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Socialism without Socialists: Egyptian Marxists and the Nasserist State, 1952-65

by

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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This thesis investigates the interaction between Egyptian Marxists and the Egyptian State under Gamal Abd Al-Nasser from 1952 to 1965. After the Free Officer coup of July, 1952, the new government launched a period of repression that targeted many political organizations, including the communists. Repression against the communists was interrupted during a brief interlude from mid-1956 until the end of 1958, when Nasser launched a second period of repression heavily aimed at the communist left. Utilizing quantitative data of the communist prisoner population as well as qualitative first-hand accounts from imprisoned communists, this thesis reconstructs the conditions, demographics, and class status of the communists targeted by the repressive apparatus of the Egyptian state. It also explores the subjective response of the Egyptian communists and their ideological shifts vis-à-vis changing material and repressive conditions. It argues that a combination of state-capitalist reforms, intense state repression, pragmatic influence of the Soviet Union, capitulation to a hegemonic nationalist discourse, and imperialist threat converged to direct Egyptian communist thought. In the end, the Marxist movement was incapable of acting as the vanguard of the Egyptian revolution.

For Grandma and Grandpa, my first working class heroes.

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Preface

Egyptian Marxists have at certain junctures of time held a presence in Egyptian society that outweighed their numerical importance. This was certainly true throughout the period ranging from the Free Officers' coup of July 1952, which overthrew the British-backed monarch of Egypt, until the communist organizations voluntarily dissolved themselves to join Gamal Abd Al-Nasser's Arab Socialist Union in March 1965. Yet, for the majority of these years communist workers and intelligentsia languished in prisons and concentration camps. During this time Ahmed Baha' al-Din, then editor of the daily *Al-Akhbar*, wrote that what existed inside Egypt was a revolution which "concentrated its efforts on building the 'material characteristics' of socialist society without concentrating on its 'human characteristics,' i.e. the socialists! There can be no socialism without socialists!"¹ Nasser's strategy, first through "cooperative democratic socialism," then "Arab socialism," and finally "scientific socialism," effectively established "socialism without socialists."² While Nasser created an ideological and economic model revolving around "socialism without socialists," Egyptian Marxists eventually succumbed to the temptations of embracing what Hal Draper referred to as "socialism-from-above." Egyptian Marxists posited Nasser as the sole embodiment of the national liberation movement, thereby subjugating class struggle

¹ Quoted in Anouar Abdel-Malek, "Nasserism and Socialism," *Socialist Registrar* (1964), 46.

² This phrase is borrowed from al-Din and utilized by Egyptian Marxist Anouar Abdel-Malek. See Abdel-Malek, "Egypt: Military Society, the Army Regime, the Left, and Social Change under Nasser," (Random House, NY: 1968), 297-8.

and socialism to secondary importance. Communist adherence to “socialism-from-above” and Nasser’s “socialism without socialists” proved symbiotic. Marxists themselves provided vital ideological and political legitimacy to Nasser’s “socialism without socialists,” thereby undermining their own importance vis-à-vis Nasser and eroding their capacity to build an independent base.

The Egyptian communist movement began in the early part of the 20th century and reached its peak in the post-World War II era. Characterized for most of its existence by internal factions and the lack of a united party, by 1965 Egyptian communists adopted a liquidationist policy whereby they dissolved their organizations in an attempt to join the government of Gamal Abd al-Nasser. The historiography has been centered on a few important questions, notably the origins of the Egyptian communist movement, the influence of both internal (demographic makeup of the movement, the role of Egyptian Jews, etc.) and external factors (especially the Soviet Union), the question of Palestine, and the 1965 dissolution decision. Often these questions overlap, as the issue of liquidation and the scholarly debate surrounding intertwines intricately with the debate over the extent to which internal and external factors affected the Egyptian communist movement.

Rami Ginat has characterized the historiography of Egyptian communist as divided into four main conceptual or methodological categories: first, scholarly works written shortly after the events they address;³ second, research offering a deeper historical perspective which draw considerably more on primary source material;⁴ third, books in

³ Here Ginat cites Walter Laqueur and M.S. Agwani.

⁴ Here Ginat cites Selma Botman, Suliman Bashear, Joel Beinín, and Zachary Lockman, among others.

Arabic written by former communist activists;⁵ and fourth, literature including biographies, memoirs, and autobiographies written by or about former Jewish communists activists in exile.⁶ I take a slightly different approach by organizing the historiographical discussion into chronological periods that signify the changing discourse surrounding the subject and the various questions attached to it. Although there is some overlap in the chronological timeframes, and while I would not claim that any particular period is completely and fully characterized by my organizational schema, this model is useful insofar as it concretizes the scholarly discussion and debate into certain periods. It is also important to note that these categories only apply to the English-language literature, and as such Arabic or other sources not translated into English exceed the purview of this study.

With such caveats in mind I argue that the period 1956 to 1973 was characterized by Cold War traditionalists who viewed the Egyptian communists primarily through the lens of the Soviet Union and were unsympathetic to communism as a whole. The period from 1969 to 1981 marks the entrance of the first scholarly voices sympathetic to communism ideologically but in many ways critical of the specificities of the Egyptian communist movement. The critical revisionists who dominated the field from 1980 to 1998 are notable in a few regards, including their often direct challenges to the Cold War traditionalists, their methodology relying upon personal interviews and testimony from Egyptian Marxists, their emphasis on the influence of women in the movement, and their nuanced positions regarding the various questions outlined above. Although the

⁵ Here Ginat cites Rifa‘at El-Sa‘id, Ra’uf ‘Abbas, Ibrahim Fathi, Mustafa Tiba, Yusuf al-Jindi, Taha Sa‘d ‘Uthman, Sharif Hatata, Yusuf Darwish, and Ahmad Sadiq Sa‘d.

