

ISRAEL

*The Soviet Union is using Vietnam as a smokescreen
to cover its penetration of the Middle East.
Unless we understand this, says the author, we cannot forge
a meaningful peace in Paris or anywhere else*

THE MIDDLE EASTERN VIETNAM?

ROMAN BRACKMAN

THE AGONY of our experience in Vietnam and the perilously explosive situation which exists in the Middle East have their roots in our inability to recognize the essence and source of the present danger. The fallacy of our foreign policy lies in our persistent evasion of the fact that our adversary is none other than the Soviet Union. Understandably disturbed by the frightening prospect of direct encounter with that formidable enemy, we are buying psychological solace through a kind of "whipping boy"—and Red China is our favored target for venting our frustrations. This in turn leads us to the second widespread fallacy, that Vietnam and the Middle East are two separate conflicts, managed independently from Peking and Moscow respectively.

That belief creates in consequence a chain reaction of other fallacies, the most prominent of which is the constantly-hinted possibility of a *quid pro quo* horse-trade, involving Vietnam and the Middle East—a game which presumably could go either way, depending on the relative strength of the supporters of opposing points of view in American public opinion. The irony of such delusion lies in the supposition that we would be dealing with the Soviets at the expense of China, while actually the Soviets would single-handedly manipulate the trade, raising the stakes at will in their reach for the ultimate price, which would eventually include both Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

What are the stakes of Hanoi, Peking, Moscow, and Cairo, in the contemporary contest? They are complex, but nevertheless deducible, at least for analytical purposes. These are multiple local discords of an ideological, nation-

alistic and economic kind, which are not all the creations of Moscow or Peking: they exist independent of external instigation. However, when utilized and purposely intensified by a great power, they outgrow in implication their local significance, and more often than not finally lose their original relevance.

Armageddon Is Invoked

So it happened with Vietnam and with the Middle East. Driven by the glorious vision of a strong Communist state in Indochina, Ho Chi Minh, or Uncle Ho, began his life-long crusade to conquer and unite under his leadership 250 million people, living in the area where ten separate states now exist. Striving to be the Stalin of Indochina, he ambitiously toyed with the role of leader of a kind of third force in the Communist world. A long-time agent of the Comintern, Uncle Ho has never been able to match the achievements of his old master. Father Joe. At 77, he is as far from attaining his goal as ever, and his desperation is matched only by his frustration.

The Moscow policy in Indochina zig-zagged and fluctuated over the years. Stalin never paid it much attention, being too preoccupied with European power politics. After his death, his heirs were in anxious search of a *modus vivendi* with the West, trying first to put their own house in order, which had been shaken by ferment and revolts in Berlin, Hungary and Poland, and by an internal jockeying for power. The Geneva Agreements of 1954 which gave the Soviets a needed respite after the shock of Stalin's death, were forced on Ho Chi Minh—he acquiesced against his better judgment. Without Moscow's help, he would not have been able to

afford continued fighting. He settled for less—but not for long. By 1959, Khrushchev had succeeded in destroying his rivals; increasingly, he turned his attention abroad in a resolute search for dramatic victories to boost the prestige of his leadership. He asserted that a shift in Soviet favor had occurred in the balance of world power. Was this claim on his part a bluff, or wishful thinking? Probably a little of both. He now revealed to the world his theory of "Wars of National Liberation." It is imperative to understand the main points of his new concept. First, the theory rejects as an "outdated notion" war between states; in the world of nuclear weapons, such war becomes "unthinkable" because it might draw in major powers and lead to Armageddon. Instead, "just" wars are to be waged by "people" against their native or "imperialist oppressors." Imperialist powers—meaning chiefly the United States—would be neutralized by paralyzing fear of Soviet retaliation, should they attempt to interfere. Yet, if such intervention did occur, direct confrontation with the Soviet Union must be avoided at all cost in order not to undermine "peaceful coexistence." This is the second rule of the theory of "Wars of National Liberation," in fact, its quintessence. If anything, it reflects not the altruistic devotion of Moscow to peaceful coexistence, but a sober realization of the preponderance of American power.

