Summary

- Much of the anti-Zionist language now common in the West did not arise spontaneously but was shaped over decades by a Soviet campaign that recast Zionism as racism, colonialism, and imperialism.
- Zionism itself began as the Jewish national liberation movement and became, especially after the Holocaust, a project of survival, dignity, and self-determination for a stateless people.
- After Israel's 1967 victory over Soviet-backed Arab states, Moscow intensified its ideological offensive, portraying Israel as the aggressor while obscuring Arab rejectionism and Soviet involvement.
- The Soviet Union spread this narrative internationally through the U.N., communist front groups, activist and academic networks, and broader anti-imperialist movements, helping make "Zionism is racism" part of mainstream discourse.
- The Palestinian cause became the central moral vehicle for this campaign, framed in the language of liberation, anti-colonialism, and human rights and made especially appealing to Western audiences.
- Although the Soviet Union collapsed, the framework it built survived in political activism, media, academia, and parts of Western public life, where it continues to shape hostility to Israel and to launder antisemitism through the language of justice.

By Jan Kapusnak

What much of the West now treats as instinctive moral language about Israel was built long before Oct. 7, 2023, and long before “apartheid,” “settler-colonialism,” and “genocide” became standard slogans at anti-Israel marches. The Soviet Union had already spent decades constructing the ideological framework that made such rhetoric feel natural, even virtuous.

That framework was visible from the first hours after the Hamas massacre. While Israeli families were still being butchered, women raped, civilians dragged into Gaza, and communities in southern Israel turned into slaughterhouses, Western activist networks were mobilizing not against the perpetrators, but against Israel. In London, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign helped organize demonstrations that cast the Jewish state, not Hamas, as the primary villain. Before Israel had even launched its major military response, accusations of “war crimes” and “genocide” were already flooding the streets. Hamas’s atrocities were reinterpreted as “resistance.” Israel’s self-defense was reframed as criminality.

Strikingly, these accusations did not subside even after the ceasefire in Gaza and even as Israel was simultaneously confronting Iran and its regional proxies. The script remained the same: whatever the trigger, Israel was cast as the chief aggressor.

The Soviets created “Anti-Zionism” because Israel refused to join their camp

To many observers, this looked like a passionate if misguided political reaction. In reality, it reflected something much older: the remarkable durability of a Soviet-made worldview that turned Zionism into a synonym for racism, colonialism, and imperial violence. That transformation was one of Moscow’s most successful propaganda achievements of the Cold War.

Zionism, in its essence, is the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. It was a movement of self-determination, not conquest. It aimed to normalize Jewish existence in history by giving Jews what other peoples were assumed to need: a state of their own. After the Holocaust, that aspiration ceased to be merely ideological and became existential. It was the condition for survival, dignity, and political agency after catastrophe.

The Soviet Union initially accepted this reality for reasons of its own. It quickly

recognized Israel and, through Czechoslovakia, helped supply the young state with weapons that proved crucial during the 1948 war. Moscow hoped Israel might weaken British influence in the Middle East and perhaps drift toward the socialist camp.

But that brief convergence did not last. Israel's strategic behavior, especially its later cooperation with Britain and France, shattered Soviet hopes. At the same time, older antisemitic patterns within Soviet political culture reasserted themselves. What changed geopolitically soon hardened into ideology. By the late 1960s, and especially after Israel's victory in the Six-Day War, the Kremlin had decided that Zionism must be recoded not as a national movement, but as a reactionary global menace.

The 1967 war was decisive. Israel's rapid victory over Soviet-backed Arab states humiliated Moscow and its clients. Worse still for the Kremlin, Israel emerged not only alive but strategically stronger. The Arab world responded with the Khartoum "Three No's": no peace, no recognition, no negotiations. Soviet propaganda simply inverted this reality. It depicted Israel as the aggressor, Zionism as inherently expansionist, and the Jewish state as a forward base of Western imperialism.

At the same time, the Kremlin faced another problem: Soviet Jews were increasingly demanding the right to emigrate, and many of them wanted to go to Israel. International pressure on behalf of Soviet Jewry was growing. To Soviet leaders, Zionism now appeared dangerous not only abroad but also at home. Under Yuri Andropov, the KGB helped shape a more systematic campaign. Zionism would be recast as a sinister transnational force – racist, manipulative, capitalist, anti-socialist, and subversive.