⁶ Here Ginat cites Henri Curiel, Gilles Perrault, Marsil Shirizi (Marcel Israel), and Didar Fawzi-Rossano.

scholarship from 2002 to 2011 is significantly less uniform, on the whole these works do not deal significantly with the chronological period discussed here.⁷

On the question of liquidation, Walter Laqueur and Shimon Shamir represent most lucidly the “cold-war traditionalist” position. In *The Struggle for the Middle East: The Soviet Union and the Middle East, 1958-68*, published in 1969, Laqueur posits that the strategies and decisions taken by Egyptian Communists under Gamal abd Al-Nasser were essentially reflections of Soviet policy. He notes that “Soviet policy in the Middle East was not to be deflected from its long-term aims by the temporary suppression of the Communist parties.”⁸ Laqueur explains that in light of the increased cooperation between the Soviet Union and Egypt, the “continued existence of an Egyptian Communist party became a cause of real embarrassment for the Soviet Union.”⁹ Following this line of thought, Laqueur suggests that the 1965 decision by the Egyptian Communist Party to dissolve itself and join Nasser’s Arab Socialist Union was a directive given by Moscow. Thus began the policy of “licensed infiltration,” whereby Marxists operated as individuals within state-sanctioned organs of power in order to exert influence over the state as a whole.

The policy of licensed infiltration is the subject of Israeli historian Shimon Shamir’s 1973 article “The Marxists in Egypt: the ‘Licensed Infiltration’ Doctrine in Practice,” which appeared in the volume edited by himself and Michael Confino titled *The U.S.S.R. and the Middle East*. Shamir maintains that a vital factor in the dissolution of the

⁷ This is particularly true of the main monograph released during this period, Rami Ginat’s *A History of Egyptian Communism*, which deals mostly with the question of Jews in the Egyptian communist movement prior to the 1952 coup.

⁸ Walter Z. Laqueur, *The Struggle for the Middle East: The Soviet Union and the Middle East, 1958-68* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1969), 26.

⁹ Laqueur, *Struggle for the Middle East*, 202.

Egyptian Communist Party was an “innovative concept” outlined by the Soviet Union in 1963. This new concept, dubbed “licensed infiltration” by outside observers, maintained that it was “incorrect to regard a regime, such as that of Nasser, as representing the ‘national bourgeoisie,’ for it struggled against capitalism and had opted for progress toward socialism.”¹⁰ For the Soviet leadership this was not a “subversive strategy.” Instead, it was a strategy that encouraged the Egyptian Marxists to reach an entente with Nasser and remove “the burden of an embarrassing problem.”¹¹ In this way Soviet foreign policy was synchronized with ideological commitments. Subsequently, the achievements of the Nasser regime were glorified and Nasser’s Arab Socialist Union was depicted as a sister-party in the Communist world.

While Cold War traditionalists unsympathetic to communist movements dominated the historiography for a decade and a half, scholars more sympathetic to communism arose in the late 1960s and 1970s.¹² The tumultuous year of 1968 marked the first time a book length monograph written by an Egyptian Marxist documenting the relationship between the Nasserist state and the Communist movement became available in English. Anouar Abdel-Malek’s *Egypt: Military Society, the Army Regime, the Left, and Social Change under Nasser* provided a profound departure from the simplistic analysis attributed to Egyptian Marxists by traditional Cold War writers like Laqueur and Shamir. Abdel-Malek’s work differed from the earlier historical monographs in many ways, but its relevance here is with regard to how he viewed the relationship between Nasser and the

¹⁰ Shamir Shimon, “The Marxists in Egypt: The ‘Licensed Infiltration’ Doctrine in Practice.” *The U.S.S.R. and the Middle East*, edited by Shimon Shamir and Michael Confino (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1973), 316.

¹¹ Shamir, “Marxists in Egypt,” 316.

¹² Not all of these writers were sympathetic to the Egyptian communists, however. Mahmoud Hussein’s study, for instance, is a Maoist attack on the Soviet-influenced Egyptian Marxists.

Egyptian Marxists. Whereas Laqueur and Shamir saw only a significant deepening of ties between the Nasser regime and the Eastern bloc countries, and thus viewed the actions of Communist organizations through such a lens (policies of licensed infiltration, directives from Moscow, etc.), Abdel-Malek counters that periods of state repression against Marxists also coincided with increasing economic ties to West Germany and the United States. In this way, the relationship between the state and Egyptian Communists cannot be reduced to Moscow-directives ordering away an “embarrassing burden” of independent Egyptian Marxists.

Another new voice came one year later in 1969 when Mohammed Shafi Agwani published *Communism in the Arab East*. Whereas both Laqueur and Shamir attribute the decision to Soviet political maneuvering, Agwani credits “a prolonged meeting of the [Egyptian] party’s Central Committee after much ‘self-criticism’ interspersed with unreserved admiration for the far-reaching social changes being carried out in Egypt under Nasser’s leadership.”¹³ Agwani argued that the Communists had “no option but to work under Nasser’s leadership.”¹⁴ In this way Agwani presents the decision as primarily a domestic, rational decision not emanating from a Soviet directive.

A work of a very different sort came about with Mahmoud Hussein’s *Class Conflict in Egypt: 1945-1970*, first published in French in 1971 and translated into English in 1973. Hussein posited a Maoist analysis of both the Nasserist regime and the Soviet-influenced Egyptian Communists. He levels a scathing critique against the Egyptian left, in some ways echoing the argument presented by Laqueur and Shamir, except reframing the argument in leftist terms. Hussein argues that since 1955 the Egyptian left

¹³ Agwani, *Communism in the Arab East*, 86.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

enthusiastically supported the regime as it began to forge relationships with the Eastern bloc countries. This is because the Egyptian Communists were “taking advantage of the worldwide neo-revisionist current” outlined by the 1956 Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.¹⁵ This current was “devastating to the Egyptian Communists,” as it “encouraged them to follow, unabashed, a path to which their opportunism predisposed them anyway, namely, to confuse the bourgeois with the proletarian class interests within the framework of a nationalist movement.”¹⁶ From 1959 to 1964, most of the Communist elements, “jailed or interned and losing their last contacts with the popular classes, were torn by sterile and dogmatic conflicts and swept along into the liquidation movement.”¹⁷ The individual Marxists incorporated into the Arab Socialist Union “joined the ranks of the regime intelligentsia” and were appointed to various official press services. In this official capacity they were responsible not for elaborating or implementing the regime’s policies but “for translating them into demagogic language.”¹⁸ Thus, in Hussein’s work one finds a Maoist critique of what he perceives as Soviet revisionism dominating the Egyptian Communist movement. In this way the Egyptian Communists appear as appendages of the Soviet Union, subject to directives from Moscow.

The critical revisionists of the 1980s and 1990s present yet another picture of the Egyptian Communist movement and, in particular, the dissolution decision of 1965 and the Marxists’ legacy in Egypt. One important entrance onto the historiographical scene was Selma Botman, who expanded her 1984 Harvard Ph.D. thesis titled “Oppositional

¹⁵ Mahmoud Hussein, *Class Conflict in Egypt: 1945-1970* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 239.