Indochina was destined to become the first battleground where the new theory had to be tested. One consideration heavily influenced Moscow's choice: by 1959, the Chinese-Soviet dispute had broken into the open and was obviously shaping not into a quarrel over obscure ideological divergences.

but rather, into a direct clash between conflicting national interests. Strong, independent and historically anti-Chinese Southeast Asia offered the Soviets a unique opportunity to acquire an ally and a political and military lever against the Chinese threat. An old Moscow hand, Ho was the ideal man for that purpose. He went to Moscow to meet Khrushchev and to strike a deal. Since that time, Ho has sided with Moscow on all ideological and political issues *vis-a-vis* China, and in return Moscow underwrote his plan for expansion, first in Laos and then in South Vietnam.

What was the original rationale behind this Moscow adventure? Several possibilities had been in the offing:

In case of American retreat and the collapse of South Vietnam's resistance, there would be practically no stopping Communist advances in Southeast Asia, and at a later stage even beyond it. Conceivably, China might even be given a slice of Asian cake, thus encouraging a permanent peace with her at the expense of someone else's real estate. The prospect of America deciding to stay and defend Vietnam did not appear unattractive either. This would create a perfect set-up for bleeding Uncle Sam, using North Vietnamese manpower. It would be a classic example of a "War of National Liberation;" the Soviets could test their arms yet not endanger their own security, for direct confrontation with the United States would be avoided. The real "killing" could be in some other place, with Vietnam as counter-decoy. It was a scheme reminiscent of Hungary-Suez and Cuba-Berlin.

Also considered was the possibility of American invasion of Vietnam. Even this would yield a bonus—and what a bonus! China could intervene, should war come close to its borders. As in Korea, the Soviets of course would shy away from direct participation, using the pretext that they did not have a common border with Vietnam. The vision of a weakened or destroyed China was too tempting to resist. The truth is that the Soviets seriously worry about the Chinese threat and would like nothing better than to see Chinese nuclear installations destroyed by the U.S.

As for Peking, it is caught in the middle, torn between its understanding of the adverse implications to Chinese security of the Soviet gambit, and its still strong devotion to Communist ide-

ology. This contradiction finds erratic expression in the well-known Chinese obstructions to Soviet arms deliveries to Vietnam; in Soviet-Chinese border incidents; and in the turmoil of a cultural revolution which in essence is the exploding of frustration over increasing isolation and helplessness, and a fervent desire for identity and recognition.

Only One Soviet Strategy

These are the principal elements of the Vietnam situation—or at least these were until recently. Since the Middle Eastern crisis of 1967, and the June War, a basic shift in Soviet strategy has taken place. Without losing its original significance, the Vietnam war has become a facet of the Middle Eastern power struggle, rather than an independent war. This is not to say that the Soviets were not counting on American preoccupation with Vietnam when they goaded Nasser into starting the Middle Eastern hostilities, using the false intelligence report of an imminent Israeli attack on Syria. The Vietnam war figured prominently in Nasser's own calculations and pronouncements as well. However, since the Israeli victory, priorities have changed drastically. The Middle Eastern conflict has entered a new phase, not yet recognized for what it actually is: but hopefully, the confusion will not last long. Recently, the *New York Times* quoted an Israeli government source: "On the one hand, the Soviets seem to be counseling the Arabs to caution; on the other, they are re-arming them much too fast. Our hope is that they don't defeat the first tactic with the second."

This line of reasoning is erroneous, for there are not two Soviet tactics but rather, two sides of one Soviet strategy: that of the by-now familiar "War of National Liberation." It is already taking perceptible shape; it is as close a replica of the Vietnam war as Middle Eastern terrain and ethnic composition will allow. True, the desert is not as good a cover for infiltration as the Indo-chinese jungle, but then Israel is not South Vietnam. One-third of its population is newly-absorbed Arabs on occupied territory. Its own population is five times smaller than that of South Vietnam, while the population of its hostile Arab neighbors is nearly five times larger than that of North Vietnam. The Soviets count on protracted, attritional conflict, which could put Israel under

