The narrative of Cold War superpower/Third World interaction usually casts the United States or the Soviet Union as a puppet master, waging ideological war by proxy. While this model is undoubtedly valuable, it deprives the Third World of agency and ignores those instances where Third World nations manipulated the superpowers. Following World War II, Zionism became a powerful force in American – and by extension Soviet – foreign policy. The events in Palestine were shaped by the emerging Cold War tensions between Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. The newly installed British Labour government was ideologically closer to Moscow than to the United States; moreover, American policy during and after the war had been to break down the British imperial system. The cordiality of Roosevelt and Churchill’s relationship had cooled markedly, and America's assertion of power in imperial affairs irritated both Britain and the USSR. Manipulating this tension, Zionists attempted to sell their allegiance to the highest bidder. While they often misinterpreted Soviet or American politics, Zionists nevertheless realized their goal: a Jewish national homeland. The narrative and analysis that follows examines how they did it, by placing Israel’s birth into the larger context of the Cold War.

Before moving to the specific history of Soviet, American, and British interaction in Palestine, I need to crystallize some important points about the Middle East, the Cold War, and the “Big Three.” First is the importance of the
Middle East to all three powers following World War II. As both a source of oil and a position of strategic importance, the Middle East became embroiled in many early Cold War skirmishes. The region was so important that the Soviet Diplomatic Academy had only two divisions – Western (dealing mainly with the U.S. and Great Britain) and Oriental (dealing with China, Central Asia, and the Middle East). ¹ The second point is that each participant – Britain, America, and the U.S.S.R. – pursued its own economic, political, and geographical interests, often at the expense of one another. Put another way, lumping the U.S. and Britain into “the West” obscures more than it clarifies because it ignores internecine tension that shaped policy.

The destruction of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War had placed Palestine under British control in 1917; at that time, the British Foreign Minister Arthur Balfour made the famous “Balfour Declaration,” which committed Great Britain to creating and supporting a “Jewish national home in Palestine.”² In 1922, the League of Nations granted Britain a “Mandate for Palestine,” giving Jews one quarter of the land in Palestine while reserving the other three quarters for Transjordan. There were three massive waves of European Jewish immigration to Palestine (called Aliyah) between 1918 and 1939, the last of these from Germany; by the end of World War II, there were approximately 583,000 Jews out of a total Palestinian population of 1,887,000.³ The increasing numbers of Jews, as well as Jewish behavior toward the non-Jewish Palestinians, caused problems; Marxist Zionists refused to employ non-Jews in Jewish businesses because hiring Palestinians would have been colonialism.⁴ This policy led to
economic separation, unequal economic development between a commercialized Jewish economy and a subsistence agricultural Palestinian economy, and social ghettoization.

Tension was inevitable, and anti-Jewish riots broke out in 1936 lasting until the British severely limited Jewish immigration with the White Paper in 1939. The White Paper marked a shift in British policy toward Palestine, boldly announced in section I: “His Majesty's Government believe that the framers of the Mandate in which the Balfour Declaration was embodied could not have intended that Palestine should be converted into a Jewish State against the will of the Arab population of the country.” The British banned further Jewish immigration to Palestine for five years, “unless the Arabs of Palestine are prepared to acquiesce to it.” This reversal of British Palestine policy galvanized Zionist leaders everywhere searching for international assistance in achieving a Jewish national homeland.

Truman responded to the White Paper in 1939 by writing a now infamous article comparing it to Britain’s policy of appeasing Hitler; this time, rather than offering up Poland to the rapacious desires of fascism, the British were delivering the chosen people to the Arabs. Truman’s comments mirrored those later in the Zionist press characterizing British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin as an anti-Semite and (by implication) a Nazi sympathizer, which has led some commentators, particularly those sympathetic to either Israel or Truman, to conclude that Truman recognized Israel out of deeply held convictions or because “it was the right thing to do.” This ignores two crucial Senate votes
Truman cast in 1944: first, against a resolution that Palestine should be converted to a Jewish territory and second, against the Taft-Wagner Act, which argued that the White Paper should be abrogated and Jewish immigration into Palestine unrestricted. The Roosevelt administration opposed both the Senate resolution and the Taft-Wagner Act because they interfered with British politics and would strain the Anglo-American alliance that was necessary for successfully prosecuting the war. Despite the fact that the administration got its way, however, Roosevelt could not ignore the demands of powerful and well financed Jewish Democrats that he do something about the unacceptable British policies concerning Jewish immigration to the “Promised Land.”