¹⁶ Hussein, *Class Conflict*, 239.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.

Politics in Egypt: The Communist Movement, 1936-1954” into a 1988 book *The Rise of Egyptian Communism, 1939-1970*. Botman’s scholarly work is notable first and foremost for her reliance upon interviews and oral testimony. Whereas earlier scholars focused heavily on documentation and archival material, Botman frequently cited personal interviews she conducted with Egyptian communists. This is a methodology that is also apparent with the work of Tareq Ismael and Rifa‘at El-Sa‘id (1990). For her, despite the fact that the Communist movement never took state power, she posits that Marxists have helped shape state policy by maintaining what she calls a “tradition of dissident thought which has become an important part of Egypt’s political life.”¹⁹ Botman argues that the importance of this “tradition of dissident thought” can be seen most clearly in two arenas. First, the military coup d’état of 1952 received “widespread endorsement partly because of earlier efforts of the left to undermine the ideological support for the royalist regime.”²⁰ In other words, the Egyptian Marxists did not fail to penetrate civil society completely, as earlier accounts suggest, since their constant criticism of the old regime resonated with the population. Second, the impact of Egyptian Communist thought is further evidenced by Nasser’s adoption of land reform, nationalization of private industry, alliance with socialist bloc countries, and state economic planning, even while communists were being repressed and Marxist thinkers were granted only nominal power as individuals in the Egyptian government. Thus, whereas some writers suggest that the Egyptian communist movement had little impact on the Egyptian government, Botman suggests that they exerted significant intellectual and ideological pressure that impact state policy under Nasser.

¹⁹ Selma Botman, *The Rise of Egyptian Communism, 1939-1970* (Syracuse: New York, 1988), xx.

²⁰ Botman, *Rise of Egyptian Communism*, xx.

In 1987 Joel Beinin wrote an article titled “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt.”²¹ In it he sought to distinguish his analysis of the 1965 dissolution of the Egyptian Communist organizations from the “dominant tendency among Western analysts,” which he described as regarding “the dissolution as a tactical maneuver whose origins lay in a conscious decision taken in Moscow.” He argued that this position, articulated by Richard Lowenthal²² and adopted by Laqueur and Shamir, was at best “only a partial explanation.”²³ In his view, the Soviet factor is less important in the Egyptian experience than in most communist movements. The communist movement was split into a variety of different organizations, none of which were officially recognized by the international movement. Furthermore, Arab communists often differed with the policies emanating from Moscow. Beinin maintained it was more fruitful to look at internal developments within Egypt to explain the dissolution. For Beinin the Egyptian Communists decision to dissolve their organizations serves as a “good illustration of Marxism’s failure, even beyond the ranks of the Third International, to develop an adequate theory of nationalism.”²⁴ Because Egyptian nationalism was directed against imperialism, it became an “unequivocally positive phenomenon” for the Communists. Consequently, the Egyptian communists were “caught up by their embrace of the national movement and ultimately destroyed by it” because they “could not outbid Abd al-Nasir for nationalist legitimacy.”²⁵ Thus, Beinin suggests that observers should

²¹ The argument presented in this article is expanded significantly in his work *Was the Red Flag Flying There?: Marxist Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in Egypt and Israel, 1948-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 59.

²² See: Richard Lowenthal, “Russia, the One-Party System and the Third World,” *Survey* (London), no. 58 (January 1966).

²³ Joel Beinin, “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 41, no. 4 (1987), 568.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 584.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 584.

focus less on the Moscow-inspired conspiracy aspect because even if they shared the theoretical perspective of the Cominform, Egyptian communists themselves saw the national struggle as their primary strategic political task.

Tareq Ismael and Rifa'at El-Sa'id, in *The Communist Movement in Egypt, 1920-1988* (1990), explicitly challenged the earlier notion put forward by writers such as Richard Lowenthal, Walter Laqueur, and Shimon Shamir that "communism is a monolithic worldwide organization that is rationally structured along bureaucratic lines with hierarchical authority and communication patterns." By undermining this notion they reject the charge that Egyptian communists were "considered representatives or agents" of the Soviet Union.²⁶ They analyze the Egyptian Communist experience from three perspectives: "the conditions in Egypt and the relevance of communist theory in addressing these conditions; Soviet policy toward Egypt and the role played by the Soviet Union in the development of communism in Egypt; and the communist movement in Egypt from the perspective of the principal actors – both the personalities and the parties."²⁷ Their study elucidates how a combination of repression and reform during the Nasser era led to the adoption of liquidationist policies within the communist movement.

Largely drawing on the scholarship of Botman, Beinín, Ismael and El-Sa'id, I maintain that the communist movement's subjective responses to objective phenomena, culminating in the liquidationist policies adopted in 1965, led to the inhibiting and enervating of their own capacity to continue any tradition of dissent. While I reject the scholarship that posits Egyptian Marxism as a simple extension of the USSR and the Soviet bloc à la Laquer and Shamir, Hussein's critique of the Egyptian Communists'

²⁶ Tareq Y. Ismael and Rifa'at El-Sa'id, *The Communist Movement in Egypt, 1920-1988* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1990), xi.

²⁷ Ismael and El-Sa'id, *Communist Movement*, xii.

inability to break their commitment to the Soviet Union, and subsequently the various fluctuations of Soviet foreign policy, is compelling. It is true, as Beinín argues, that the Egyptian Marxists were “caught up by their embrace of the national movement and ultimately destroyed by it.” Yet, this was the case because either potential benefactor of the Egyptian Marxists, the Soviet Union and the Nasser regime, were glad to politically use and sacrifice the communists at will when it suited their respective interests. The desire on behalf of Egyptian Marxists to pursue the road to socialism through such benefactors, consequentially and practically, entailed loosening or casting away any serious commitment to a genuine, revolutionary socialism-from-below. Ideological delusions and discipline were so embedded in party comrades that at some points, when realpolitik considerations dictated Soviet support for Nasser, imprisoned Egyptian Marxists were congratulating and expressing their support for Nasser’s government, despite their own harsh sentences and conditions.

