

CZECHOSLOVAK-EGYPTIAN  
RELATIONS AT THE ONSET OF THE COLD WAR:  
THE WAY TO A PRAGMATIC PARTNERSHIP\*  
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This study examines the turbulent development of Czechoslovak-Egyptian relations from 1948 to 1955. The initially rather strained relations in the late 1940s were replaced by a close partnership between the two countries that resulted in the development of various projects in the fields of political, economic, military, cultural, and scientific cooperation. Such a shift was encouraged both by the internal political changes in Egypt following the events of the July Revolution in 1952 led by the Free Officers Movement, and also by the changing priorities of the Eastern Bloc in the Middle East and North Africa. Czechoslovakia as a Soviet satellite echoed to some extent Soviet attitudes towards the region. The detailed examination of Czech archival sources confirms the importance of Czechoslovak involvement in Egypt at the onset of the Cold War for the whole Eastern Bloc, as in the 1950s Czechoslovakia was not only able to use its former experience and contacts in the country to become one of the most active socialist countries in the area but these activities also had a significant international impact on both the contemporary political situation in the region and the development of the Cold War rivalries that later escalated during the famous Suez Crisis (1956).

**Keywords:** Czechoslovakia, Cold War, diplomacy, Egypt, foreign policy

## Introduction

The history of Czechoslovak involvement in Egypt dates back to the 1920s when the newly born Czechoslovakia started developing political, economic, and cultural activities in strategic world regions including the Middle East and North

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Africa. A Czechoslovak diplomatic mission in Cairo was established in 1923 but the importance of mutual relations increased during the Cold War. Already in the late 1940s, both the United States of America (USA) and the Soviet Union (USSR) understood the geopolitical importance of Egypt often labelled 'the gateway to Africa', and aimed to include the country in their sphere of influence. Czechoslovakia, which after the communist coup in February 1948 had been fully integrated into the Eastern Bloc, followed the foreign policy agenda of the Soviet Union to spread the principles of socialism abroad by developing various political, economic, military, and cultural strategies and activities. Czechoslovakia with regard to the aforementioned historical experience with the region and existing local ties was particularly active in engaging in all these interactions with the countries in the area, including Egypt.

At first, the chances for closer collaboration between Egypt and the Eastern Bloc did not seem to be very great as King Fārūq of Egypt like other regional monarchs saw communism as a hostile ideology for his regime and at the same time Egypt condemned the strong Czechoslovak support for the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. The situation, however, started changing in the early 1950s following the Free Officers Movement (1952) coup that overthrew the monarchy and the subsequent establishment of a progressive nationalist regime, first represented by general Muḥammad Najīb but a year later toppled by lieutenant-colonel Jamāl 'Abdannāṣir. Despite the initial distrust by Czechoslovak leaders of the new Egyptian regime, eventually, the Arab Republic of Egypt became one of the key allies of Czechoslovakia in the Middle East in the 1950s, which was confirmed not only by the political support of the Eastern Bloc for 'Abdannāṣir's regime but also by the development of various cooperative projects in the following years, including the famous Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deals in 1955.

This article aims to examine and interpret the turbulent history of the diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and Egypt from 1948 to 1955, based on research on recently declassified documents from the Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (AMZV) and the National Archive of the Czech Republic (NA) by using the traditional methods of historical inquiry. These archival collections contain thousands of pages of documents and offer a unique insight into the views of Czechoslovak authorities such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Czechoslovak Embassy in Cairo, the Presidential Office, and the Politburo of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia on the dynamic relations with Egypt through internal reports and analyses, records of the meetings organized to discuss how to deal with this matter, copies of diplomatic correspondence between Czechoslovak and Egyptian diplomats both in Prague and Cairo, regular local media surveys, and much more. The narrative of these archival materials is often biased by the ideological perspectives and

worldviews that the communist regime expected from their diplomatic corps. This means that some reports may have some information gaps/misinterpretations but they are, nevertheless, valuable sources of information on Czechoslovak foreign policy of the time.

Ideally the information from the Czech archives should be compared and contrasted with the relevant Soviet and Egyptian sources to create a complex picture of Czechoslovak-Egyptian bilateral relations. Unfortunately, at present, such research is not possible due to the limited access for foreign researchers to these archival collections. In recent years, the Russian Federation has been criticized internationally by academics for not providing full access to the archival documents from the time of the Soviet Union, presenting instead carefully chosen files that support the current political regime's interpretations of Russian history.<sup>1</sup> With regard to the current deterioration of the relations between Russia and the West due to the war in Ukraine, the opportunities for western scholars to conduct research in the State Archive of the Russian Federation seems to be reduced to the absolute minimum. Similar problems also occur in Egypt, where the local authorities are reluctant to open up potentially sensitive issues of the 20th-century history of their country. For these reasons, foreign researchers face many obstacles when asking for permission to study the archival collections of Egypt on foreign policy and security.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, this study aims to present the new findings from Czech archival sources that have not been fully exploited so far. A case study examining the Czechoslovak perspective on the relations with Egypt in 1948 – 1955 will not only fill a knowledge gap – in comparison to research already conducted on the other Eastern Bloc countries, especially the Soviet Union and East Germany – it will also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the foreign policy of communist Czechoslovakia towards the region of the Middle East in the first decade of the Cold War. The research will be based on the premises of the *New Cold War History*. While the traditional paradigm of Cold War studies has focused mostly on the interactions between the USA and USSR to reach at least a partial understanding of global political affairs, the role of the satellites of both superpowers was somewhat underdeveloped and underestimated.<sup>3</sup> These views on the Cold War, however, have been gradually changing with the emergence of the so-called *New Cold War History*, which is generally considered one of the current influential historiographical trends of

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<sup>1</sup> ÚSTR. *Chceme zpřístupnit ruské archivy, ne legitimizovat ruskou politiku* [We Want to Open up Russian Archives, not to Legitimize Russian Politics].