Zionist organizations in Britain and the United States demonized British Foreign Secretary Bevin as an anti-Semite, a particularly stinging accusation that subtly connected Bevin with the Nazis. Zionist organizations looked for support to North and Latin America and even the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was a logical choice for the Zionists because it was large, powerful, and in need of allies in the devastating struggle against Nazism. David Ben Gurion recognized what could be a mutually profitable relationship for Zionists and Soviets alike, and within months of the Nazi invasion of Soviet territory was offering Moscow the assistance of Jewish labor.

Moreover, Ben Gurion cast the Zionists and Soviets as natural allies because both respected labor. In his notes from a 1941 meeting with Ivan Maiskii, the Soviet ambassador in London, Ben Gurion wrote that he had argued, “Our people fully realized the meaning of the war for the existence of the Jewish
people and the labour movement throughout the world, as well as for the USSR.”

Additionally,

Labour was the leading group in the Jewish community in Palestine. The chairman of the Jewish community was a labour man. Labour was the main colonizing force in Palestine. Almost all of the settlements founded by the Zionist Organization were labour settlements, mainly based on communal (to avoid misunderstanding, I did not say communistic) life; though from an economic point of view they were communistic settlements, our movement is not a communist movement.⁹

While Ben Gurion makes a clear distinction between Zionist communalism and Soviet Communism, his statement was designed to assure Maiskii that Soviet support of Zionist goals would be rewarded. From the Zionist point of view, this was a good deal for the Soviets: Ben Gurion thought that it offered Stalin much needed men and material at a dark point in the war, the prospect of a strong postwar ally in the Middle East, and even a platform among American labor because, according to Ben Gurion, “In America, the great bulk of Jewish organized labor was behind Palestine labor.”¹⁰

Zionists had misread Stalin; by 1941, he had recognized that “world revolution was not a goal in itself, but rather provided the rationale for building a strong Soviet Union. Indeed, a strong U.S.S.R. would signify that the engine of world revolution was still on track.”¹¹ Stalin’s goal was always Soviet security and prosperity, and while a union with the Zionists held the tantalizing prospect of furthering world revolution, the exigencies of the war militated against Zionist
demands. The need to build a powerful industrial complex during the 1930s and mobilize Soviet citizens to fight during the war led Moscow to promote a Russocentric national identity that often mutated into Russian chauvinism and was often expressed as anti-Semitism; during and after World War II, Soviet Jews were purged from government and academic positions, denied admission to universities, and often harassed by their fellow Soviets. Moreover, Stalin tolerated Soviet Zionism insofar as it contributed to his goals; once Zionism became potentially threatening, Stalin moved against it. His fear of “Western” or “reactionary” ideologies that threatened the Revolution was the reason he ruthlessly exterminated all uncontrollable non-Soviet ideological influences. Stalin had absolutely no Zionist sympathies, and refused to allow Soviet Jews passage to Israel.

The Zionists were also using the tension between the superpowers to force America’s hand on recognizing Israel. The situation in America was similar to that in the Soviet Union, with Zionist pressure groups making promises of ideological fealty to the United States to acquire American support. But the Zionists were unable to counter the State Department argument that a Jewish nation would be a Soviet satellite; this was mostly due to the fact that the Zionists were playing one side against the other. The collection Documents on Israeli-Soviet Relations, 1941-1953 shows that the Zionists were arguing (subtly) that Israel would be a Soviet satellite if given Soviet support. This was done through veiled references to a common respect for labor and Zionist gratitude for Soviet support. The State
Department’s suspicion was thus less a product of anti-Semitism and more due to the fact that Zionist loyalty was available to the highest bidder.

