

BOOK REVIEWS

SORBY, Karol R. *Jún 1967. Šest' dní, ktoré zmenili Blízky východ* [June 1967. The Six Days that Changed the Middle East]. Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 2010. 519 p. ISBN 978-80-8095-065-1. In Slovak.

While it has been more than 40 years since the “Six-Day War” of June 1967, its impacts and influence on the subsequent fate of the region were exceptional and one can say that they continue to the present day. This is why it is most pleasing to see a book written in Slovak on this topic of such high academic quality. Even the title of the book attracts the attention of everyone interested in this area of international political relations because the event analysed was not only incredibly complicated, but also occurred on a number of mutually related levels. For more than 40 years, the Six-Day War of 1967, when without declaring war Israel attacked Egypt and then Jordan and Syria, has been a continually fascinating turning point in Middle Eastern history and in the area of world politics and international relations. This war brought about the practical end to the vision and 15-year effort of the Egyptian leader of the revolution of 1952 and the country’s president Gamal Abdel Nasser to bring about Arab unity and build a sustainable regional Arab power in the Middle East which could have been a worthy player in the international political arena.

It is pleasing to see that among Czech and Slovak academic publications there are more and more works dealing with the history of Oriental countries including their modern history. Karol Sorby is one of the most important Slovak Arabists and the first in Slovakia to have focused over many years on the 20th century history of the Arab world with a particular awareness of international relations in the region: i.e. he has observed the region as an object of international political superpowers, and has examined the key events of historical development in individual countries and regional conflicts. Karol Sorby, the head academic of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, currently also teaching at the Faculty of International Relations at the University of Economics in Bratislava, has shown with this work that he has a thorough knowledge of issues in world politics, particularly those issues concerning the Arab world and surrounding the historical development of individual countries in the Middle East. In this book he analyses key events of the war based on primary sources and acquaints the reader with the actors to the conflict, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. He also evaluates the limits of possibility for regional actors to influence the actions of the USA and USSR superpowers in the period of the first signs of *détente* in the ongoing Cold War and their guarded behaviour in avoiding a nuclear conflict in spite of naturally following their own political interests.

Already for decades historians and journalists have tried to understand the reasons behind the war and the humiliating Arab defeat. The reviewed work not only concerns a noteworthy subject but is also remarkable in its handling of the subject: this is not a

military history, which in many works has already been richly analysed in much detail, but rather an informed opinion from a domestic and international political point of view on the development of the situation in the Middle East in the period from the end of the Suez Crisis in 1956 to the formal ending of the June 1967 war by Resolution 242 in November of that year. The author directly refers to his extensive academic monograph *Suez 1956. Súmrak tradičného kolonializmu na Blízkom východe* [Suez 1956: The Twilight of Traditional Colonialism in the Middle East], which was published in 2003 and whose findings fluently deliver a starting point from which to analyse the subsequently difficult period in the development of the region and whose dramatic conflict was the crisis in May, the military climax in June and finally the political-diplomatic ending of this string of events by the Security Council of the United Nations in November 1967, which today still has an open ending.

The book is a successful synthetic handling of a historical development which was the turning point in the history of the wider region and which met with much reception in the international sphere. In the presented work, the author provides an informed narration of events leading up to the dramatic climax in June 1967. Using Arab, Western, Russian and Israeli sources, the author brings to life the drama of diplomatic manoeuvre, Middle Eastern intrigue and conspiracy as well as colossal mistakes and errors. June 1967 is a book not only about the struggle for political power but is also about powerful actors who stood at the head of both camps in this fateful conflict. In the work the author's intimate knowledge of the area under discussion, gained through a number of shorter and longer periods spent in the Orient, is apparent. In spite of its large size – after all, this is a detailed description of one of the most important periods in the political history of the Middle East in the second half of the 20th century – the book is thoughtfully and logically divided into 6 chapters.

The content of the individual chapters in this book approximates the individual sides to the conflict whose “Suez adventure” or “tripartite aggression” of 1956 led to another round of armed confrontation between Arabs and Israelis 11 years later. The author is an erudite Arabist who has spent many years in Arab countries as a researcher as well as an ambassador of the Slovak Republic to Iraq, and in his book one encounters a point of view on the development of the conflict from an Arab perspective which is not well known.

The first chapter entitled *Blízky východ ako objekt veľmocenskej politiky po suezskej vojne* [The Middle East as an Object of Superpower Politics after the Suez War] analyses the complicated nature of international relations in the Middle East. The chapter recognizes the gradual penetration of the Soviet Union into the Middle East, which allowed for the unreserved support of Israel by the United States and Western allies: a fact which has been pointed out by one cited American author (p. 63). In the second chapter entitled *Medziarabské vzťahy po suezskej vojne* [Inter-Arab Relations after the Suez War], the author undertakes a complex analysis of relations between Arab states, united in The League of Arab States regional organisation, which were practically incapable of becoming closer and uniting because of the deep ideological and class contradictions of their “revolutionary” and “reactionary” regimes (p. 128). The third chapter *Izraelský faktor v arabskej politike* [The Israeli Factor in Arab Politics], analyses the problem created for Arabs by the creation of the Jewish state of Israel in 1948. This

is a problem of long-settled societies being confronted with a new militant neighbour who confronts the Arabs on a daily basis with the “historical injustice” inflicted on the Palestinians and which in this way significantly influences international relations and political developments in Arab countries. Upon the basis of Israeli and American sources, Sorby shows that Israel secretly developed nuclear weapons in an effort to claim the upper hand over its Arab neighbours in the Middle East balance of power and that given the disagreement of the United States administration with the expansion of nuclear weapons, the Israeli government misled its own most loyal ally (p. 219).