<sup>2</sup> BYRNE, K. *A Survey of Middle East Archives: Egypt*.

<sup>3</sup> HOPKINS, M. F. *Continuing Debate, and New Approaches in Cold War History*, pp. 913–914.

Cold War studies. Thus the role of the Soviet satellites such as Czechoslovakia is understood as an important contribution to and an alternative perspective on Cold War history.<sup>4</sup>

### Summary of the Current State of Research

The activities of the Eastern Bloc in Third World countries during the time of the Cold War have aroused the increasing interest of academics and the public. Due to the opening up of archives in some former Soviet satellites over the last 30 years, researchers have had the opportunity to study the declassified documents to reconstruct the political, economic, military, cultural, and educational interactions of the Eastern Bloc in Africa and the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> Alongside interstate relations, more attention has gradually been paid to studies of the contacts and cooperation of the Eastern Bloc with some non-state actors, especially the national liberation movements and guerrilla groups operating in Third World countries, and the activities of the intelligence services.<sup>6</sup> Most of the existing publications examining the interactions between the Eastern Bloc and Egypt focus predominantly on the Soviet Union, according to the traditional interpretations of the Cold War as the exclusive preserve of the superpowers.<sup>7</sup> The politics of the Soviet satellites towards Egypt has been examined only partially with an emphasis on the attitudes of one satellite state towards Africa and the Middle East<sup>8</sup> that partially also includes the relations with Egypt, or the spectacular moments of Egyptian history with an international impact such as

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<sup>4</sup> WESTAD, O. A. *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>5</sup> See MUEHLENBECK, P. E., TELEPNEVA, N. (eds.). *Warsaw Pact Intervention in the Third World: Aid and Influence in the Cold War*; KOURA, J. *Czechoslovakia and the 'Cyprus Issue' in the years 1960 – 1974: Secret Arms Deals, Espionage, and the Cold War in the Middle East*, pp. 516–533.

<sup>6</sup> KOURA, J. *A Prominent Spy: Mehdi Ben Barka, Czechoslovak Intelligence, and Eastern Bloc Espionage in the Third World during the Cold War*, pp. 318–339; ZÁHORÍK, J. *Czechoslovakia and Congo/Zaire under Mobutu, 1965 – 1980*, pp. 290–314.

<sup>7</sup> GINAT, R. *The Soviet Union and Egypt, 1945 – 1955*; RUBISTEIN, A. Z. *Red Star on the Nile: The Soviet-Egyptian Influence Relationship since the June War*; SORBY, K. Jr., *Egypt v siločiarach veľmocenskej politiky v polovici 60. rokov 20. storočia* [Egypt's Role in Superpower Politics in the mid-1960s], pp. 77–98.

<sup>8</sup> SCHULZ, B., HANSEN, W. W., REMINGTON, R. A., DOBOZI, I. *The Soviet Bloc and the Third World: The Political Economy of East-South Relations*; TRENTIN, M. *Socialist Development' and East Germany in the Arab Middle East*, pp. 127–144; RICHTEROVÁ, D., PEŠTA, M., TELEPNEVA, N. *Banking on Military Assistance: Czechoslovakia's Struggle for Influence and Profit in the Third World 1955 – 1968*, pp. 90–108.

Egyptian involvement in the conflict with Israel, the Suez Crisis, or the ideology of pan-Arabism promoted by the revolutionary Egyptian leadership.<sup>9</sup> The attitudes of Czechoslovakia towards Egypt in these publications are mentioned only briefly or not covered at all. In general, there are not many publications on the foreign policy activities of Czechoslovakia in the Middle East in the Cold War that could offer a detailed analysis of Czechoslovak interactions with Egypt.

There is the important book *Czechoslovakia and the Middle East in 1948 – 1989*<sup>10</sup> [in Czech] by Petr Zídek and Karel Sieber (2009), in which the authors present a very wide-ranging summary of the bilateral relations between Czechoslovakia and some countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Czechoslovak relations with Egypt are, however, presented only in one overview chapter. A similar case is the comprehensive book by Eduard Gombár, Ladislav Bareš, and Rudolf Veselý (2021) *History of Egypt*<sup>11</sup> [in Czech] that traces the historical development of the country from prehistoric times to the beginning of the 21st century. Hence the bilateral relations between Czechoslovakia and Egypt are not the main topic of this book; they are introduced briefly in the last chapter. Philip Muehlenbeck (2016) in his book *Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945 – 1968*<sup>12</sup> provides an in-depth analysis of Czechoslovak activities in the region in the first two decades of the Cold War, but, the primary focus of the author is not on Egypt.

In recent years, a few studies on aspects of the relations between Czechoslovakia and Egypt after the Second World War based on extensive archival research have appeared. While Veronika Vavrečková (2015) focused in her article *Czechoslovakian-Egyptian Relations in the Years 1945 – 1948*<sup>13</sup> [in Czech] on the restoration of the postwar bilateral relations between the two countries, Eva Taterová (2022) has published a study analyzing the changing attitudes of Czechoslovak Cold War diplomacy towards the actors of the Arab-Israeli conflict *The Gradual Changes of the Attitude of Czechoslovak Diplomacy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict during the 1948 – 1967 Period*<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> KAMRAVA, M. *The Modern Middle East: A Political History since the First World War*; MORRIS, B. *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881 – 1998*; ABURISH, S. *Nasser: The Last Arab*; ABOU-EL-FADL, R. *Foreign Policy as Nation Making: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War*.