In his 1990 monograph *Was the Red Flag Flying There? Marxist Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in Egypt and Israel, 1948-1965*, Joel Beinín accepts Gareth Stedman Jones’ argument that “the language of politics can determine the range of options that social movement swill regard as available to them.” He insists, correctly, that “political discourse is more than a tactical question. Persistent use of nationalist imagery and language ultimately contributes to erective a barrier to internationalism.”²⁸ Beinín borrows from Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined communities”²⁹ and Antonio

²⁸ Beinín, *Red Flag*, 18.

²⁹ Beinín maintains a la Anderson that these imagined communities “must be constructed and reproduced by both social relations and institutions that operate within, and thus reinforce, national boundaries and discursive practices that interpret cultural and political phenomena, past and present, in a national framework.” Beinín, 17.

Gramsci's concept of "hegemony"³⁰ to coin what he phrases as a "nationalist hegemonic discourse." Beinín explains that the nationalist discourse was hegemonic in the Gramscian sense insofar as it was "established through the noncoercive components of class rule."³¹ For Beinín, Egyptian Marxists were largely "formed by their national environments and functioned within their boundaries." Thus, the "line of demarcation between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic political projects was not always as clear as many on both sides of the divide imagined it to be."³² The hegemonic nationalist discourse, to which communists acquiesced and eventually embraced, became an impediment to the articulation of an alternative politics.

Noticeably absent from this historiography is the positioning of Egyptian Marxists within a broader ideological span of socialist thought. While I share Beinín's argument that a "hegemonic nationalist discourse" sublimated the class politics of the communists and facilitated their utter marginalization at the hands of Nasser,³³ I contend that the trajectory of the Egyptian communist movement must also be understood within the theoretical dichotomy outlined by Hal Draper in his pamphlet *The Two Souls of Socialism*. Draper defines two conceptual frameworks, "socialism-from-above" and "socialism-from-below":

What unites the many different forms of Socialism-from-Above is the conception that socialism (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) must be handed down to the grateful masses in one form or another, by a ruling elite which is not subject to their control in fact. The heart of Socialism-from-Below is its view that socialism can be realized only through the self-emancipation of activated masses in motion, reaching out for freedom

³⁰ Beinín agrees with Gramsci that "subaltern groups regard regimes as legitimate because their power is reinforced throughout civil society by education and cultural norms, and especially by the activity of the organic intellectuals who articulate and elaborate the interests of a given class within the context of a national culture." Beinín, 17.

³¹ Ibid., 17.

³² Ibid., 17.

³³ Ibid., 59.

with their own hands, mobilized “from below” in a struggle to take charge of their own destiny, as actors (not merely subjects) on the stage of history.³⁴

Draper argues that there are at least six, often overlapping and interrelated, strains of socialism-from above, including *philanthropism*, *elitism*, *plannism*, *communionism*, *permeationism*, and *socialism-from-outside*.³⁵ The “Arab Socialism” of Gamal Abd al-Nasser satisfied most of the definitions of these various strains.

The question remains as to where the Egyptian communist movement falls within the battle over the soul of socialism. It is my contention that a genuine, revolutionary socialism-from-below current was subsumed during this period and adherents of socialism-from-above, either through acquiescence in the face of repression or the conscience embrace of such ideology, won the day. The Egyptian communist movement, in the face of reform and repression and despite the intentions of individuals or splinter organizations, proved incapable of adhering to the principles of socialism-from-below. Here I largely share the Egyptian Marxist Samir Amin’s analysis, who argues that the “great majority of Arab communists, just like communists elsewhere, accepted the recommendation of the Soviet leadership to become, at best, the leftwing of the national-populist and anti-imperialist regimes. In other words, offer barely critical, practically unconditional support.” Citing both the 1965 dissolution of the Egyptian communist organizations and Khaled Bakdash’s³⁶ thesis that “national construction was the only item on the agenda,” Amin concludes that “Arab communism, as a whole, had not moved outside of the essential context of the national-populist project, ignoring that the latter

³⁴ Hal Draper, *The Two Souls of Socialism* (London, Bookmarks: 1966), 8.

³⁵ Draper, 26-31.

³⁶ Leader of the Syrian Communist Party.

was ultimately part of a strictly capitalist perspective.”³⁷ Thus, when Nasser died in 1970, the Egyptian left, with the Communists parties dissolved and the Nasserist forces in disarray, were unable to challenge both the neoliberal economic program put forward by Anwar al-Sadat and the resurgence of political Islam. In the 1970s a new mode of contention led by alternative tendencies had to be rebuilt under fundamentally different economic, social, and political circumstances.

Egyptian communists found themselves in the middle of a triangle of volatile commitments: the Soviet Union in the context of the Cold War, hegemonic nationalism in a postcolonial state, and communist ideology. Egyptian Marxists attempted, often in a highly instrumental and obtuse manner, to maintain loyalty to both the “progressive forces of tomorrow” (the Soviet Union) in its battle with Anglo-American imperialism and Nasser as the manifestation of Arab national consciousness. At various junctures, but not always, these two commitments converged, easing the situation of the communists. Adherence to a strict working class politics of revolution, however, remained consistently divergent from either of the above commitments. Thus, trapped by the *realpolitik* of the Soviet Union and the operational capitulation to the hegemonic nationalist discourse, Egyptian Communists often abandoned Marxist ideology.

It should be clear that my contention is not that had the communists simply adopted a different set of ideological commitments, or a radically different lexicon, they would have captured state power. On the contrary, Egyptian Marxists faced a variety of material and subjective constraints that made such an event unlikely, whatever their ideological orientation. Amin’s analysis is once again poignant when he suggests that the choice of

³⁷ Samir Amin, *The World We Wish to See: Revolutionary Objectives in the Twenty-First Century*, Monthly Review Press, 2008, 23.

Arab communists to embrace the “national-populist project” at the expense of class politics:

...was not conjunctural and opportunist. It was structural and reflected the original shortcomings of these communist movements, the ambiguity of the ideologies they supported and, in the end, their ignorance of the popular classes whose immediate and long-term social interests they were supposed to defend. The result of this unfortunate choice was that the communists lost their credibility as soon as the national-populist regimes, having attained their historical limits, began to see their legitimacy eroded. Since the communist Left was not posed as an alternative to national-populism, a political vacuum was created, opening the way for the disastrous entry of political Islam on the scene.³⁸

My conclusions mirror Amin’s insofar as I share the argument that “original shortcomings” and the “ambiguity of the ideologies” of the communists translated into a substitution of class struggle for socialism-from-above. Had the communists been able to maintain an independent, alternative analysis, it is possible that the left could have provided a more popularly rooted alternative to Sadat’s neoliberal restructuring after 1973 or, at the very least, augmented a stronger culture of resistance in the post-Nasser years. The burgeoning popular support the Egyptian communists experienced in the immediate post-World War II period, along with the objective threat the Egyptian government felt at their presence, indicated by the enormous repression levied against them despite their relatively small size, suggests that this was not outside of the realm of possibility.

