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Who Saved Israel in 1947?

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The usual answer is Truman, but it could just as easily be Stalin -- a bit of diplomatic history that offers lessons for Jerusalem today.

November 29 marks the 70th anniversary of UN General Assembly resolution 181, recommending the partition of Mandate Palestine into two separate Jewish and Arab states. It is a "paradoxical aspect of the Zionist miracle," wrote the historian Paul Johnson, "that "among the founding fathers of Israel was Joseph Stalin." Not only did the Soviet Union under Stalin vote for partition, and also recognize Israel, it had come out in favor of a Jewish state well before the United States. Moreover, it had held firm in that support both before and after the vote, and had indirectly assured that the newborn state would have the war materiel it desperately needed to defend itself.

The objective of acknowledging this history is not to "rehabilitate" Stalin's Soviet Union, nor to belittle the significance of American support for Israel. Rather, it is to show how, in the years just before, during, and after the establishment of the state of Israel, its leaders thought creatively about the postwar geopolitical order. Knowing that they had no steady friends, they presciently identified the Soviet Union as an emerging great power, and set about wooing Moscow. Soviet support then allowed them to parlay budding cold-war rivalries into even more American support. It was a masterstroke of Zionist diplomacy. Today, as Israel makes its way in a changing world, marked by the rise of new powers, there may be a lesson to be learned from this history. It all began with a forgotten speech...

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