unbearable pressure of terror, sabotage, infiltration and hate-mongering campaigns, leading either to her humiliating surrender, or to a desperate strike by her against the source of her troubles. To prepare for the last eventuality, the Soviets undertook a massive arms build-up to replace the losses in the June War, and to increase the offensive and defensive capabilities of the Arab states. The entirely new element in the Soviet Middle Eastern build-up is that control of military activities has now passed into Soviet hands. There is some justification in the current argument that the sole victor in the June War was the USSR, and that our joy over the Israeli victory was premature. However, the argument misses a point: the Soviets obviously did not plan it that way, and the increased Arab dependence on her for military support, as a result of Arab defeat, is costing Russia a great deal. By trying to salvage what was left, the Soviets are making the best of the situation. Admittedly, they are not doing badly. Would an Israeli defeat make America's position in the Middle East stronger? It would not; the Soviets, for all their pathological antisemitism, are not just out to destroy the Jewish state. The Soviets need Israel as a symbol of blinding hatred for Arab fanaticism, which they utilize for their own ends. If Israel did not exist, the Soviets would have had to invent it. So would Nasser. to divert the attention of his subjects from their own plight.

By encouraging Nasser to provoke a crisis, the Soviets wanted to create a situation where victorious Arab armies would have to be stopped by U.S. intervention from completely overrunning Israel, thus exposing the U.S. as the chief Arab enemy, while the Soviets would play their favorite role of "honest broker" between the "progressive Arab people" and the "reactionary imperialist" United States. It did not work out that way. Israel did not need U.S. intervention: it was the Arabs who needed Soviet help which never came. Despite all the cover-up propaganda, the Soviet failure to intervene to save Arab armies will not be soon forgotten. For realistic Arab leaders, the message was unmistakable.

What the Soviets arc really after is Western strategic positions in the Middle East, and Middle Eastern oil, with which they would like to blackmail the West and strangle it economically. Soviet interest in the Middle East is far

from being a new phenomenon. This area had always been coveted by them, as it had been by their predecessor, Imperial Russia. The difference between Czar and Commissar is more apparent than real; and the degree of continuity in traditional policies is striking.

For his part, Soviet leader Brezhnev recently set right any possible misunderstanding about Soviet aims: "There is no justification for the permanent presence of the U.S. Navy in the waters washing the shores of Southern Europe. . . . The time has come for the demands for the removal of the U.S. Sixth Fleet from the Mediterranean to sound loudly." Were his demands ever satisfied, there is no question as to who would move into the place of the U.S. Sixth Fleet. Even now Soviet warships harass the U.S. Navy by passing perilously near our ships, once again demonstrating familiar Soviet tactics of surreptitious provocation with ominous undertones. Soviet naval construction (especially of aircraft carriers) is being stepped up. The Syrian port of Latakia, Egypt's Alexandria and Port Said are being used more and more by the Soviet Navy for naval support.

British withdrawal from the Middle East created a vacuum of power, and the Soviets decided to fill it. The new

aggressiveness' in Soviet foreign policy reflects a recent debate in the Kremlin. Apparently, the Shelepin group is winning the argument and the Brezhnev-Kosygin collective leadership is trying its best to compensate for its failure last June.