The following chapters are organized thematically as opposed to chronologically, in order to flesh out both the overarching argument and the sub-arguments presented by each thematic. Chapter one provides the necessary information on economic, political, and ideological developments under Nasser’s state-capitalist model and by doing so

³⁸ Amin, *The World We Wish to See*, 23.

inform and situate the following chapters within that particular context. I position Nasser's regime firmly within the tradition of socialism-from-above, reestablishing the analysis first put forward by Anwar Abdel-Malek that Nasser's Egypt represented "state-capitalist" socioeconomic formations, not socialism.

The second and third chapters deal with state repression. In Egypt there were two large waves of repression against Egyptian Marxists after the Free Officers coup of July 1952. The first period of repression, which forms the subject of chapter two, began after the strike at Kafr al-Dawwar in August 1952 and lasted until mid-1956, with the advent of the Suez Crisis. Making use of the available demographic data of communist prisoners, I explore possibilities and potential that the communists had during this period to establish a mass, working class tradition rooted in socialism-from-below. The third chapter deals both with the period of cooptation from mid-1956 to the end of 1958 and the second period of repression, starting January 1, 1959 and culminating in the dissolution of the communist parties in spring of 1965. The former period, when the communists turned to Nasser as a progressive engaged on the non-capitalist road to development, was essential in firmly cementing socialism-from-above as the primary orientation within the Marxist movement. The limited demographic data available for the period after 1959 suggests that the potential for a popular, mass base capable of articulating an alternative socialist discourse had been eroded during and after the first period of repression, meaning that the focus of the second wave of repression shifted from working class cadre to intellectuals.

The final chapter, covering the entire period from July 1952 to 1965, addresses the subjective response to these two phenomena (reform and repression) by Egyptian

Communists. These fluctuations in policy and analysis, in large part displaying an ideological subservience to the Soviet Union as the vanguard of the international communist movement, are critical to the argument that Egyptian communists substituted the goal of working class revolution for the achievement of state-capitalist reform programs (in line with the Soviet Union's "non-capitalist path of development" theory) headed by representatives of the petit-bourgeoisie such as Nasser. In other words, socialism-from-above not only represented the dominant discourse, despite whatever lip service was paid to the working class, but permeated the ideology, policies, and tactics of the Egyptian communist movement.

Adherence to the tradition of socialism-from-above facilitated the dissolution of the communist movement and the debilitation of the left. This is especially true of the post-Nasser period, when Sadat began to roll back the progressive social transformations that took place in the decade and a half analyzed here. The victory of socialism-from-above was disastrous for the left; communists were in disarray after Nasser's death. The road was then open for other political forces to assert themselves more fully without the benefit of an organized left which could have, at the very least, presented an alternative socialist discourse to challenge the failures of the past and the neoliberal reality under Sadat. In the end, instead of further radicalizing Egyptian society socialism-from-above facilitated Egypt's retroactive slip back into the capitalist and imperialist camp by undermining the possibility for a politics rooted in working class radicalism.

Chapter 1

“Socialism without Socialists,” the Nasserist State and Arab Socialism

Prior to July, 1952 the colonial state established and kept in power by the British could not masquerade as anything other than what it was, a coercive imposition from outside. Indeed, the Egyptian state served a single raw material, cotton, to a world market dominated by Europe. Some 70% of Egypt's exports in 1870 were cotton, rising to 93% in 1910, prompting one contemporary writer referred to Egypt as “a gigantic cotton plantation.”¹ In 1907, out of a population of 11 million, Egypt had a small but growing modern working class of some 350,000 workers. Over 70% of these were concentrated in commerce and transport, some 150,000 and 100,000 respectively.² Despite some degree of formal independence, Egypt was what Anwar Abdel-Malek has described as a “semi-dependent state, ruled by the agrarian wing of the Egyptian bourgeoisie in alliance with foreign capital, under the aegis of the palace.”³ Although the colonial state carried out some modicum of industrialization and modernization, both the legitimacy and

¹ Anne Alexander. *Nasser: His Life, His Times*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005, 5.

² Joel Benin, “Formation of the Egyptian Working Class,” MERIP Reports (No. 94, February 1981), 15.

³ Anouar Abdel-Malek, “Nasserism and Socialism,” *Socialist Registrar* (1964), 38.

hegemony of the state were continually contested throughout its existence. The colonial state was unsuccessful in establishing the institutional means to penetrate civil society.

In 1952 a group of military officers overthrew the old colonial state. By 1954 Gamal Abd al-Nasser had positioned himself as the head of the Egyptian state and within a few years became the international symbol of pan-Arab nationalism. By the early 1960s he championed an economic model of development referred to as “Arab Socialism,” a state-capitalist model with an Arab-nationalist ideological twist. In contrast with the colonial state, Nasser’s Egypt maintained a large degree of state ownership, carried out agricultural reform that enervated the power of the landed elites, and endeavored upon economic programs that increased the standard of living for Egyptian workers and peasants. The state nationalized important industries. Furthermore, the government provided subsidies which often insulated state-owned companies them from immediate market concerns such as short-term profit considerations. Instead, the state as a whole managed a wide array of enterprises in various industries via state planners who collectively pursued capital accumulation. In the end Egypt’s state was only a large island within both a domestic and international sea of private capital. Insofar as the state had to play by the rules of the market, especially within the international context, it cannot be adequately described as socialist.