<sup>10</sup> ZÍDEK, P., SIEBER, K. *Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948 – 1989* [Czechoslovakia and the Middle East in 1948 – 1989].

<sup>11</sup> GOMBÁR, E., BAREŠ, L., VESELÝ, R. *Dějiny Egypta* [History of Egypt].

<sup>12</sup> MUEHLENBECK, P. *Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945 – 1968*.

<sup>13</sup> VAVREČKOVÁ, V. *Československo-egyptské vztahy v letech 1945 – 1948* [Czechoslovakian-Egyptian Relations in the Years 1945 – 1948], pp. 73–87.

<sup>14</sup> TATEROVÁ, E. *Proměny přístupu československé diplomacie k arabsko-izraelskému konfliktu v letech 1948 – 1967* [The Gradual Changes of the Attitude of Czechoslovak Diplomacy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict during the 1948 – 1967 Period], pp. 43–77.

[in Czech]. The military cooperation between Czechoslovakia and Egypt has been studied by Milan Vyhliđal, whose work examines the history of Czechoslovak military experts training Egyptian troops and the establishment of the Military Technical College in Cairo.<sup>15</sup> The remarkable story of the Czechoslovak-Egyptian Arms Deal (1955) from the perspective of Israeli intelligence was recounted by Guy Laron (2009) in his piece “*Logic dictates that they may attack when they feel they can win: The 1955 Czech-Egyptian Arms Deal, the Egyptian Army, and Israeli Intelligence*.”<sup>16</sup> However, the author had only limited access to Czech archival sources. The personal stories of Arab students in communist Czechoslovakia were collected by Daniela Hannová (2014) and published in her article *The Restless Dandies: Arab Students in Prague in the 1950s and 1960s*<sup>17</sup> [in Czech].

Next to the above publications, there are some books that deal with broader historical, religious, cultural, and other types of interactions between Czechoslovakia and the Arab countries, including Egypt. A classic is the book *Islam and the Czech Lands*<sup>18</sup> by Jiří Bečka and Miloš Mendel (1998), whose primary concern is to provide a complex overview of the history of the contacts between Islam and the Czech people rather than to direct attention to the relations with one specific Muslim country such as Egypt. Jana Gombárová (2017) has published the book *Islamic Culture and its Reflection in Europe and the Czech Lands*<sup>19</sup> [in Czech] which examines current Czech-Arab relations on the basis of historical traditions. Similar topics were previously examined by Miloš Mendel, Bronislav Ostránský, and Tomáš Rataj (2007) in their book *Islam in the Heart of Europe: The Influences of Islamic Civilization upon the Past and Present of the*

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<sup>15</sup> VYHLÍDAL, M. *Češi v Káhíře. Aktivní pomoc Vojenské akademie Antonína Zápotockého v Brně při budování Military Technical College v Káhíře* [Czechs in Cairo. The Active Assistance of the Military Academy of Antonín Zápotocký in Brno in the Constitution of the Military Technical College in Cairo], pp. 99–112; VYHLÍDAL, M. *Czechoslovak Assistance with the Development of the Military Technical College in Cairo*, pp. 134–141.

<sup>16</sup> LARON, G. “*Logic dictates that they may attack when they feel they can win: The 1955 Czech-Egyptian Arms Deal, the Egyptian Army, and Israeli Intelligence*,” pp. 69–84.

<sup>17</sup> HANNOVÁ, D. *Problémoví elegáni. Arabští studenti v Praze v 50. a 60. letech 20. století* [The Restless Dandies: Arab Students in Prague in the 1950s and 1960s], pp. 105–125.

<sup>18</sup> BEČKA, J., MENDEL, M. *Islám a české země* [Islam and the Czech Lands].

<sup>19</sup> GOMBÁROVÁ, J. *Islámská kultura a její reflexe v Českých zemích* [Islamic Culture and its Reflection in Europe and the Czech Lands].

*Czech Lands*<sup>20</sup> [in Czech]. None of these three books, however, worked with available Czech archival sources.

### **The Strained Mutual Relations in the late 1940s**

Already in the late 1940s, both the USA and the USSR understood the geostrategic importance of the Middle East and North Africa, and the crucial role of Egypt as one of the regional leaders. Yet, most of the region was still under the political influence of the traditional colonial European powers, especially Great Britain and France, both of which were generally unpopular in local societies.<sup>21</sup> Such a situation seemed to be a window of opportunity for the two superpowers to spread their spheres of influence in the region. Postwar Czechoslovak diplomacy was in the shadow of the gradual integration of the country into the Soviet Bloc, which also affected Czechoslovak Middle Eastern policy.<sup>22</sup> While the immediate goal to restore the prewar diplomatic missions in the area was successfully achieved – as early as November 1943 Jaroslav Šejnoha had been appointed as the Czechoslovak ambassador in Cairo<sup>23</sup> and his Egyptian counterpart, Sadek Aboud Khadra, started serving as the *chargé d'affaires* in Prague in November 1946<sup>24</sup> – the political priorities went through a turbulent period owing to the dynamics of the Cold War, in which the Middle East became one of the important battlefields.<sup>25</sup>

While the USA focused on developing strategic partnerships with countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the Soviet Union learned a lesson in Iran in 1946 when the Soviet reluctance to withdraw the Red Army from the territories

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<sup>20</sup> MENDEL, M., OSTŘANSKÝ, B., RATAJ, T. *Islám v srdci Evropy: vlivy islámské civilizace na dějiny a současnost českých zemí* [Islam in the Heart of Europe: The Influences of Islamic Civilization upon the Past and the Present of the Czech Lands].