To attract Jewish support in 1942, the Soviet Bureau of Information created the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC), which was designed to disseminate pro-Soviet, anti-German propaganda to a predominantly Western Jewish audience. In May 1943, JAC members Solomon Mikhoels and Itzik Fefer were dispatched on a seven-month tour of North America (where they met Albert Einstein) and Great Britain to encourage transnational Jewish cooperation in the fight against Nazism. Mikhoels and Fefer were given stringent and contradictory instructions on their conduct: for instance, they were to consider themselves representatives of the JAC and not the Soviet Union, but they were also to ensure that both the Soviet and host country flags were on display at all events. Moreover, in a precursor of the postwar Soviet policy of emphasizing Soviet casualties while downplaying Jewish victims of German aggression, the delegates “must not limit themselves to Jewish concerns, but must speak of the friendship of the peoples in the USSR, of how they all compete in the struggle against Hitler, of the heroism of the Red Army, and so forth.”

Mikhoels and Fefer’s tour raised nearly 40 million dollars for the Soviet war effort. However, they returned to the Soviet Union with Zionist ideas gleaned from their American and British co-religionists. By 1944, the JAC was riding a wave of Russian-Jewish nationalism that had yet to crest, generated by Zionism, the Holocaust, and the anti-Semitism of Soviet society. The JAC drafted a letter to Stalin pushing for a Jewish nation in Crimea with four arguments: first,
Jewish refugees had no homes; second, the Russian anti-Semitic purges had left the Jewish intelligentsia essentially superfluous to Soviet society; third, Yiddish cultural institutions were too scattered to meet Russian Jewish needs; and fourth, the war had led to both increased anti-Semitism and a reactionary Jewish nationalism. Then in April 1945, Morris J. Mendelson, president of the New Zionist Organization of America, wrote to Stalin urging him to instruct the Soviet delegates to the San Francisco conference to “demand a pledge be made to the Jewish people, that Palestine would be restored to its historic borders as a Jewish national homeland.” Mendelson attempted to play what Zionists considered their trump card, writing, “Informed American and world public opinion fully supports this attitude.” This is another example of a prominent Zionist attempting to influence Soviet policy by subtly dangling before Stalin the prospect of losing a valuable Middle Eastern ally to the Americans.

Clearly, 1944 represented an important moment because a truly international Zionist movement had come into existence. While the movement was neither monolithic nor homogenous, the main actors (people like David Ben Gurion and Chaim Weizmann) were meeting with Soviet, American, and British leaders and telling each what the Zionists thought they wanted to hear. With Soviet and American leaders, the Zionists used Cold War antagonisms to prompt movement; Ben Gurion and Weizmann were criticizing as anti-Semitic the State Department’s position that Israel would be a Soviet satellite while pandering for Moscow’s support by promising that Israel would be a Soviet satellite. Though Jews across the world sometimes disagreed on nuts-and-bolts issues, they were
nonetheless responding to the horrors of the Holocaust and to Soviet, American, and British anti-Semitism by creating a transnational Jewish identity. The practical expression of this identity, Zionism, was poised to become a powerful political lobby in the United States, a terrorist organization in Palestine, and a victim of repression in the Soviet Union.

The expiration of the White Paper in 1944 came at a unique time for the British; the exigencies of the Second World War had vastly depleted their ability and willingness to maintain the empire, and friction between Arabs and Jews in Palestine wore down the beleaguered British public. By late 1946, Palestine was simply becoming ungovernable; the British were suffering terrorist attacks by Zionist fanatics and several British citizens were kidnapped in retaliation for death sentences delivered against Jewish murderers.\(^{20}\) Moreover, American Zionist support for the Palestinians Jews, including providing them with weapons and money, strained the Anglo-American alliance.\(^{21}\) At Britain’s request, the United Nations passed a resolution requiring a fact-finding mission to Palestine, and the Soviet delegate, Andre Gromyko, surprised the UN by supporting partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab nation, the heart of the Zionist cause.\(^{22}\) The UN Special Committee on Palestine reported on August 31, 1947, its recommendation that Palestine be divided into two states (one Arab and one Jewish), with Jerusalem under international trusteeship.

