

BOOK REVIEWS

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.

Only two years have elapsed since I reviewed the monograph written by Karol R. Sorby: *The Middle East in International Politics, 1918 – 1945* and the same author has already presented a new monograph dealing with the period from 1971 to 1990. The Middle East and the Arab world have counted for many years among the areas oscillating in the centre of international politics and not in its periphery. In Slovakia there is only a limited number of scholars who are working in the field of the modern history of the Arab world and Dr Sorby is in the lead. One of the educational establishments continuously broadening its range of study programmes in this field is the Faculty of International Relations at the University of Economics in Bratislava. The Faculty offers its students as an optional subject the specialization “The Middle East in International Politics in the Twentieth Century” which is divided into three semesters (half-year terms). In this work Karol R. Sorby summarizes the results of his research covering this specific period in the history of the Arab East, published in Slovak and English in several scientific journals in the course of the last decade.

The year 1970 brought a radical change, because the premature death of Egypt's President Jamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir on 28 September 1970 meant the passing away of a man who for nearly eighteen years had crucially influenced the course of political events in the Arab world. We can agree with the author, that this man to a great extent succeeded in putting Egypt in the centre of three important circles – the Arab Circle, the African Circle and the Islamic Circle as he had foreseen in his little book *The Philosophy of the Revolution* published in 1954 (p. 14). However, the real legacy of the *Nāṣirist* revolution which influenced even the most remote corners of the Arab fatherland, was not only the abolition of social distinctions by elimination of influence of the feudal and haute bourgeoisie strata, by the agrarian reform, by developments in industrialization of the country and by the construction of the High Aswan Dam, but above all that it gave the Egyptians the feeling of dignity and pride that development could be achieved as a result of nationwide endeavour. His death changed the balance of power in the Arab world and in Egypt, where he for years undisputedly ruled the country and made all the important political decisions, and left a great vacuum. His successor Anwar as-Sādāt found himself in a difficult position: in relation to Israel the state of “no war, no peace” went on and it became obvious that the USA was not ready to exert sufficient pressure on Israel to withdraw its troops from the occupied territories on terms which would not

be totally humiliating for the Arabs. The then existing cease-fire was advantageous for Israel which would have welcomed its indefinite duration.

The development which is marked by two important elements: oil and Israel, began to unfold here in different Middle Eastern countries. The political and economic development of the Middle Eastern region, during the last two decades of the Cold War between the two superpowers, inevitably has to be analysed through the prism of these elements. The regional, inter-Arab, confessional and sectarian conflicts were taking place against this background. They were substantially marked by irregular division of influence of social forces, when the pressing problems of the times had to be solved by semi-feudal regimes which had still not passed through the bourgeois revolution, together with “revolutionary” regimes which were totalitarian too.

In the book reviewed here the notable Slovak Arabist and historian takes into consideration all the crucial components of the twenty-year development of this turbulent region and composes it into a balanced complex. In the respective chapters he deals with the development in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, for better understanding of the religious radicalism he has added the chapter “The Roots of militant Islam in the Middle East”. The monograph is properly completed with three chapters by his son, also an Arabist and historian, Karol Sorby Jr. In the first of it, named “Islam and the National State” he theoretically approaches the relationship between Islam and the national state which is extremely important for understanding the differences between Orient and Occident. In another chapter he analyses the situation in Iraq of Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr and Ṣaddām Ḥusayn in the 1970s and explains the roots of the Iraq-Iran War in the 1980s. He continues this narrative in the last chapter where he tries to give a balanced picture of the origins of the Gulf War of 1990, after which the “Pax Americana” in the Middle East began.

The book *The Middle East in International Politics, 1971 – 1990* fulfils all the standards required from a monograph of this kind: it is relatively concise, but at the same time it gives an answer to all the cardinal problems which characterized the development in Middle Eastern Arab society in the given period. The two authors have followed all the high scientific requirements, and treated the complex local and international problems in an understandable way not only for university students, but also for wider academic circles and those interested in this troubled region. The aspects of international politics are stressed in every chapter dealing with political development in the Arab countries. Both authors sensitively linked together the synthetic and the analytical methods and consistently exploited the chronological approach.

Lastly, I would point to some very important matters treated in the monograph under review, without which it is hard to understand all the interrelations of events on the Middle Eastern political scene. First of all, there is a well documented analysis of superpower interests in gaining or keeping influence in this geostrategically important region. No less important is the critical historians’ view of the dramatic development of Arab-Israeli relations against the background of two Arab-Israeli wars (1967 and 1973) and the problem of the Palestinian refugees, which is still unsolved today, in spite of many UN resolutions. The authors use a wide source base: the list of used sources and literature points to a high level of understanding of all the issues related to the subject. It

is important to appreciate the precise and very reliable scientific transcription of Arab proper names.

The monograph represents a qualitative enrichment of our specialized literature in history and international relations. It will not only be a useful source of knowledge for the students of the Faculty of International Relations, but will undoubtedly be of interest for larger academic circles. It will also certainly be helpful for everybody who would like to understand better the course of events in the contemporary Middle East.

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