the United Nations which afforded protection to Israel." When Dulles pointed out that many Arabs now seemed to believe the Soviets would veto any resolution directed against them, thereby giving them immunity, Molotov "said that the Soviet Union would abide by the principles of the United Nations."<sup>35</sup>

Molotov's view apparently reflected the consensus of the Foreign Ministry that the best way to become a major force in the Middle East was to mediate between the Arabs and Israel. In contrast, Khrushchev—despite earlier doubts—seems to have been tempted increasingly by the idea of aligning

Moscow with Arab nationalism. In a speech to the Supreme Soviet in December 1955, Khrushchev declared: “We understand the yearnings of the peoples of the Arab countries who are fighting for their full liberation from foreign dependence. One cannot, at the same time, fail to condemn the actions of the State of Israel which from the first days of its existence began threatening its neighbors and pursuing an unfriendly policy toward them.”<sup>36</sup>

By January 1956 the USSR had posted ambassadors to Syria, Lebanon, and Libya. Ambassador Solod, so instrumental in the arms deal, was recalled from Cairo back to Moscow to head up the Middle East Department of the Foreign Ministry. During this same period, Moscow initialed a new trade agreement with Syria in which the USSR would build industrial installations in exchange for cotton, tobacco, and other raw materials.<sup>37</sup>

During the spring of 1956, as tensions between Israel and Egypt increased dramatically and news came out that the French would deliver some *Mystère* fighter jets to Israel, the *New York Times* reported on May 21 that at least two new Egyptian-Czech arms arrangements had been made.<sup>38</sup> Khrushchev—even more openly than before—abandoned any pretense of neutrality.

In an interview with the Egyptian *Al Abram*, Khrushchev claimed Israel was “launching aggressive attacks” against its Arab neighbors. He accused Israel of seeking to maintain tensions to secure Western aid. Yet, although the Soviet leader was decidedly pro-Egyptian, he articulated the central dilemma for Soviet policymakers: Would an Arab-Israeli war lead to a world war? He urged the Arabs to be patient because the “results will be in their favor.”<sup>39</sup>

Negotiations over the financing of Nasser’s pet project, the Aswan Dam, had dragged on for months. In October 1955, shortly after the arms deal was concluded, Soviet ambassador Solod offered Egypt assistance in building the Aswan High Dam. Nasser initially rejected the Soviet offer for fear of becoming too dependent on Moscow.<sup>40</sup>

Yet the Soviet arms deal and Nasser’s flirtation with the communist bloc were obviously complicating any effort to get aid for the dam project from the U.S. Congress. In mid-June 1956, Shepilov, recently appointed foreign minister and always an enthusiastic supporter of Khrushchev’s outreach to Egypt, journeyed to Egypt himself. He was there to participate in the celebrations of the final British evacuation from its giant Suez base. The Western press speculated that Shepilov carried with him a Soviet offer to finance the dam project. The joint communiqué issued on Shepilov’s departure claimed there was “full unanimity of views” on all aspects of Soviet-Egyptian relations.<sup>41</sup>

Shepilov was supportive, but the economic commitments were vague.

Sergei Khrushchev writes that, at the time of Shepilov's visit, Nasser secured a full range of Soviet economic assistance. Moreover, he continues, his "father considered that we with our experience in hydro-construction were in a position to build any kind of dam."<sup>42</sup>

But when, on July 19, the United States informed the Egyptians that the Aswan Dam financing offer was rescinded, and an Egyptian newspaper quoted the new Soviet ambassador, E. Kiselev, as remarking that the USSR would finance the dam project, Kiselev denied the report. However, Kiselev was also cited in another press report as saying the Soviet Union was ready to assist with the dam project "if Egypt asks for it." These reports were also denied by the embassy in Cairo.<sup>43</sup>

Two days later, in Moscow, Shepilov seemed to hedge on whether or not the Soviet Union would be interested in stepping in to replace the Western offers. The foreign minister said Egypt had many other problems that were just as vital as the dam, "particularly problems connected with industrialization." But if Egypt requested assistance for other industrialization projects, he promised that "we would find ways to meet those wishes and would consider favorably any Egyptian request without preliminary political conditions and without putting forward any enslaving economic conditions."<sup>44</sup>