

## BOOK REVIEWS

GOMBÁR, Eduard, BAREŠ, Ladislav, VESELÝ, Rudolf. *Dějiny Egypta* [History of Egypt]. Praha: Lidové noviny Publishing House, 2021, 848 pp. ISBN 978-80-7422-798-1

The contemporary importance of Egypt is reflected in the large and constantly increasing body of publications dealing with its history, politics and ideologies as well as its social and economic development. The Lidové noviny Publishing House has now included in its long-running and successful series entitled *Histories of Nations* the publication of a historical work examining the whole history of Egypt. It has become the rule that works which were written by leading home specialists – unlike translations of books from abroad – are closer to the thinking and requirements of both Czech and Slovak readers. As the authors put it, Egypt belongs to those countries in which the central axis was based on rivers, like other civilizations (China, India and Mesopotamia) and it has one of the longest continuous histories in the world which reaches back to the very threshold of human civilization.

Egypt provided one of the earliest sites of civilized society on earth. Throughout its long history Egypt's culture has been deeply influenced by topographical peculiarities and geographical location. The rainfall of the country is sparse and most of the territory is desert. Thus, Egypt's capacity to support an agricultural population depends on the valley of the Nile and some oases in its western desert. The natural bounty of Egypt – the annual floodwater from the Nile – has been exploited for millennia, stored in specially prepared basins and gradually released over the subsequent months. Because of the constant renewal of fertility by the silt brought down by the flood it has always been possible to harvest two crops a year. On the banks of the Nile handwriting in the form of hieroglyphic writing came into being and represented a visual record of the spoken word.

The racial origins of the first Egyptian people are obscure, but it is obvious to any visitor that the type made familiar by the paintings and sculptures of Ancient Egypt still persists side by side with the multitude of others left by the numerous conquests and immigrations which the country has experienced since the Assyrian conquest in the seventh century BC. That conquest left little trace but the Greeks, who came first as mercenaries and merchants and later with

Alexander the Great as conquerors in the fourth century BC, brought about profound changes. The Romans succeeded the Greeks as the rulers of the eastern Mediterranean. When the Roman Empire was finally divided in the fourth century AD, Egypt naturally remained in the eastern half and it had already become Christian. In the seventh century AD Egypt became part of the domain of Islam and from then on ceased to share in the political and cultural evolution of Europe.

The authors of this monumental historical work are three outstanding Czech orientalists. The first is an Egyptologist, Professor Ladislav Bareš, director of the Institute of Egyptology at Charles University in Prague; the second is an Arabist, Rudolf Veselý lately deceased professor emeritus from the Institute of the Near East and Africa; and the third is Professor Eduard Gombár, the former director of the Institute of the Near East and Africa at Charles University in Prague. Professor Bareš has written the first part of the book entitled *The Ancient History of Egypt*. This is the period beginning with earliest human activities in the Nile valley. The author gives a vivid picture of the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms and ends his part with a description of the situation during the Greek and Roman supremacy. It is clear that the greatest problem for Professor Bareš was to cram so much into a limited space.

The second part of the book is entitled *Egypt in the Middle Ages* and begins with the emergency of Islam and the conquest of Egypt by Muslim Arabs. Professor Veselý describes the historical events in Egypt during the age of the Umajjad and Abbasid Caliphates and during the Shīʿite Fāṭimide Caliphate, when Egypt became the base for a heretical anti-caliphate which lasted for two hundred years. For a time, this made Cairo the main centre of Islamic power. He continues his narrative of Egypt through the age of the crusades and explains how the orthodoxy of Islam was restored when Egypt was conquered by Ṣalāḥaddīn al-Ayyūbī. A century later the Baghdad caliphate had been destroyed by the Mongols and Cairo was ruled by the freedmen officers of the slave regiments of the Ayyūbid armies, the Mamlūks. It was these Mamlūks who halted the Mongol armies in Syria and destroyed the last strongholds of the Crusaders. Professor Veselý also concentrates on the history of the Mamlūk Sultanate in Egypt and after its defeat in 1517 with Egypt as a part of the Ottoman Empire. During the 16th to 18th centuries we witness several attempts by the Mamlūk elite to seize power once again in Egypt from the Ottomans.