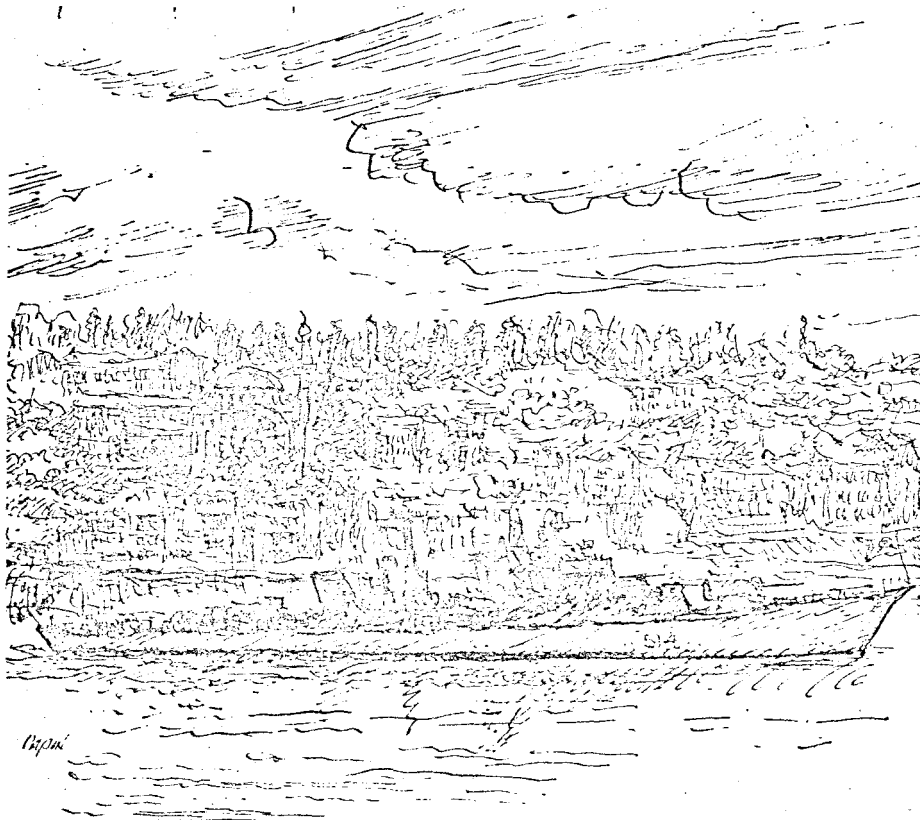
Jordan Is First

What are the Soviet tactics? In order to destroy America's position in the Middle East, the Soviets are organizing Vietnam-type guerrilla warfare, not only against Israel but also against "reactionary" Arab governments. The first to come under Soviet pressure is Jordan, which is assigned the role of a Middle Eastern Laos as a privileged sanctuary and safe route for infiltration and is, as such, indispensable in the Soviet game of sabotage and hit-and-run operations against Israel. King Hussein was invited to Moscow and offered an arms deal in exchange for a Souvanna Phouma-type of cooperation. He is trying to resist Moscow-Cairo pressure, but his ability to do so is limited. The Arab press is increasingly vocal with appeals for the creation of an "Arab Vietcong," a Vietnam-type "guerrilla war" against Israel, and threats against King Hussein and Saudi Arabia,

which is a stumbling block for Soviet designs in Yemen and Aden. General de Gaulle, with his morbid anti-Americanism, is going to be used as a stalking-horse for eventual Soviet take-over. The Soviet-Iraqi oil pact is the product of the "fruitful" cooperation between the French government-controlled Compagnie Franchise des Petroles (CFP) and its partner, the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC). We can be reasonably sure that the French base at Mers-el-Kebir in Algeria will soon be occupied by the Soviet Navy, after de Gaulle's obliging exit.

Keeping up with de Gaulle's runaway senility is not too difficult these days, for it is consistent. Consistency and insanity are not mutually exclusive, as we know. Often, they make strange bedfellows and lead to confusion—such as mistaking the pervasive fixation of a deranged mind for perceptive and far-sighted statesmanship. De Gaulle's anti-American, anti-British, anti-Canadian, antisemitic and anti-Israeli statements and actions are universally known. The indignation they generate is understandable. Yet, we should not overemphasize them and make the mistake of blaming de Gaulle for all our troubles in the Middle East, as we blame China for all our troubles in Asia. Despite his craving for importance, de Gaulle is helpless to do more than minor mischief, as is Mao—their token nuclear capacity notwithstanding.