<sup>21</sup> COHEN, M., KOLINSKY, M. *Demise of the British Empire in the Middle East: Britain's Responses to Nationalist Movements, 1943 – 55*.

<sup>22</sup> DEJMEK, J. *Diplomacie Československa. Díl I. Nástin dějin ministerstva zahraničních věcí a diplomacie (1918 – 1992)* [Diplomacy of Czechoslovakia – Part I: An Outline of the History of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1918 – 1992)]; ZBORIL, F. *Československá a česká zahraniční politika: minulost a současnost* [Czechoslovak and Czech Foreign Policy: Past and Present].

<sup>23</sup> AMZV Diplomatic Protocol (DP), 1945 – 1958, Box 5. *Vysl. J. Šejnoha, agrément pro Egypt* [Ambassador Šejnoha, Agrément for Egypt], Call No. 2773, 14 October 1943.

<sup>24</sup> VAVREČKOVÁ, V. *Československo-egyptské vztahy v letech 1945 – 1948* [Czechoslovakian-Egyptian Relations in the Years 1945 – 1948], pp. 74–76.

<sup>25</sup> See TAKEYH, R., SIMON, S. *The Pragmatic Superpower: Winning the Cold War in the Middle East*.

of northern Iran had escalated into a serious diplomatic clash at the United Nations.<sup>26</sup> To avoid similar confrontations in future years, the Soviet leadership sometimes used their satellites as intermediaries in potentially sensitive political affairs. In the early years of the Cold War, Czechoslovak diplomacy often had the intermediary role in the Middle East, owing to the already established diplomatic missions and existing connections in the region. At first, Czechoslovakia was particularly active in providing support to the Zionist movement that was perceived as a possible ally in the Middle East thanks to the leading role of the Labour Party (Mapai). Even though the representatives of this political party such as the later Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion never considered themselves to be communists, there was still some hope that eventually the leftist ideology might help to make a newly established Jewish state one of the close allies/potential satellites of the Eastern Bloc in the Middle East.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, a similar type of cooperation with the Arab countries seemed to be rather difficult to establish in the late 1940s because these states were either pro-western monarchies known for their negative attitudes to communist ideology (Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia),<sup>28</sup> or newly established republics closely allied to western countries such as the USA and France (Lebanon, Syria). Nevertheless, Czechoslovakia had long-term economic interests even in these countries. Alongside the local resources of oil, which was considered a crucial energy source for all contemporary economies, there were also the agricultural commodities such as cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane that had been an important part of the commercial exchange between Czechoslovakia and Egypt since the interwar period. In return, Czechoslovakia was able to offer Egypt, as well as the other regional partners, advanced industrial products. At the same time, Czechoslovakia's reputation in the region was temporarily enhanced in the autumn of 1947 at the outbreak of the cholera epidemic in Egypt when Czechoslovakia provided twenty thousand free vaccines to the local authorities.<sup>29</sup>

The mutual relations, however, deteriorated in 1948 because of the communist coup in Czechoslovakia that confirmed Czechoslovak affiliation with the

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<sup>26</sup> HASANLI, J. *At the Dawn of the Cold War: The Soviet-American Crisis over Iranian Azerbaijan, 1941 – 1946.*

<sup>27</sup> See BIALER, U. *Between East and West: Israel's Foreign Policy Orientation 1948 – 1956.*

<sup>28</sup> ISMAEL, T. Y., SAID, R. *The Communist Movement in Egypt, 1920 – 1988*; ISMAEL, T. Y., ISMAEL, J. S. *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon.*

<sup>29</sup> ŽÍDEK, P., SIEBER, K. *Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948 – 1989* [Czechoslovakia and the Middle East in 1948 – 1989], pp. 51.



ideology that the regime of King Fārūq perceived as an existential threat,<sup>30</sup> and also because of the events of the first Arab-Israeli war (1948) as Czechoslovakia was extensively criticized by the Arab countries for providing arms supplies and political support to Israel.<sup>31</sup> With regard to the relations with Egypt, the situation deteriorated after the Czechoslovak authorities refused to launch a similar type of cooperation with Egypt by not providing twenty aircraft that could be used for both civilian and military purposes.<sup>32</sup> Under these circumstances, the Czechoslovak embassy in Cairo became politically isolated and the mutual relations between the two countries were rather cold and hostile.<sup>33</sup> One of the reports delivered to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czechoslovakia from the embassy in Cairo even suggested that Egyptian leaders had unofficially instructed local businessmen to boycott goods coming from the Eastern Bloc.<sup>34</sup>

This tense situation started to change in the early 1950s with the growing tension in relations between Israel and the Eastern Bloc as a result of the anti-Semitic purges in Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Romania, and some other socialist countries.<sup>35</sup> The show trial of Rudolf Slánský, the former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and his collaborators marked the end of the friendship between Czechoslovakia and Israel,<sup>36</sup> a state of

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<sup>30</sup> AMZV, Territorial Departments-Regular (TO-O), 1945 – 1959, UAR [United Arab Republic], Box 7. *Československo-egyptské vztahy /I. pololetí 1952/* [Czechoslovak-Egyptian Relations /First Half Year 1952/], Call No. 128110, 28 August 1952.