Professor Gombár is the author of the third and fourth parts of the book. The third part called *Modern Egypt* begins with the military campaign of Napoleon Bonaparte to Egypt in 1798 and its consequences. Afterwards the author describes Egypt during the reign of the Viceroy Muḥammad ʿAlī and his successors. The whole narrative is interwoven with explaining the problems of the so called “Eastern Question” from its beginning at the end of the eighteenth

century until its end as a result of the peace settlement after the Second World War. The author objectively evaluates the events and at the same time brings into sharp focus the overt and covert interests of the Great Powers, interests which are on numerous occasions either omitted or embellished by their own historians. The author also examines the situation after the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, when the country remained formally a part of the Ottoman Empire, covering the period of the British protectorate (1914 – 1922). The author continues his scholarly account of the political, economic, social and cultural development of Egypt during its formal independence under firm British control supported by the presence of thousands of British troops.

The fourth and last part of the book written by Professor Gombár is similarly entitled *Contemporary Egypt* and is dedicated to historical developments from the Egyptian revolution of the Free Officers in 1952 to the end of the twentieth century. Most attention is paid to that period of Egyptian history when the country was ruled by Jamāl ʿAbdannāṣir (1954 – 1970). Then follows the decade of President Anwar as-Sādāt (1971 – 1981), during which he radically changed the revolutionary course of Egypt. His political line was inconsistent and the fact that at the beginning of his rule he exploited the Muslim Brotherhood in his political struggle with leftist forces released the long oppressed forces of political Islam which finally bloodily liquidated him. Egypt during the era of President Ḥusnī Mubārak once and for all lost the position of a regional Arab power, which it had been in the fifties and sixties. An interesting section of this part of the book is the chapter entitled *Czech-Egyptian Relations*. In his presentation Professor Gombár links together the problems of internal development (e.g. modernization, secularization, nationalism and political Islam) in the periods studied with questions of foreign policy which influenced the situation (the policy of European powers and later the USA and USSR superpowers) and provides an essential background for a better understanding of the problems and prospects of contemporary Egypt.

The authors have mobilized their deep knowledge in the field and the book will appeal to anyone interested in the history of Egypt. It will undoubtedly be of help to students and to non-specialists alike. Although the bibliography is limited to a list of selected works, it shows a creative and wide-ranging use of primary and secondary sources and can serve both professional historians and those with an interest in history as a sufficient guide. Bearing in mind the fact that a synthetic work of this type cannot answer every question it raises, it gives a sound basis for further reading. The book is undoubtedly the result of many years of successful combining of all three authors' teaching and research work at the university. This book is vital reading for anyone interested in the subject it addresses, particularly those who have a good command of Czech. It is

written with imagination, understanding, profound insights, and scholarly detachment.

Despite its large size the book is extremely readable and in fact one which is often hard to put down. It is so well written, so beautifully produced, and so coherent in its presentation of what in other hands might be a tedious subject. In sum, this important and challenging book will be an excellent stimulus for those interested in the history of Egypt. The reader finishes this substantial book with a firm grasp of the main tendencies of Egypt's historical development. The authors have put together a fascinating account of continuity and change and they have succeeded on every score.

*Karol R. SORBY*

RIGGAN, Jennifer. *The Struggling State: Nationalism, Mass Militarization, and the Education of Eritrea*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016, pp 243. ISBN 978-1-4399-1270-6.

*The Struggling State: Nationalism, Mass Militarization, and the Education of Eritrea* is a book written by Jennifer Riggan. It focuses on the role and attitudes of schools and especially teachers in nation-making processes in Eritrea. This long-term, in-depth study of this specific segment of Eritrean society uncovers to the reader some of the everyday realities that affect individual identity and personal attitudes towards the state, which fuses education with militarization. The book also provides the reader with a substantial account of the social, political and historic context.

Jennifer Riggan is a Professor of International Studies in the Department of Historical and Political Studies at Arcadia University. Her ethnographic research focuses on political identities and state formation in Eritrea and Ethiopia. She has published several articles on the de-coupling of the nation and the state, the dynamic relationship between citizenship and nationalism, and militarization, education, and development.

