

Egypt a Soviet sacrificial lamb?

Nineteen years ago this month Israel demolished the armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria in the Six Day War. In spite of all that has been written on this subject, one great mystery still remains: Who really started the 1967 war that dramatically altered the face of the Mideast?

During the mid-1960s, tension between Israel and its Arab neighbors had been steadily rising. Vicious border raids threatened to erupt into general war. France was arming Israel while Egypt and Syria turned to Moscow for weapons. In Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser was urging his fellow Arabs to unite against Israel and to resist growing American influence in the region.

In May 1967, as war fever on both sides mounted, Egypt was given a series of secret reports by the Soviet ambassador in Cairo. Whether these reports came from the KGB or military intelligence, GRU, remains unknown. Moscow claimed that its photo reconnaissance and agents had detected a massive Israeli military buildup just below Syria's Golan Heights.

These eight Israeli armored and mechanized divisions, backed by heavy artillery and much supplies, asserted the Soviets, were the spearhead of an impending Israeli attack on Syria.

Such a Soviet claim was readily believable. For many months Syrian and Israeli air and ground forces had been clashing along the border. Syria shelled Israeli settlements while Israel blasted away at Syrian irrigation projects. This escalating violence, reinforced by public threats of some Israeli generals to march on Damascus, had already convinced Cairo that Syria was in peril. The new Soviet information seemed final confirmation that Cairo's main ally, with whom Egypt had a mutual defence treaty, was about to be invaded.

ERIC MARGOLIS



Nasser, in spite of much subsequent propaganda to the contrary, was not eager to get into a war with Israel. He had learned to respect its military power on two previous painful occasions. But neither could Egypt, as political and military leader of the Arab world, sit back passively and watch its ally be invaded.

When Nasser received the mysterious Soviet report at the end of May, he ordered his army in Sinai to abandon its prepared defensive positions near the Suez Canal. Egyptian forces advanced forward close to the border with Israel, assuming an offensive posture. This fateful decision not only gave Israel a pretext to attack but it spelled doom for the Egyptian Army.

On June 6 the Egyptians were caught totally unprepared by a devastating Israeli surprise assault. With their backs to the Sinai, cut off from water, transport, air cover and supplies, the Egyptian Army was encircled and destroyed. Then the Israelis fell on Jordan, and then, finally, on Syria.

We now know that Nasser never intended to attack Israel. The forward movement of his troops and closure of the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping was a giant bluff designed to prevent the supposed Israeli attack on

Syria and to show the Arabs that Egypt could overawe the Israelis. Alas for Egypt and its hashish-smoking field marshal, the Israelis had no intention of allowing a menacing Egyptian army to sit on its border and make diplomatic points.

We also now know that in the days before the war Israel never had eight brigades massed — as the Soviets claimed — to invade Syria. Given this most interesting fact, we can conclude that the Soviet report that triggered the war was either wrong or deliberate disinformation. It is difficult to see how Soviet spies could have been honestly mistaken about the presence of some 40,000 Israeli troops and about 500 tanks in an area the size of downtown Toronto.

Which leads to the suspicion that Moscow deliberately misled Nasser, knowing that he would have to act to support Syria and thus be forced into a war with Israel — one that Moscow was certain Egypt would lose disastrously. In fact, the rout of the Arab armies achieved a dramatic, if temporary, triumph for Moscow.

A shattered Egypt became dependent on Moscow. Nasser, always viewed with suspicion by the Soviets, was deflated. Syria also turned to Moscow and the Palestinian resistance was born. The Arab World, convinced that Washington was behind Israel's victory, reacted to the Six Day War with a firestorm of anti-Americanism that persists to this day. Overnight, Soviet influence in the Mideast soared.

If these suppositions are correct, the bogus "Golan Warning" may prove to be one of modern history's most successful pieces of disinformation. With the consummate artistry of a chess grandmaster, Moscow sacrificed a pawn to gain long-term, strategic advantage in the Mideast.