<sup>31</sup> AMZV, TO-O, Israel, 1945 – 1954, Box 10. *Záznam o rozmluvě s vyslancom Ueberallom dňa 6. januára 1949, 6. ledna 1949* [Record of the Conversation with Ambassador Ueberall on 6 January 1949], Call No. sine, 6 January 1949.

<sup>32</sup> AMZV, TO-O, UAR, 1945 – 1959, Box 3. *Zpráva káhirskeho tisku o dodávkách zbraní* [Cairo Press Report on Arms Supplies], Call No. 1176, 4 September 1948.

<sup>33</sup> AMZV TO-O, Palestine, 1945 – 1959, Box 2. *Dodání zbraní do Palestiny* [Arms Supplies to Palestine], Call No. 24322, 29 June 1948; AMZV TO-O, 1945 – 1959, Palestine, Box 2. *Arabská všepalestinská vláda se sídlem v Egyptě – protestní nota proti uznání Izraele čs. vládou* [Arab All-Palestine Government based in Egypt – Note of Protest against the Recognition of Israel by the Czechoslovak Government], Call No. 103531, 7 November 1948.

<sup>34</sup> AMZV TO-O, UAR, 1945 – 1959, Box 4. *Bojkot zboží zemi východního bloku* [Boycott of Goods from the Eastern Bloc], Call No. 203, 16 June 1949.

<sup>35</sup> BRENT, J., NAUMOV, V. P. *Stalin's Last Crime: The Doctors' Plot*; LONDON, A. G. *Doznání: v soukolí pražského procesu* [The Confession]; SOUKUPOVÁ, B. *Antisemitismus v Českých zemích po druhé světové válce a jeho vizualizace* [Visual Depictions of Antisemitism in the Czech Lands after World War II], pp. 201–222.

<sup>36</sup> See KAPLAN, K. *Kronika komunistického Československa: Klement Gottwald a Rudolf Slánský* [A Chronicle of Communist Czechoslovakia: Klement Gottwald and Rudolf Slánský]; STRÖBINGER, R. *Vražda generálního tajemníka: poslední Stalinův*

affairs that was to prevail until the end of the Cold War.<sup>37</sup> Still, this estrangement between Israel and the Eastern Bloc did not lead to an immediate upturn in bilateral Czechoslovak-Egyptian relations. Despite the prevailing ideological discrepancies, there were also structural problems of contemporary Czechoslovak diplomacy. After the coup in February 1948, there were a series of purges in Czechoslovak diplomatic circles that led to a significant decrease in the effectiveness and projection of the representation of Czechoslovak interests abroad. In general, the non-communist diplomats – and especially those who had contacts in the western countries – were perceived as suspect and potentially treacherous by the communist leaders, which resulted in enforced resignations, escape into exile, and sometimes even imprisonment.<sup>38</sup>

This was also the case for the Czechoslovak *chargé d'affaires* in Cairo, František Krucký, a professional diplomat who had previously served for the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in London, who was appointed as the head of the diplomatic mission in Egypt in March 1948 only to be dismissed a few months later in September. His dismissal was rather dramatic as Krucký at first refused to hand over his position to his successor Josef Klvaňa who had already arrived in Cairo. The whole story made the headlines of the Egyptian media, who proclaimed Klvaňa to be a dangerous communist.<sup>39</sup> After pressure from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Krucký was forced to accept his dismissal and instead of returning to Czechoslovakia, chose to stay in exile<sup>40</sup> where he became one of the leaders of the Czechoslovak compatriots in Egypt and Ethiopia.<sup>41</sup> Klvaňa, however, like another candidate, Josef Chalupa, did not receive the official *agrément* from the Egyptian authorities, needed to be officially recognized as the ambassador.

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*exemplární proces, soud s Rudolfem Slánským* [The Murder of the General Secretary: Stalin's Last Show Trial: the Trial of Rudolf Slánský].

<sup>37</sup> See TATEROVÁ, E. *Československá diplomacie a Stát Izrael v letech 1948 – 1967* [Czechoslovak Diplomacy and the State of Israel 1948 – 1967].

<sup>38</sup> DEJMEK, J. *Diplomacie Československa. Díl I. Nástin dějin ministerstva zahraničních věcí a diplomacie (1918 – 1992)* [Diplomacy of Czechoslovakia – Part I: An Outline of the History of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1918 – 1992)], pp. 145–155.

<sup>39</sup> AMZV DP, 1945 – 1958, Box 5. *Zpráva o převzetí Československého vyslanectví v Kahýře po odvolání Dr. Kruckého* [Report on the Takeover of the Czechoslovak Embassy in Cairo after the Dismissal of Dr. Krucký], Call No. sine, 14 March 1948.

<sup>40</sup> DEJMEK, J. *Diplomacie Československa. Díl II. Bibliografický slovník československých diplomatů (1918 – 1992)* [Diplomacy of Czechoslovakia – Part II: Biographical Dictionary of Czechoslovak Diplomats (1918 – 1992)], p. 128.

<sup>41</sup> AMZV, TO-O, UAR, 1945 – 54, Box 7. *Činnost dra. Kruckého v Kahýře* [The Activities of Dr. Krucký in Cairo], Call No. 62, 21 February 1949.