1.1 Analyses of the Nasserist State

Translated into English and published in the tumultuous year of 1968, Anouar Abdel-Malek’s *Egypt: Military Society, the Army Regime, the Left, and Social Change under Nasser* provided a nuanced analysis of the new class society that arose under Nasser’s

“Arab Socialism.” He argued that while the “controlling position of imperialism” had been rooted out, “private ownership was still the dominant mode of production in the Egyptian economy as a whole.”⁴ Likewise, although the “state controlled the objectives, the priorities, and the methods of growth of the national economy,” economic planning was “still based on private enterprise and... loosely regulated by market requirements.”⁵ The beneficiaries of the new economic model were largely the “new power elite” which consisted of the “medium and large landowners (but not the old landed aristocracy).”⁶ In Abdel-Malek’s final analysis, Egypt represented a “relatively fast-growing economic with a central state-capitalistic sector.”⁷ In this situation “leadership by a mass political organization” was lacking and the transition to socialism could only be considered underway when “the delegates of the ‘popular forces’ direct the political and economic life of the country.”⁸ As Abdel-Malek pointed out, the “repression of the Marxist Left (1952, 1954-56, 1959-64) [gave] considerable encouragement to economic cooperation with, and reliance upon, West Germany and the United States.”⁹

In other words, Nasser juggled support from the United States and the Soviet Union in an attempt to augment Egypt’s economic power as leader of the Arab world. Later scholars, such as Omnia El Shakry, have generally accepted the complex material and ideological roots of Nasser’s Egypt. El Shakry notes that studies of Nasserism have often focused on the state apparatus, consisting of an “authoritarian-bureaucratic state structure, characterized by a highly state-centralized process of socio-economic development, a

⁴ Abdel-Malek, *Military Society*, xvi-xvii.

⁵ Ibid., xvii.

⁶ Ibid., xviii.

⁷ Ibid., xix.

⁸ Ibid., xix.

⁹ Ibid., xviii.

corporatist patrimonial state bourgeoisie, a single-party system bolstered by a repressive state apparatus, and a populist nationalist ideology.” Yet, she argues that such a focus fails to adequately capture the complexity of Nasserism, since it was “equally characterized by an ideology and practice of social-welfare, premised upon the state apparatus as arbiter not only of economic development, but also of social welfare.” In Nasser’s Egypt “revolutionary or democratic political change was exchanged for piecemeal social reform and the amelioration of the conditions of the working classes.” The dominant decision makers consisted of what Abdel-Malek referred to as an entrenched technocratic elite using what El Shakry refers to as “an interventionist policy of social planning and engineering.”¹⁰ Not all scholars agree on the state-capitalist nature of the regime. Some, like John Waterbury, suggest that under Nasser “the Egyptian state and its leaders enjoyed sufficient autonomy to put the country squarely on noncapitalist path.”¹¹ Whatever else can be said about the social dimensions of Nasserism, however, there was a significant dimension to his economic program predicated on human-needs and improving the economic conditions under which people lived.

1.2 Economic and Social Reforms

The Nasser government nationalized the Suez Canal in July 1956 which reinforced its political legitimacy and prompted the imperial tripartite aggression by Britain, France, and Israel. The nationalization allowed for profits from the canal to be redirected into social services and infrastructure development. Thus, while the power of the state

¹⁰ Omnia El Shakry, “Egypt’s Three Revolutions: The Force of History behind this Popular Uprising,” *Jadaliyya*, February 06, 2011. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/569/egypts-three-revolutions_the-force-of-history-behind-this-popular-uprising.

¹¹ John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes* (Princeton: University Press, 1983), 20.

apparatus remained primarily coercive, this act was the most important attempt to don the armor of hegemony by attempting to identify the interests of the masses with the interests of the state. The changing nature and function of the Egyptian state was not immediate, however. Mahmoud Hussein argued that as late as the period from 1957 to 1959 the Nasser government had “only succeeded in consolidating the ruling class politically and ideologically and in regaining for the Egyptian state enough prestige and moral authority to forestall temporarily the danger of a popular explosion.”¹² By 1960, however, Nasser had signed an agreement with the Soviet Union for the second phase of the High Dam and nationalized the Misr Bank, and within two years had articulated a political ideology of “socialism without socialists,” explicitly rejecting class struggle.

The attempt to win hegemony was furthered through a variety of measures. A wave of nationalizations occurred between 1960 and 1962, including all major banks, heavy industry, oil, and other key economic enterprises. This provided a model for state control of production and the expansion of the public sector. Material living standards increased as people had access to jobs and services previously unavailable to them. A large network of social services provided employment, education, healthcare, subsidized goods and services, and a variety of other benefits which had previously only been supplied via various non-state actors such as the Muslim Brothers. The state apparatus expanded, employing 1.29 million workers in the civil service in 1971, up from 707,312 in 1962.¹³ From 1951 to 1960, real wages increased between 41% and 51%, depending on the calculation, while hourly real wages nearly doubled by 1964 due to a decline in length of

¹² Mahmoud Hussein, *Class Conflict in Egypt: 1945-1970* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 162.

¹³ Waterbury, *Egypt of Nasser and Sadat*, 242.

the workweek.¹⁴ The 50 hour work week, which had been standard throughout the 1950s, decreased to 44 hours of work per week by 1964.¹⁵ From 1964 to 1970 the number of pensioners increased from 102,000 to 153,000, while the number of participants enrolled in the social security program rose from 1.7 million to 2.9 million.¹⁶ Likewise, the number of unions grew from 568 in 1952 to 1056 in 1958, with an increase of workers represented in unions from 159,000 to 341,000 during the same period.¹⁷ By 1964, the number of workers in the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation rose to 1.29 million members.¹⁸

The Free Officers first broke the power of the old, landed aristocracy by instituting agrarian reform which, to some extent, empowered the rural peasantry. Between 1952 and 1961 the agrarian reform program, coming in different segments, had successfully “redistributed about one seventh of the country's cultivable land from large landowners... to the landless and near landless fellahin rather” which led to an “improvement of rural incomes and agricultural production.”¹⁹ While this program may not have gone far enough, particularly in relation to some South and East Asian countries,²⁰ it was the most effective land reform campaign in the region. Despite both Syria and Iraq seizing more

¹⁴ Marsha Pripstein Posusney, *Labor and the State in Egypt: Workers, Unions, and Economic Restructuring*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, 50. The discrepancy regarding wages, as Posusney explains, rests in the difference in estimates based in the Survey of Wages and Working Hours published by CAPMAS and the report released by International Labor Organization using nominal wages figures. Regardless of the exact number, there was a clear and significant trajectory upwards for real wages throughout the 1950s.

¹⁵ Posusney, *Labor and the State in Egypt*, 71.

¹⁶ Waterbury, *Egypt of Nasser and Sadat*, 222.

¹⁷ Posusney, *Labor and the State in Egypt*, 53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁹ Ray Bush, “Coalitions for Dispossession and Networks of Resistance? Land, Politics and Agrarian Reform in Egypt,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (Vol. 38, No. 3, December 2011), page 395.