The fourth chapter, *Zostrovanie krízy v máji 1967* [The Escalation of the Crisis in May 1967], examines the escalation of the tension between Israel and Egypt and the unsuccessful diplomatic attempts at their easing in a detailed and dedicated manner. Upon the basis of an analysis of available sources and literature, the author comes to the conclusion that the leadership of the Israeli army was already ready to resolve the conflict with the Arabs in a military fashion at the end of 1966 and was merely waiting for an opportune moment to strike (p. 247). He shows that Israel had a well-prepared and armed army and excellent intelligence; thus the legend of the “poor victim” fighting for its very existence against the superior might of aggressors does not hold water. In the fifth chapter *Izraelský útok na Egypt bez vyhlásenia vojny* [The Israeli Attack on Egypt without a Declaration of War] the author emphasizes the excellently prepared and successful initial surprise air attack, which in the space of three hours destroyed the Arab air forces (p. 334), and subsequently the fantastic organisation of the military operation against Egypt. On the other hand, upon the basis of analyses of the event by Egyptian and Arab authors the book also brings to light the causes of the catastrophic defeat of the Arabs, which were centred on the gross errors of the Egyptian army High Command in army preparation and the poor quality of its officer corps. The sixth and final chapter *Zápas Arabov za odstránenie následkov agresie* [The Struggle of Arabs to Remove the Impacts of the Aggression] shows how Egypt had to start with its army from scratch after its humiliating defeat and that considering its rejection of this defeat it had to rebuild its armed forces (pp. 401 – 403). For Arabs there was a decisive task ahead to do everything to reclaim the land lost as a result of defeat. The ambiguous United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 in November 1967 formally ended the conflict but did not resolve the existing problem and merely pushed it forward, leading to another round in Arab-Israeli conflict 6 years later. The path to a just and lasting peace in the Middle East has not been completed even today.

The book includes an extensive collection of notes and the level of the work is lifted even higher by maps and photographs. There is also a rich list of sources, literature and an index, which considering the number of mentioned actors is a necessary help. Karol Sorby has followed all processes and their interconnectedness on a global, regional and personal level. This approach is not a simple one and requires a wealth of knowledge, yet the result is most pleasing and presents a lot of well-known events from entirely new perspectives. The text of the book is understandable and reads well. It is important to appraise the diligent and highly reliable academic transcription of Arab personal and geographical names and titles. The author has used a wide heuristic base: the list of used sources and literature bears witness to the exceptionally wide scope of the author and for those interested in this field of study it offers reliable navigation for further research. The

book is the first of its kind in Slovak and Czech historiography and will certainly be a great contribution to experts in the field of the historical development of the Middle East and students of international relations as well as the wider reading public.

Ladislav DROZDÍK

SORBY, Karol R., SORBY, Karol Jr. *Blízky východ v medzinárodnej politike (1971 – 1990)* [The Middle East in International Politics (1971 – 1990)]. Bratislava: EKONÓM Publishing House, 2011. 266 p. ISBN 978-80-225-3227-3. In Slovak.

In the present day, the Near and Middle East is again a very often mentioned part of the world. The year 2011 seems to be a new turning point in the history of the Arab and Islamic world: people in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and other countries lost their fear of the despotic regimes which oppressed them and kept them in abject poverty, and got onto the streets and squares to demand the removal of these corrupt regimes and the introduction of essential political and social changes.

In recent years we can observe in the Czech Republic as well as in Slovakia a slight increase in the number of scholarly works dealing with historical developments in Asia and Africa. It is encouraging that the Arab world, i.e. the Middle East and North Africa, are becoming the subject of more intensive scholarly attention. The Faculty of International Relations at the University of Economics in Bratislava is one of the educational establishments constantly broadening its range of study programmes in this domain.

This work sums up the results of the authors' research treating the above specified period of Arab history which has published in Slovak and English in several scholarly journals in the course of the last decade. The notable Slovak Arabist and historian in the book under revision takes into consideration all the crucial components of the 20-year development of this turbulent region and presents it in a balanced complex structure. In the respective chapters he deals with developments in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The monograph is properly completed with three chapters by his son, also an Arabist and historian, Karol Sorby Jr., who follows the situation in Iraq of Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr and Ṣaddām Ḥusayn in the 1970s and explains the roots of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. He continues this narrative in the last chapter, where he tries to give a balanced picture of the origins and course of the Gulf Crisis in 1990 which ended in the First Gulf War.

The turning points in the development of nations, states or regions can always be a matter of feverish discussion between scholars. I am convinced that the year 1970 in the history of the Middle East was extremely important as it brought a radical change in political direction. Whereas the 1950s and 1960s were an era of revolutionary upheaval and forming of society on the lines of secular nationalism and "Arab" socialism, the beginning of the 1970s brought about a turning point. The decisive events leading to this change were the crushing defeat of the revolutionary Arab regimes in the Six-Day War of 1967 and the untimely death of Egyptian President Jamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir, the most distinctive personality of modern Arab history and a champion of Arab nationalism and Arab unity. The second turning point in the book is the crisis and the war in the Gulf in