Therefore in the period 1948 – 1954, Czechoslovak diplomatic rank in Cairo decreased to the rank of *chargé d'affaires*<sup>42</sup> which may serve as further proof of the lowering of Czechoslovak-Egyptian relations.<sup>43</sup> At one point, *chargé d'affaires* Zdeněk Pravda was the only remaining member of the Czechoslovak diplomatic corps in Egypt.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the Czechoslovak embassy in Cairo was paralyzed by these internal changes and thus not able to carry out the full diplomatic agenda, which undermined the activities of Czechoslovakia in Egypt to a great extent. At the same time, the embassy was not able to report back to Prague with detailed information about local affairs even during the critical times of the Egyptian revolution in 1952.<sup>45</sup> This troubling state of Czechoslovak diplomacy in Egypt improved in 1954 when Arnošt Karpíšek was appointed as the head of the embassy in Cairo with the position of ambassador and gradually attempted to restore the diplomatic activities of Czechoslovakia in Egypt.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Egyptian Revolution: The Beginning of a New Era in Relations with Czechoslovakia**

One of the milestones in modern Egyptian history was the July military coup carried out by the Free Officers Movement in 1952 that had started the process of the Egyptian revolution that brought far-reaching changes to both the politics

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<sup>42</sup> Namely: Vladimír Hellmuth (1948 – 1950), Karel Novotný (1950 – 1952), Zdeněk Pravda (1952 – 1954), Arnošt Karpíšek (1954 – 1959).

<sup>43</sup> The lower level of diplomatic representation was mutual as the Egyptian embassy in Prague was also headed by the *chargé d'affaires* Mohamed Mohamed El Said Mater Bey (1949 – 1953), who was replaced by the Minister Mohamed Abdel Moneim (1953 – 1954), then Minister Amin Taha Aboul Dahab (1954 – 1955), and finally Minister Dimitri Rizq Hanna (1955 – 1958), who was appointed as ambassador of Egypt in Czechoslovakia in 1956.

<sup>44</sup> DEJMEK, J. *Diplomacie Československa. Díl II. Bibliografický slovník československých diplomatů (1918 – 1992)* [Diplomacy of Czechoslovakia – Part II: Biographical Dictionary of Czechoslovak Diplomats (1918 – 1992)], p. 128.

<sup>45</sup> AMZV, TO-O, UAR, 1945 – 59, Box 1. *Oddělení KA/1, s. Licek požádalo oddělení AO/3 o vypracování hodnocení práce s. Zdeňka Pravdy, vedoucího ZÚ v Káhiře, AO/3 navrhuje* [The Department KA/1, Comrade Licek Requested the Department AO/3 to Prepare the Evaluation of Comrade Zdeněk Pravda, Head of the Embassy in Cairo, AO/3 Suggests], Call No. sine, 27 August 1953.

<sup>46</sup> AMZV, TO-O, UAR, 1945 – 59, Box 1. *Věc: Odevzdání pověřovacích listin, Káhira* [Subject: Presentation of Diplomatic Credentials, Cairo], Call No. 2619, 10 November 1954, pp. 1–2.

and the society of the country.<sup>47</sup> The disillusion after the military defeat in the First Arab-Israeli War (1948), the long-term unsatisfactory economic situation that condemned a significant part of the population to poverty, protests against the presence of British troops in Egypt, together with the increasing unpopularity of the royal family represented especially by King Fārūq who seemed to have too extravagant and luxurious a life style at the expense of his nation, all these factors created the preconditions for the Egyptian revolution in July 1952.<sup>48</sup> The Free Officers Movement, which had already been established in the late 1940s among the nationalist officers of the Egyptian army, eventually became the spearhead of the revolution.<sup>49</sup>

On 22–23 July 1952, the Free Officers Movement led by General Muḥammad Najīb and lieutenant-colonel Jamāl ʿAbdannāṣir launched the military coup d'état that resulted in the abdication of King Fārūq in favour of his infant son Fouad II, who, however, left together with the whole royal family for exile. The end of the monarchy was confirmed by the official declaration of the Republic of Egypt in June 1953.<sup>50</sup> The overthrow of King Fārūq and the fall of the Kingdom of Egypt had significant impacts on the international relations of the country.<sup>51</sup> However, at first, the priority was to consolidate the new regime. The Free Officers Movement might have achieved unity to overthrow the monarchy, but their views on how to build the republic and what should be the political, economic, and ideological priorities of the new regime differed significantly. A few months later, in January 1954, the tension between the two main leaders, President Najīb and Prime Minister Jamāl ʿAbdannāṣir, escalated into open conflict resulting in the resignation of Najīb and his subsequent home arrest. ʿAbdannāṣir, on the contrary, became a new unquestionable leader of the country and also one of the most charismatic personalities of the Arab world.<sup>52</sup>

The key principles of Egyptian foreign policy under ʿAbdannāṣir were anti-imperialism with the ultimate goal of undermining the remaining colonial activities of the western European countries in the Middle East. This effort was closely connected with the emphasis on the principles of pan-Arabism, in other

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<sup>47</sup> AMZV TO-O, UAR, 1945 – 1959, Box 9. *Vyslanectví ČSR Káhira – změna vlády v Egyptě* [Embassy of Czechoslovakia in Cairo – A Change of Government in Egypt], Call No. 108646, 6 March 1952.

<sup>48</sup> GOMBÁR, E., BAREŠ, L., VESELÝ, R. *Dějiny Egypta* [History of Egypt], pp. 547–566.