²⁰ Timothy Mitchell argues that in East and South Asia “effective agrarian reform was a critical instrument for building more egalitarian and democratic ways of life.” Whereas Egypt limited land ownership to 84 hectares in 1952 and 42 hectares in 1961, Iraq set the upper limit to 250 hectares. China, on the other hand, set the limit to 3 hectares. See Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2013), pg 145-6.

land for state control, neither reform program distributed land directly to the peasantry in the way that Egypt's did.²¹ Joel Migdal suggests that Nasser's failure to totally transform Egyptian society via land reform is indicative of a failure with regard to building a hegemonic state capable of social control.²² Nazih Ayubi counters, appropriately, that while it was not a "total success," if one considers the "political objectives, such as the undermining of the landowners' power base, the improvement of agricultural productivity, and the diversion of capital to urban development, then the reform must be regarded as a success."²³ These political objectives, while not totalizing in their transformative capacity, were vital elements for the Nasserist state to develop a significant level of hegemony.

Despite this emphasis on ameliorating life for working people and increasing the standard of living, Nasser-style social welfare was based primarily upon economic improvements from above and not democratic control from below. There was no faith in the working class and its ability to act on its own in a collective, democratic manner to fundamentally restructure society. "Social welfare, of course, should not be understood as a benevolent process whereby the state shepherds citizens in their own welfare," Omnia El Shakry maintains, "Rather, it entails the social and political process of reproducing particular social relations, often based on violence and coercion, at least partly to minimize class antagonisms."²⁴ Like Abdel-Malek and El Shakry, Mahmoud Hussein maintained that the "state bourgeoisie," following a "capitalist road of development,"

²¹ Syria appropriated about one-fifth of agricultural land, while Iraq seized almost half. See Roger Owen, *State, Power, and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 26.

²² Quoted in Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State*, 451. Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

²³ Ayubi, 451.

²⁴ El Shakry, "Egypt's Three Revolutions."

exercised power under Nasser. Whereas El Shakry appears to indicate that the social welfare measures of the Nasserist state in many ways strengthened the Egyptian state's hegemony, Hussein argued that the "proletarianized masses" were the least sensitive to "the demagogic Nasserist system." While they could be "mobilized spontaneously whenever the regime confronted any foreign power... these masses were left outside the scope of the social demagoguery practiced by the regime."²⁵ Despite the modest but important changes in the average Egyptian's standard of living, there is some evidence to suggest that Hussein is correct.

1.3 "Socialism-from-Above," Contradiction and Collapse

There is a long elitist trajectory in Nasser's thought that exhibits his disdain for the autonomy of popular forces. In the 1940s he was introduced by Khaled Mohi al-Din, another Free Officer and member of the Democratic Movement for National Liberation (DMNL), to the Communist activist and secretary general of the DMNL, "Comrade Badr." Badr revealed himself as a mechanic by trade and later, during internal Free Officer debates, Nasser disparaged Mohi al-Din by contemptuously emphasizing that "his leader is a mechanic."²⁶ The implication being that a mechanic was incapable and inadequate for a position of leadership in society. Once in power, Muhammad Sid Ahmad recalls that Nasser used to proclaim that Marxism was a "factor to enrich us and to correct our mistakes... we deal with Marxists as consultants, for enriching and consulting."²⁷ Other Marxist notions, such as class struggle or workers' control, were out

²⁵ Hussein, *Class Conflict*, 183.

²⁶ Anne Alexander, *Nasser: His Life, His Times* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 29.

²⁷ Selma Botman, *The Rise of Egyptian Communism, 1939-1970* (Syracuse: New York, 1988), 149.

of the question. Despite the vast social programs and increased standard of living Nasser's policies brought to Egyptians, he articulated the relationship between workers and the state rather under Arab Socialism succinctly: "The workers don't demand, we give."²⁸ Throughout his rule, no independent forms of working class organization were permitted. Instead, political participation was tightly controlled through three different, all-encompassing government parties, first the Liberation Rally (1953-6), then the National Union (1956-62), and finally the Arab Socialist Union (1962-1978, when it was dissolved under Sadat). Those who challenged the regime to articulate demands for autonomy were severely repressed. The aspect of state coercion was apparent almost immediately under both the Free Officers and the Nasser regime and forms the subject of later chapters.

The internal contradictions inherent in Nasser-style state capitalism meant that the model could not last forever. Indeed, by 1964 Egypt's GDP growth fell "precipitously" and by 1966 Nasser had already looked to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for relief, one year before the devastating 1967 Arab-Israeli war which significantly exacerbated Egypt's problems. While some accounts claim real wages continued to increase during the last half of the 1960s,²⁹ most accounts show a slow leveling by 1966 and a slight decline after the 1967 war.³⁰ Mark Cooper argues "these changes in wages represent a redistribution of wealth from the working classes towards the state and private

²⁸ Posusney, *Labor and the State in Egypt*, 74.

²⁹ Juan Cole, "Egypt's Class Conflict," *Informed Comment*, January 30, 2011.

<http://www.juancole.com/2011/01/egypts-class-conflict.html> (accessed April 10, 2014). Cole claims "real wages nearly doubled from 1960 to 1970," but while this may be true from 1951 to 1964, it most likely is not accurate considering the drop in real wages during the last half of the 1960s.

³⁰ Posusney shows a leveling in real wages from 1964 to 1966 and a slight decline in weekly real wages from 1966 to 1967. Cooper argues that while real wages are "more suspect because of the difficulty in choosing a cost-of-living deflator," trends consistently show a leveling during the mid-1960's and a "steady decline after the war."

sector capitalists.”³¹ Despite eventually rejecting the proposed IMF deal, due to the stringent “stabilization program” which included cuts to subsidies for basic commodities, the crisis of Arab nationalism was becoming apparent.³² Still, Egypt’s total deficit under Nasser actually decreased from 1965 to 1970, from roughly 253 million to 47 million Egyptian pounds. It never reached astronomical levels known under Nasser’s successors, Anwar al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. For instance, the total deficit in 1979, for instance, was nearly 3.2 billion Egyptian pounds.³³ Likewise, the failure of the short-lived United Arab Republic³⁴ exposed the shallowness behind Nasser’s conception of Arab unity with himself at the helm. His elevation of realpolitik similarly underscored the idea that commitment to economic or social programs were largely transient and intended for expediency in securing political objectives. Nothing elucidates this more than the fact that Nasser won deals with the Soviet Union at the same time as Egyptian Marxists were thrown in prison.