The reality of the Soviet threat in both the Middle East and Indochina can no longer be ignored. In fact, it has now caught up with us. We have to close the gap between Soviet strategic moves and our ability to decipher them. We can no longer afford the time-lag between Soviet actions and our reactions. (The confusion created by Prince Norodom Sihanouk's sudden about-face in welcoming American troops to Cambodian territory is not difficult to clarify. The resignation of the strongly left-wing and anti-American cabinet of Premier Son Sann is logical in view of the sudden change in the pattern of the Vietnam war.) North Vietnamese attacks against Thailand, Laos and Cambodia are increasing in scope, and their significance is not limited any more to South Vietnam fighting. War is not spreading—it is being spread, while conforming to elaborate and far-reaching plans. (Sihanouk understood this instantly.) The Vietnam war, although retaining its original con-



notation, has undergone a transformation. Frustrated in South Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh is spreading the war to Thailand and Laos in his lifelong quest of a Communist Indochina. With an eye to easy morale-boosting victories, his troops infiltrate Laos, Cambodia and Thailand where, he believes, the United States will be reluctant to interfere because of growing domestic agitation against involvement in Indochina. The new tactics of spreading the war to include all of Indochina fit perfectly into the Soviet adventure in the Middle East. They would like nothing better than to have the Indochinese war be the smokescreen for their take-over in the Middle East. The empty threat of Berlin was too familiar to be useful; they revived it in December 1967 and in February 1968, and then suddenly dropped it.

Both conflicts could be singlehandedly controlled and synchronized from Moscow. Indubitably, the Soviets consider their tremendous investment in North Vietnam worthwhile; the Middle East is certainly more than adequate compensation. They could fight in Indochina to the last Ho Chi Minh soldier and the last North Vietnamese bridge to achieve their goal . . . so could Ho, to achieve his. Loss of life and property has never been an inhibiting factor for fanatics obsessed with dreams of conquest, and we gravely miscalculate if we believe such factors are as important to our enemy as they are to us.

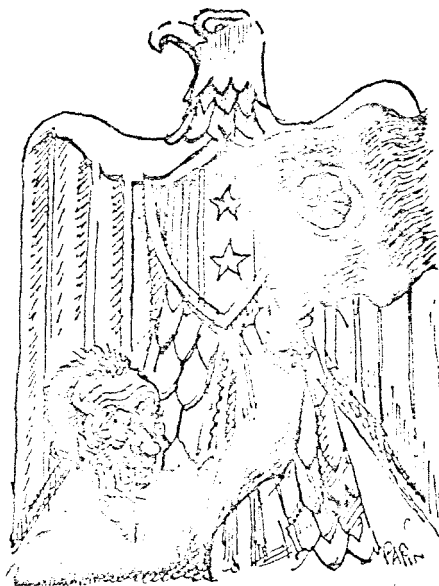
IME is running out for us to grasp the enormity of the stakes in the Indochina and Middle East crises. Yet, wishful thinking and fantasies persist, even where we can least afford them. Perhaps never before was this demonstrated more cogently than in a Johnson interview, published in the *New York Times* on December 20, 1967:

Question: "Mr. President, you have always credited the Russians with a sincere desire for peace in South Vietnam. Do you still hold to that view? If they really want peace why do they not stop supplying the North Vietnamese?"

President Johnson's answer: "I don't think I could honestly tell you just what their motivations are. We have always hoped that they would like to see this war brought to an end. That has been their indications to us. Whether that would work out in the long run, I don't know."

President Johnson went on at extraordinary length to attempt to justify Soviet involvement in Vietnam: "Now, we can understand the Soviet Union's inhibitions and the problems they have as long as Vietnam is taking place. They are called upon to support their Communist brother, and they are supporting him in a limited way with some equipment. We wish that were not so."

Mr. Johnson is a man of compassion but this time he clearly overdid himself. We can almost hear the mephisto-



phelian laughter, with strong tones of avid anticipation, coming from behind the Kremlin walls.

Mr. Johnson's answers were pathetic: but far worse, they augur ill for our security—our security being only as good as our basic assumptions are. The cost of "some equipment," as reported by the *U.S. News & World Report*, is estimated as high as \$6 to \$8 billion a year of Soviet aid; nearly all of it goes by hundreds of Soviet ships the long way around Africa—thanks to the Israeli occupation of the east bank of the Suez Canal. And the American Seventh Fleet stands idly by while deadly Soviet weapons pass through to be used tomorrow against our land and air forces. We behave like an inexperienced surgeon, removing peripheral tissue but afraid to touch the real source of the cancer—with the result of producing endless pain. What it amounts to is a perpetual torture for both patient and doctor, with no indication as to who will collapse first.