The Soviet Union was changing its relationship to the UN at this moment; the Iranian misadventure had badly burned Moscow but had demonstrated that the UN could be a formidable weapon.\(^{23}\) Clearly the old strategy of taking power by
force was passé; in the post war world, power would be seized by proxy. Thus
the USSR organized its constituent parts into a “rigidly regimented armed camp”
that could be depended upon to support Moscow at the United Nations.24 In this
context the Soviet vote of November, 1947, to accept the partition plan makes
more sense. This policy had a number of upsides, besides merely adding to the
UN’s prestige; the Palestinian affair could embarrass Britain and the U.S. and
possibly even yield the U.S.S.R. a new Middle Eastern ally.

Gary Hess argues that after June, 1946, the U.S. reoriented its policy toward
the Soviet Union from “appeasement” to “getting tough,” symbolized by the
Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan.25 The Truman Doctrine was unveiled in
Truman’s March 12, 1947, speech before Congress when he requested U.S.
assistance ($400 million was eventually appropriated) to help the Greek
government combat a socialist insurrection; the doctrine stated that America
would send economic aid to any country fighting socialism or communism. The
Marshall Plan was also based on economic aid, though it was open to all
countries, even those attached to the Soviet Union. Outlined by Secretary of
State George Marshall in a June 1947 speech at Harvard University, the Marshall
Plan had two components: a large injection of American money ($20 billion, 50
times the amount appropriated for the Truman Doctrine three months earlier) and
a caveat that Europe had to develop a plan for using the money as a unit.
Moscow denounced the project as a form of dollar driven imperialism and
refused to participate, demonstrating how badly U.S.-Soviet relations had
deteriorated since the war. Truman’s manipulation of the UN Security Council in
December to force a Soviet withdrawal from northern Iran in 1946 mortally wounded the prospects of a peaceful US-Soviet coexistence. Within three months, Stalin argued that capitalism and communism would inevitably produce war, prompting the American Republican party to push Truman to harden his administration’s policy toward to the U.S.S.R. The deterioration in U.S.-Soviet relations strengthened the Anglo-American alliance on the principle that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Though the U.S. and Great Britain were competing against one another for global influence and squabbling over the future of the British Empire, the Soviet Union posed a clear threat to British imperial interests as well. This is not to say that British and U.S. interests gelled; both London and Moscow opposed Washington’s construction of an air base in Dharahan because it gave America a claim to Middle Eastern oil and because it was within striking distance of the Soviet Union’s heavy industrial plants.

The Zionists seized on the Truman Doctrine, arguing that a commitment to Greece was ipso facto a commitment to a Jewish national homeland. This was another example of Zionists exploiting Cold War antagonisms to achieve their goal. The American public, however, was strongly opposed to military intervention in Greece and, by extension, in Israel. America was strongly anti-Semitic; according to one poll, one in four Americans felt that Jews were less patriotic than other Americans, while another poll found that three in five Americans felt that the German people were not to blame for the Holocaust. This was partly due to a lack of widespread information about the Holocaust, which American and Russian Zionists tried to remedy by jointly publishing the
Black Book, cataloging Nazi horrors. While the American edition appeared in 1946, the Russian edition never made it to press because of Stalinist repression, and the typefaces were destroyed in 1948.

On September 26, 1947, Bevin announced his intention to end the British mandate, while the Arab League rejected the partition plan on September 29 and the Jewish Agency accepted on October 2. On November 29, the UN Security Council voted to allocate 56.3 percent of Palestine for a Jewish nation, internationalize Jerusalem, and give the remaining 43 percent to the Arabs, leading to the organization of Jewish and Palestinian defense committees; violence broke out between Jews and Arabs all over Palestine. On March 10, 1948, the British House of Commons voted to end the Mandate effective May 15, and President Truman promised to recognize Israeli sovereignty in a meeting with Zionist leader Chaim Weitzman just over a week later.