<sup>49</sup> See SORBY, K. R. *Egyptská revoluce 1952* [The Egyptian Revolution of 1952].

<sup>50</sup> AMZV, TO-O, UAR, 1945 – 1959, Box 9, *Vyhlášení republiky v Egyptě – hlášení* [The Declaration of a Republic in Egypt – A Report], Call No. 837, 19 June 1953.

<sup>51</sup> KHAWAJA, N. *Egypt's Foreign Policy Analysis: From Nasser to Morsi*, pp. 43–63.

<sup>52</sup> See ABURISH, S. *Nasser: The Last Arab*.

words, the vision to achieve the unification of all Arab countries,<sup>53</sup> and to renew the glory of the Arab nation. Simultaneously, the regime initiated deep structural social and economic changes to modernize Egyptian society and economy. One of the crucial changes in comparison to the previous political system was the emphasis on secularism as one of the key attributes of the reforms. This policy not only brought ʿAbdannāṣir’s government into open conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood and other conservative religious groups, but also in a way contributed to the initiation of a rapprochement with the Soviet Union and the other countries of the Eastern Bloc including Czechoslovakia.<sup>54</sup>

At first, Czechoslovak diplomacy was hesitant about how to deal with these rapid political changes in Egypt and especially how to perceive Najīb, ʿAbdannāṣir and the other new nationalist leaders of the country. This uncertainty was also reflected in the official Czechoslovak diplomatic response to the coup d’état. The Czechoslovak embassy in Cairo neither approved nor condemned the change of political regime, their representatives simply confirming the delivery of the diplomatic correspondence informing all embassies in Cairo of the coup.<sup>55</sup> On the one hand, Czechoslovakia could only applaud the fight of the new Egyptian leadership against western imperialism, which was a crucial agenda also for the countries of the Eastern Bloc. On the other hand, the new regime seemed to be rather unpredictable and not fully compliant with the socialist ideology of the Eastern Bloc. Some internal reports by Czechoslovak diplomacy from the early 1950s accused Jamāl ʿAbdannāṣir and his regime of imperialism and fascism. This initial distrust even intensified in the following months when ʿAbdannāṣir seemed to be reluctant to start the transition of the country to socialism and, to the disappointment of Czechoslovak diplomats, also launched a campaign of harsh repression of Egyptian communists.<sup>56</sup>

Despite these disagreements, Egypt under ʿAbdannāṣir eventually became one of the key allies of the Eastern Bloc in the Middle East and North Africa. This unlikely partnership was made possible by the circumstances of the ongoing Cold War, when both superpowers were willing to make very pragmatic partnerships

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<sup>53</sup> MANDUCHI, P. *Arab Nationalism(s): Rise and Decline of an Ideology*, pp. 4–35.

<sup>54</sup> GOMBÁR, E., BAREŠ, L., VESELÝ, R. *Dějiny Egypta* [History of Egypt], pp. 547–566.

<sup>55</sup> AMZV, TO-O, UAR, 1945 – 1959, Box 9. *Egypt – změna vládní formy* [Egypt – A Change in the Type of Government], Call No. 124457, 23 June 1953.

<sup>56</sup> NA A ÚV KSČ [Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia] 1945 – 1989, KTAN-II [Bureau of Antonín Novotný, the 1st Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia – Part II], Egypt, Box 7. *Procesy s komunisty v Káhíře* [Trials of Communists in Cairo], Call No. 3166, 1 August 1959, pp. 1–3.

to spread their spheres of influence worldwide. Alongside the political changes in Egypt initiated by the July Revolution, there were also important conceptual shifts in the foreign policy strategies and preferences of the Eastern Bloc. Nikita Khrushchev, who became the leader of the Soviet Union after the death of Joseph V. Stalin in 1953, introduced a different vision of how to achieve superiority in the Cold War competition that he presented in detail in his speech to the XXth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. One of the main messages was the declaration that the ongoing rivalry between the East and the West should take place in all regions of the world but in a peaceful way because of the risk of a disastrous nuclear war. The recently decolonized countries of the so-called Third World were considered as the battlefields of this competition, in which not only the superpowers themselves but also their satellites would engage in promoting the principles of socialist ideology.<sup>57</sup>

The cooperation of the decolonized countries with the Eastern Bloc was expected to be very appealing to the Third World nations as the reputation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was not damaged by past colonial activities. For these reasons, the countries of the Eastern Bloc including Czechoslovakia launched extensive programmes of economic, military, cultural, educational, and scientific cooperation with chosen countries of the Third World. In the case of Egypt, the main emphasis was put on cooperation in economic development projects, and military affairs, both of these sectors being the long-term priorities of Jamāl ʿAbdannāṣir's regime. The Soviet Union did not only promise to co-finance the ambitious project of the Aswan Dam but the Eastern Bloc countries also offered their expert advice and assistance to develop specific sectors of Egyptian industry. In the 1950s, Czechoslovakia was among the most active Soviet satellites involved in developing cooperation with Egypt. In addition to the traditional commerce in cotton, tobacco, and some other agricultural products, in the 1950s for instance the Czechoslovak company Technoexport provided equipment for the sugar factory Dëshna. At the same time, selected Egyptian students – and among them also Palestinian students – received university scholarships to study in Czechoslovakia.<sup>58</sup>

The world's attention, however, was drawn to the famous military contract signed by Czechoslovakia and Egypt under the patronage of the Soviet Union in 1955. The Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deals declared that Czechoslovakia

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<sup>57</sup> WILSON CENTER. *Khrushchev's Secret Speech, 'On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences'*, Delivered at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1956.