As for Israel, Mr. Johnson was as

unsure on this point as he had been on Soviet "motivations":

Question: "Mr. President, do you consider that this country has the same kind of unwavering commitment to defend Israel against invasion, as we have in South Vietnam?"

Instead of answering to the point. Mr. Johnson volunteered legal information that is common knowledge:

President Johnson: "We do not have a SEATO Treaty, if that is what you are asking. We have made clear our definite interest in Israel, and our desire to preserve peace in that area of the world by many means. But we do not have a mutual security treaty with them, as we do in Southeast Asia."

What do "definite interest" and "desire to preserve peace . . . by many means," signify? One is left wondering.

Same Old Mistakes

The President's temptation to warn his Vietnamese critics—who happened to be hawkish on Israel—of the danger of their viewpoint, is understandable. His Vietnam critics may or may not get the message and that is of relatively small import. What is important, however, is that our adversary may get the wrong message. That is precisely what occurred as a consequence of Mr. Acheson's statement a few months before the Korean War started, and Mr. Johnson's statement of 21 October, 1-964 ("We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.")—which turned out to be a prelude to the beginning of the Korean War, and the escalation of the Vietnam war, respectively. We seem not to be able to learn from our own past mistakes.

Today, Israel and Lebanon are the only stable, democratic states in the Middle East, and as such, they are the best custodians of our strategic and economic interests. Pro-Western Arab states, especially Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, must have all our support and encouragement to withstand Soviet-Nasser pressure. We should stop trying to ingratiate ourselves with hostile petty dictators through dubious concessions, at the expense of our friends. It is a disservice to Arab countries to mislead them into believing in our neutral stand in their conflict with Israel. The ambiguity of our foreign policy pronounce-

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Middle East

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ments in this respect could have tragic consequences by encouraging wishful thinking and dangerous miscalculations. This is no time for duplicity.

Like Nkrumah and Sukarno, Nassers come and go, but the people they rule, remain. More than 80 per cent of the Arab masses are *fellahs*, living in degrading, miserable conditions of illiteracy and ignorance, barely aware—if at all—of the ambitious schemes of their rulers. Those rulers should not be given the degree of respect they enjoy (but certainly do not deserve) as a result of our constant fawning on them. The irony of this situation defies all logic. Accommodating greedy dictators, advantageous though it sometimes may seem, is self-defeating in the Middle East as well as in Indochina and elsewhere. While the obsessive drive to defeat America in Indochina is dressed in ideological clothing, in the Middle East it took the form of naked fanatical nationalism. For the Soviets, it could not matter less. They are not ideological Communist puritans and never were. Great Russian chauvinism of old Imperial days and Communist ideology seem to blend perfectly, certainly to the point of indistinguishability. After all, do not the ends justify the means?

What could be done to counter the Soviet challenge? The first, and seemingly most daring step, should be to break the conspiracy of silence surrounding the Soviet threat, and recognize it for what it is, instead of pretending that it is not. The second and most logical move for us would be to change the Soviet-imposed rules of "Wars of National Liberation," and make these wars at least as risky for the Soviets as they try to make them dangerous unilaterally for us.

Dealing with those who hold the key to it will help us open the door to peace in Vietnam. Fortunately, a historical precedent was established: in October 1963 we dealt with the Soviets and not with Castro. For once, our ability to comprehend reality became credible, thanks, paradoxically, to the incredible Khrushchev move in Cuba, precipitated by our consistent retreat in the Bay of Pigs, in Laos, in Berlin. Khrushchev got used to the idea that he could get away with almost anything. And he almost did. Will we rise to the occasion again, as we did then? We engage Ho in the mud and jungles of the Vietnam battlefield, as well as in the quicksand of the Paris "Peace Conference." And we continue to pay a high price for our self delusions in war efforts and in the pursuit of peace. We are acting no differently in the Middle East when we apply pressure on Israel, as if her retreat will bring peace. It will not. One day, we will have to face the Soviet challenge. This will take courage, but the reward will be our ultimate survival. Q