The method was familiar: repeat a colossal falsehood often enough, through enough institutions, and it acquires the appearance of truth. Thus emerged one of the central slogans of modern anti-Israel politics: the claim that Zionism is racism. The Soviet Union internationalized this message. It pushed the new anti-Zionist lexicon through diplomatic channels, communist front groups, academic networks, "peace" organizations, and conferences linking the Palestinian cause to every fashionable anti-imperialist struggle of the era. Vietnam, Cuba, South Africa, anti-colonial revolutions in Africa and Asia—Israel was rhetorically inserted into this moral universe as the embodiment of the oppressor.

The UN became the multiplier of Moscow's Anti-Zionist propaganda …

The United Nations became the most important theater for this operation. As decolonization transformed the U.N.'s membership, dozens of new states entered the General Assembly. Many had recently emerged from European colonial rule, lacked strong democratic institutions, and were highly receptive to Soviet messaging, patronage, and geopolitical courtship. Moscow exploited this shift masterfully. A new voting bloc could now be mobilized against Israel and, by extension, against the West.

The culmination came in 1975, when the U.N. General Assembly adopted Resolution 3379 declaring Zionism "a form of racism." The resolution was an extraordinary act of ideological aggression. It took the national movement of a people that had just survived genocide and recast it as a species of moral depravity. The Soviets had succeeded in converting slander into international language. What had begun as propaganda was now dressed in legalistic respectability.

Although the resolution was repealed in 1991, the underlying worldview survived. Its repeal was driven largely by shifting diplomatic needs surrounding the post-Cold War peace process, not by any thorough reckoning with the lie itself. The damage had already been done. The association between Zionism and racism had entered global political culture. It continued to shape journalism, activism, academia, and diplomacy long after the Soviet flag had disappeared from the Kremlin.

… and the Palestinians were made its useful instrument

Another major Soviet success lay in its cultivation of the Palestinian cause as the ideal vehicle for anti-Zionist politics. Arabs in Mandatory Palestine had certainly existed before the 1960s, and local identities were real. But the deliberate construction and promotion of a distinct Palestinian national identity as the central instrument for delegitimizing Israel took on new force under Soviet guidance and in partnership with radical Arab regimes.

According to Ion Pacepa, the highest-ranking intelligence officer from the Soviet bloc ever to defect to the West, the KGB played an active role in crafting this strategy. The key insight was tactical: Islamic and Arab hostility toward the West and toward Jews could be reframed in a language that appealed far beyond the Middle East. Instead of presenting the struggle against Israel as a religious war, it could be marketed as anti-colonial liberation, national self-determination, and human rights. That translation made the cause intelligible and attractive to Western intellectuals, students, clergy, and activists.

The Palestine Liberation Organization PLO became the centerpiece of this effort. Established in 1964 under Arab sponsorship and deeply influenced by Soviet patronage, it served as the institutional vehicle through which a new political narrative could be advanced. Pacepa later said that the 1964 Palestinian National Charter was drafted in Moscow. Whether every detail of that claim is accepted or disputed, the broader pattern is unmistakable: the PLO functioned not only as a militant organization but also as a propaganda instrument.

What is especially revealing about early Palestinian political doctrine is what it did not emphasize. The charter did not focus on establishing a state in the West Bank and Gaza, which at the time were under Jordanian and Egyptian control. Its center of gravity was the elimination of Israel. The struggle was defined not by coexistence, but by negation.

Yasser Arafat became the face of this project in the West: a revolutionary icon for radicals, a nationalist for diplomats, a pragmatic statesman when useful. Yet beneath these shifting masks, the core structure remained. Palestinian identity was elevated internationally less as the basis for mutual accommodation than as a moral battering ram against Jewish sovereignty. Even leading figures in the movement occasionally admitted the tactical nature of this construct with startling bluntness.

Through its propaganda, Moscow created one of the greatest political myths of the 20th century. The Palestinian movement is historically unprecedented: The only “national” project whose aim is not to build its own state, but to destroy another.

Today’s leftist anti-Zionism is less a response to events in Gaza than a continuation of recycled Soviet ideological nonsense, passed from one generation of intellectuals and activists to the next. The liberal West, victorious in the Cold War, largely failed to confront this legacy. Moscow turned Zionism into a slur, and from this lie emerged the modern face of antisemitism. In reality, Zionism is exactly the opposite of Soviet narratives: a national liberation movement of the Jewish people, grounded in the universal right to self-determination, a right that is unquestioningly granted to every other nation. Except for the Jewish one.

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