The book *The Struggling State* is a very interesting, and, in my opinion, important contribution to the literature focused on Eritrea's political and social situation. The author draws on her long-term experience of Eritrea because she lived and worked in the country for several years. From 1995 – 1997 the author served as a Peace Corps volunteer, during which time she was an English

language teacher in a senior secondary school. After her service, she returned to Eritrea eight times between 1997 and 2003 and even married an Eritrean teacher in 2000. Then, from 2003 to 2005, she stayed in Eritrea and conducted field research in the same school where she was teaching as a volunteer. Riggan, in her book, very cleverly draws on her experience and, although she was a teacher in the very same school herself, she does not hesitate to be very critical of some practices that teachers are using during the teaching process, providing the reader with examples, including even some of her own, which she criticizes. However, more importantly, the book is interesting because it depicts the nation-making process both from a micro and macro-perspective.

The book's introduction provides the reader with the basic historical context of Eritrea, the most relevant theoretical background, the organisation of the book and the duration and character of her field research. The first chapter, "Struggling for the Nation: Contradictions of Revolutionary Nationalism", explains the historical development of the country, the role of the armed struggle in its history, and the inculcation of the struggle ethos into the relatively recently constructed image of Eritrean citizens. According to Riggan, the most important tools for forging and maintaining an Eritrean identity can be identified as mass socialization, which happens through compulsory National Service; everyday rituals, such as the raising of the flag, the utilization of everyday objects as national symbols, such as a camel or *shida* (sandals, which soldiers wore in the struggle) etc.. The second chapter, called "It Seemed like a Punishment: Coercive State Effects and the Maddening State", starts with the author's personal experience, which recounts the story of the arrest of the author's husband. This arrest was a part of a so-called *gifa* – a round-up during which large numbers of citizens appearing to be of the age suitable for National Service, were arrested and held in custody until they proved that they had already finished their service or that they were exempt. This practice, along with many others, creates the condition of the so-called "maddening state". Coercive use of power by state actors creates a sense of alienation among its citizens, which results in a change of perception of the state among its subjects. As a result of those practices, many citizens created "evasive strategies". The next chapter, "Students or Soldiers? Troubled State Technologies and the Imagined Future of Educated Eritrea" focuses entirely on the educational system and schools. The main concern of this chapter is the school reform from the year 2003, which established military training as a compulsory part of the educational system. Every student who finished 11th grade was sent to boarding school in a military camp in Sawa, where they underwent training. Because some students were "evading" the grade 12th, the requirements to pass 11th grade were reduced, teachers were instructed to pay particular attention to students "at-risk" of not passing the 11th grade. The fourth chapter, "Educating

Eritrea: Disorder, Disruption, and Remaking the Nation”, describes the situation which most of the teachers in Eritrea face. The author argues that schools and even the teachers themselves can be perceived as being in a liminal phase. This situation results in a sense of disorder: students, teachers, schools, national institutions in general, and even the whole state are seen as dysfunctional. The fifth chapter, “The Teacher State: Morality and Everyday Sovereignty over Schools”, focuses on three specific events that occurred in the school studied, which can be interpreted as an attempt by the teachers to re-gain control over the space of the university. Even though most teachers condemn the authoritarian practices of the state, even they themselves on some occasions use corporal punishment and other forms of authoritarian practice. Because of this, most students perceive their teachers in the same way as most Eritreans perceive their government: as inept and overtly coercive. In the conclusion, the author discusses the trends of mass emigration from Eritrea. In her view, Eritrea can be seen as a “gated community”. The author emphasizes that the same processes that are happening in Eritrea can be seen in many other countries worldwide, and even in those that are perceived as democratic.

The book *Struggling State* is very interesting and well-written. The author uses a wide range of scholarly literature to support her arguments, ranging from well-known authors such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Benedict Anderson, Mary Douglas to more recent academic studies on concepts such as nation, state, education, power, etc. I strongly recommend this book to those interested in the countries of the Horn of Africa or nationalism and to every curious reader who would like to gain insight into some of the processes which are very important for nationalism and state formation.

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