<sup>58</sup> HANNOVÁ, D. *Problémoví elegáni. Arabští studenti v Praze v 50. a 60. letech 20. století* [The Restless Dandies: Arab Students in Prague in the 1950s and 1960s], pp. 105–125.

would provide supplies of weapons and other military equipment to the amount of CZK 398 million.<sup>59</sup> In addition to these exports, Czechoslovak military experts would be sent to provide training and advice to the Egyptian army so the soldiers could use this new material.<sup>60</sup> Abdannāšir hoped that such cooperation would modernize the capacities of Egyptian troops in the expected future conflict with Israel, seeking at the same time to strengthen the position of Egypt as a regional hegemon by disposing of advanced military technologies. For Czechoslovakia, this agreement meant not only a significant trade deal but also a way to restore the good reputation of the country in the Muslim world, a reputation damaged by the previous cooperation with Israel.

In the following years, Czechoslovakia supplied even more weapons to Egypt and also agreed similar contracts with the other countries of the region such as Algeria (1963), Iraq (1959), Syria (1962), and Yemen (1956). Over time, Czechoslovakia became a respected supplier of military technologies in the countries of the Third World.<sup>61</sup> In the international context, this agreement not only shocked western countries and acted as confirmation of the infiltration of the Eastern Bloc into the region that Great Britain and France saw as their traditional exclusive sphere of influence, but it also contributed significantly to the concatenation of international events that eventually resulted in the famous Suez Crisis (1956), one of the tensest moments of the Cold War with a high risk of nuclear war.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

The history of the diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and Egypt at the onset of the Cold War is an important case study that not only contributes to the existing explanations of the turbulent development of contemporary international relations but also provides an insight into the rapidly changing regional priorities of the Eastern Bloc in the geostrategic region of the Middle East and North Africa.

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<sup>59</sup> ZÍDEK, P., SIEBER, K. *Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948 – 1989* [Czechoslovakia and the Middle East in 1948 – 1989], p. 57.

<sup>60</sup> VYHLÍDAL, M. *Češi v Káhiře. Aktivní pomoc Vojenské akademie Antonína Zápotockého v Brně při budování Military Technical College v Káhiře* [Czechs in Cairo. The Active Assistance of the Military Academy of Antonín Zápotocký in Brno in the Constitution of Military Technical College in Cairo], pp. 99–112; NA A ÚV KSČ 1945 – 1989, KTAN-II, Egypt, Box 7. *Untitled*, Call No. M-007333, 27 December 1955.

<sup>61</sup> AMZV TO-O, UAR, 1945 – 1959, Box 9. *Čs.-egyptská dohoda – dopisy* [Czechoslovak-Egyptian Agreement – Letters], Call No. 2481, 18 November 1956.

<sup>62</sup> See VARBLE, D. *The Suez Crisis 1956*.

The global competition of the Cold War made even the political affairs of geographically distant regions very important for all actors in international politics. With the speeding up of decolonization, the newly independent states of the Third World became a new battlefield for both superpowers and their allies. With regard to the negative perception of the former colonial countries in most of the Third World, the Soviet Union sought to use this opportunity to export socialism and to spread there its zone of influence through the networks of partnerships with the local regimes. In this context, Egypt was a key country due to its large population, access to the geostrategic Suez Canal, and, last but not least, a hegemonic position both in the Middle East and in Africa.

Czechoslovakia as a country that had already had historical experience and numerous important contacts in the area from the interwar period was one of the pioneers that helped to pave the way to a deeper cooperation between Egypt, or the other countries of the Middle East, and the Eastern Bloc. Czechoslovak approaches to Egypt were inevitably affected by the events of the ongoing Cold War as well as by the internal development in the region. In this regard, Czechoslovakia echoed the diplomatic approach of the Soviet Union, even though Czechoslovak diplomacy remained itself very active. Firstly it provided massive support to the establishment of Israel (1948) which led to the deterioration of Czechoslovak mutual relations with Egypt. Later, Czechoslovak arms exports to Egypt encouraged the process that led to the events of the Suez Crisis (1956). From this perspective, Czechoslovak activities in the Middle East in both aforementioned cases had significant historical importance and in some aspects went beyond the traditional role of a satellite state.

When examining Czechoslovak-Egyptian relations at the onset of the Cold War, the dominant feature is a distinctive pragmatism. For instance, Czechoslovak diplomacy internally criticized ʿAbdannāṣir’s political regime for the repression of local communists but this situation did not have any direct impact on the ongoing projects of mutual economic and military cooperation. This pragmatism was not determined solely by the economic interest of the country – even though Egyptian cotton was essential for the Czechoslovak textile industry – but also by the orders and political needs of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, Czechoslovak diplomacy had more freedom in choosing what policies to implement, how, and who the recipients would be. Altogether, various technological, cultural, and educational programmes helped to establish the good reputation of Czechoslovakia in Egypt and contributed to the leading position of the country among the Soviet satellites in the Middle East and North Africa in the 1950s.



## Abbreviations

- AMZV – Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic  
DP – Diplomatic Protocol  
KTAN-II – Bureau of Antonín Novotný, the 1st Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia – Part II  
NA – National Archive of the Czech Republic  
TO-O – Territorial Departments-Regular  
UAE – United Arab Republic  
USA - United States of America  
USSSR - Union of Soviet Socialist Republics  
ÚV KSČ – Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia

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