All of this took place against a backdrop of important Cold War events that undoubtedly influenced Truman’s decisions. For instance, Czechoslovakia “went communist” on February 25, 1948. Three weeks later, Truman addressed a joint session of Congress, detailing the “Communist menace.” Truman was reacting to pressure from Republicans who argued that he was not prosecuting the Cold War vigorously enough and left wing Democrats who flirted with nominating Truman’s secretary of state to run for president. Republican criticism of Truman’s Cold War policy was perhaps the most damaging to Truman’s prospects in the election of 1948. This explains the Truman administration’s brief change of course on Palestine in March 1948, when the president’s UN
ambassador, Warren Austin, backed away from U.S. support of the partition plan. Later in life, Truman would claim that the State Department, which had never supported the partition plan or U.S. involvement in Palestine, had “hijacked” his foreign policy in this matter. While this may in fact be true, the facts can be read differently. Truman was being crucified by the GOP for being weak on the Soviet Union, and the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan were attempts to deprive the opposition of this powerful wedge issue. Yet the Soviet Union still managed to “take” Czechoslovakia, and was now supporting the partition plan. It was an article of faith among State Department diplomats that an independent Jewish nation would become a Soviet satellite. Though Truman despised the professional diplomats in the State Department, the risk of “losing” another country in a tightly contested election year was more than he could handle. Yet so was the loss of a powerful and wealthy Democratic constituency, forcing Truman on May 15, 1948, to again change course and extend de facto recognition to Israel minutes after its creation. He was beaten by the Soviet Union, however, in extending de jure recognition, which Moscow did on May 18, 1948.

Arnold Krammer argues that there were three reasons that the Soviets recognized Israel: Israel would serve as a staging ground for Soviet diversionary tactics, ensure access to a warm water port and Middle Eastern oil, and protect Soviet interests in Iran and Turkey. As I have demonstrated, the Soviets were not in fact pushing for recognition of Israel as a Soviet satellite, leaving only Krammer’s last two explanations. While the United States’ domestic production of
oil was eight times that of the U.S.S.R.’s during the war, the latter was still the second highest producer of domestic oil, outpacing the United Kingdom by more than 20 percent and Germany’s by nearly 400 percent. While this does not disprove Krammer’s argument, access to Middle Eastern oil and a warm water port could be more easily enjoyed by cordial relations with the Arabs, who constituted a majority of the Middle East’s inhabitants and were strongly opposed to international recognition of Israeli statehood. The Arab Middle East had enjoyed Soviet support in its struggle against British imperialism, and the Palestine Communist Party (an institution with ties to the Soviet Union) spent considerable time trying to distance communism from Zionism and Judaism because the Arab perception that communism was a “Jewish” ideology had retarded the growth of a Middle Eastern communist movement.

George Lenczowski has argued that the nationalist leaders swept into power after the British withdrawal were often antagonistic to communism. In places like Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, nationalists utilized repressive measures to halt the world revolution. According to Lenczowski, Stalin had a choice: support anti-communist Arabs against the West or give up the Middle East entirely; the plan to Partition Palestine was a godsend for Stalin because it ensured Arab hostility against the U.S. and a continued sense of frustration among the Arabs. Lenczowski’s argument is weak because it assumes that global revolution was the sole goal of Soviet foreign policy, the error the Zionists made. However, as Vladislav Zubok and others have argued, world revolution took a backseat in the U.S.S.R. to security and prosperity, meaning that the Soviet Union could have
supported anti-communist Arabs as long as that support ensured Soviet security and prosperity. Thus my analysis demonstrates two things: first, by 1944 Zionism was able to submerge nuts-and-bolts internal disputes to the overall goal of achieving a Jewish nation in Palestine; and second, Zionist leaders were able to manipulate Cold War antagonisms to achieve recognition by both superpowers. With regard to Cold War interaction between superpowers and the Third World, the lesson to be learned is that superpowers' policies were susceptible to manipulation by determined Third World actors.


4 Ibid., 52.


6 Ibid.


8 Ibid.


10 Ibid.


19 Ibid., 97.


21 Ibid., 90.

22 Ibid., 88.


24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 134.


30 Ibid., 134.


33 Ibid., 94.

