
Victor Israelyan. *On the Battlefields of the Cold War: A Soviet Ambassador's Confession*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003. 414p.

DANIEL C. VILLANUEVA
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS

Victor Israelyan, a prominent second-tier Soviet diplomat active in many decisive phases of the Cold War, has written a memoir whose stated purpose is to assist in understanding facets of “the tragedy that was the Soviet experiment” (xvii). Using his own case as a model, he includes all Soviet citizens as accomplices in the failure of this experiment, rather than shifting the entire burden to their leaders. Unlike the memoirs of many senior Soviet and Eastern European Cold War leaders, his recollections are neither a comprehensive denunciation of all things Communist nor an *apologia* for being a misled apparatchik. His detail-rich, crisply written text contains factual analysis of the ideological constraints and political contradictions inside the Soviet Foreign Ministry which he served for five decades, with his own career trajectory illustrating these realities. As with all interesting memoirs, there is some score-settling as well: in this case, this means primarily assessing the motives of those who pushed for his removal from active diplomatic service in 1987. More than a valuable primary source of historical information, however, *On the Battlefields of the Cold War* also evinces careful and faithful translation into English from the original Russian.

During his long career, Israelyan represented the Soviet Union at the United Nations and at international conferences under prominent ambassadors such as Malik, Gromyko, and Shevardnadze. His accounts of their personalities as well as Western politicians such as George H.W. Bush serve to entertain as well as enlighten, filling in lacunae in other diplomatic histories of the various conferences he relates. The author of over ten books on diplomatic history and politics, his academic relevance first became known to a wider Western audience with *Inside the Kremlin During the Yom Kippur War* (1995). That work shed light on many strategic considerations of the Soviet Union which were largely unknown to analysts of this conflict. In the book reviewed here, he again reveals less widely known aspects of internal Soviet debates over Cold War diplomacy over a longer time period. To mention but one example: although policy disagreements in the Soviet diplomatic corps between so-called “Americanists,” “Europeanists,” and “Germanists” were known to exist, Israelyan’s personal anecdotes make this more vivid with specific instances of each group’s influence (241-244).

A major reason Israelyan's memoirs merit additional attention next to those of other more senior Cold War policymakers is in part due to his semi-outsider status in the Soviet foreign policy establishment. First, his initial academic degrees were in medicine, not law or history, though he later received a doctorate in history as part of his Diplomatic Academy training. The physician's proverbial drive to diagnose the cause of affliction—in this case, the persistence of the Soviet malady—is well-represented here. Also, unlike the overwhelming majority of the upper-level Foreign Ministry staff, Israelyan was not an ethnic Russian. He was instead born in Georgia to ethnic Armenians, though he was not fluent in that language and his parents only spoke Russian at home (34). His multiethnic origins and sensibilities lend his recollections valuable contours not found in many other memoirs of similarly highly-ranked diplomats. Three of these facets mention merit here: his descriptions of ethnically-based policy disagreements inside the “unified” Soviet foreign policy apparatus, the misunderstandings as to his religious identity based on his last name (his family was not Jewish), and the presence of official anti-Semitism in Russia in general. Especially as regards this last point, Israelyan's almost hesitant asides (7, 122-124) within the larger narrative give first-person testimony to an oft-overlooked aspect of Soviet life during the Cold War.

As edited and revised by Stephen Pearl, the work is an uncomplicated and sophisticated read. One is quite certain that the authentic voice of Israelyan, his writing style and modes of expression all have been conscientiously reproduced. The wry description of the one meeting Israelyan ever had with Leonid Brezhnev is reproduced as “speculations on some international problems, a few jokes, and one obscene anecdote” (101-102). In this, as in so many passages, both the intention of the author and the gifts of the translator are clearly articulated and excellently meshed. Very occasionally this textual fidelity is misplaced, as in the transliteration, rather than accurate rendering, of the spelling of the last name of East German leader Erich Hon[n]ecker (378). Overall, however, the translation allows the reader to concentrate on Israelyan's story, not on his “foreign voice,” in that the book is an unencumbered rendering of the source text. Instructively, Israelyan's text also includes an anecdote relating to political aspects of translation. He recalls a Soviet-US diplomatic row over the inclusion of a specific definite article in versions of UN Security Council Resolution 242 on Israeli withdrawal from territory conquered in the Six-Day War (160-161). Remembering that the anecdote is itself translated, his text provides uncannily elegant meta-commentary here.

Melvin Goodman's concise foreword provides an astute contextualization of Israelyan's contribution to the West's evolving knowledge of Soviet—and Ameri-

can—diplomacy from 1945 to 1990. As Professor of International Studies at the National War College and former Soviet analyst at the CIA and State Department, Goodman is well qualified to summarize what this work contributes to a more robust comprehension of Cold War history. As he rightly states, most available memoirs of Soviet leaders can best be characterized as “selective and self-serving on key issues” (ix). In this regard, Israelyan’s analysis is assuredly much more nuanced than many published Soviet memoirs. Still, Goodman’s paean to Israelyan’s contribution to Cold War diplomatic history is launched from a well-tended plot of ideological ground on the victorious side of the Iron Curtain. Thus, one must keep the effusive praise for Israelyan’s “searing examination of how the Kremlin conducted its foreign policy” (ix) and its “balance and fairness” (xiii) in perspective. The introduction is therefore valuable both for direct insights into Soviet diplomatic history and as a cultural artifact displaying ideological trajectories of inquiry into that history from the West.

This work will presumably be of most interest to European historians and Cold War scholars, as they compare their own evolving research with Israelyan’s first-person accounts. Yet the digressions into the politics of cultural diplomacy make his work useful for literary scholars and cultural historians as well. Likewise, translators will also want to consult this volume for an example of careful editing and revision. The extensive index of both names and topics is a useful guide to those areas of interest to scholars in various fields, and the many photographs also personalize the text. Overall, this book helps better illuminate the dedicated diplomatic efforts of high-ranking Soviet and other politicians whose deft diplomatic choreography was essential to the forty-year duration of the Cold War. Both for those who experience it only as history and those who have enduring memories of life during that time, *On the Battlefields of the Cold War* is a fascinating resource in helping to better understand this defining era in international relations. ✿