This myriad of contradictions contributed to the inability of the Nasserist state to fully win over the masses. While it is apparent that out of any successors or predecessors, the Nasserist state was the only one to consolidate some level of ideological hegemony, it was not a permanently reliant hegemony. As Marie-Christine Aulas argues, the state capitalist model eventually became its own inhibitor:

...the transformation of economic structures proceeded on the basis of a state capitalism which in no way altered the capitalist relations of production... Once the initial stage was over, the concentration of responsibilities in the expanding bureaucratic order gave birth to a new form of economic statism and internal political rivalries. These rigid

³¹ Mark N. Cooper, *The Transformation of Egypt*, (New York: Routledge, 1982), 61.

³² Joel Beinin, “Workers, Trade Unions and Egypt’s Political Future.” *Middle East Research and Information Project*. (2013). <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero011813> (accessed April 10, 2014).

³³ Waterbury, *Nasser and Sadat*, 114.

³⁴ Merger between Syria and Egypt from 1958 to 1961.

tensions had all the more paralyzing effect in that the national momentum never structured a broad social base or a will to sweep away the old social order. However great the aspirations and initial steps towards equality, any further progress was rendered highly problematic by the essential incapacity of this social class to formulate a coherent project. Its very nationalism, which had been intended as a revolutionary force, later served to mystify the crucial socio-economic differentiation of the traditional classes and of the privileged layer emerging from the new state-capitalist class.³⁵

Nasser capitalized on this hegemonic nationalist discourse to marginalize potential political alternatives, as with his repression and cooptation of the communist movement.³⁶ Furthermore, the Nasser regime “concentrated its efforts on...co-opting the old industrial bourgeoisie to further its own aims of large-scale national industrialization.” In the end what emerged was what Hussein referred to as the “state bourgeoisie,” which El Shakry describes as “the new class that emerged and characterized the state public sector... made up of the new class of technocrats together with older elements of the industrial, financial, and commercial bourgeoisie who worked their way into the public sector.”³⁷ It was from this group that Sadat and Mubarak emerged. Both would ossify the state apparatus of repression in an attempt to further solidify their own authoritarian rule.

The ideological weakness of Nasserism without Nasser and “Socialism without Socialists” facilitated the neoliberal process. As Tareq Ismael explains, “appealing to broad masses whose class origin and intellectual beliefs differ and are even, at times, contradictory, the Nasserites have fragmented, after Nasser, into a multiplicity of groups, collectivities, and organizations. These units often work at odds with each other under the

³⁵ Marie-Christine Aulas, “State and ideology in republican Egypt,” in Fred Halliday and Hamza Alavi eds., *State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988), 137-8.

³⁶ See Beinín, “Nationalist Political,” 568-584.

³⁷ El Shakry, “Egypt's Three Revolutions.”

wide banner of Nasserism.”³⁸ Both the contradictions within the state capitalist model and Nasser’s death spurred the dissolution of the forces which had rallied around him. Subsequently, the political vacuum allowed for the possibility of economic restructuring and geopolitical realignment, an opportunity Nasser’s successor would capitalize on.

³⁸ Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Arab Left*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1976), 82.

Chapter 2

First Period of Repression, 1953 to 1956

2.1 Repression by the Revolutionary Command Council

“On November the 4th, at dawn, policemen and members of the secret police... broke suddenly in the room of my father’s apartment in which I was sleeping. Major Achoub threw me out of bed and started his inquiry... ‘You are a communist, a traitor to the country. Me, an officer of the army will show you what you deserve...’.”¹ Thus begins a letter from an unnamed “young comrade” in Cairo’s Central Prison. The year was 1953, and the first wave of post-revolutionary repression against the communist movement was in full swing.

The Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) forcefully dissolved all political parties, with the exception of the Muslim Brothers, on January 18, 1953. Just over a month before, on December 9, 1952, the RCC passed a law abolishing the right to strike.² In August, 1952 a large-strike erupted at Kafr al-Dawwar which the Free Officers dealt with harshly. By repressing the independent political elements, especially communist

¹ Letter, “Letter from a young comrade sent from Cairo’s Central Prison,” folder 159, Egyptian Communists in Exile (Rome Group), International Institute of Social History. Unless otherwise noted, all documents with folder numbers come from the same archives. My sincerest gratitude goes to the archivists at IISH, whose help was immensely valuable.

² Newsletter, *Solidarity*, October 1959, 5, folder 182.

organizers within the trade union movement, the new government hoped to facilitate their attempt at fostering economic and political relations with the United States. The property of all parties, especially offices and printing presses,³ were confiscated and leaders of political parties were arrested and put under house arrest pending trial.⁴ The military established ad hoc revolutionary tribunals to try political dissidents; dozens of left-wing militants, among others, were rounded up in 1953. On January 18 alone security forces arrested 101 political leaders, 48 of them communists, most of whom were associated with the Democratic Movement for National Liberation (DMNL, or *al-Haraka al-Dimuqratiyya lil-Tahrir al-Watani, HADITU*).⁵ This wave of repression initiated the first direct attack on Egyptian communists in post-coup Egypt. On August 10, 1953, state security forces detained another twenty-one leaders of the DMNL, and in December fifty more members were arrested.⁶ In early November the government arrested the leaders of the National Democratic Front, the umbrella organization spearheaded by communists like Ahmed Taha and the unnamed young comrade from the letter above.

After being arrested, a member of the Military Police adumbrated the rules given to the new inmates rounded up with the young comrade. Prisoners were “Forbidden to talk to anyone or to make any sign...[or] to talk to soldiers,” required permission “to address

³ Communist media outlets had already been sequestered in December, 1952. Khaled Mohi El Din explains that both al-Katib (The Scribe) and al-Wajib (The Duty) had been shut down in December. See Mohi el Din memoirs, 136-7. Selma Botman confirms this, 162-3. Interestingly, the Free Officers had relied heavily on a printing press owned and operated by the communists to print their leaflets before taking power. Khaled Mohi el Din recounts a story of how Nasser, under the code name “Maurice,” used to retrieve Free Officer leaflets printed by a young Armenian named Malkon Malkonian, a DMNL cadre. “Maurice” would park his black Citroen across from Malkonian’s office, at which point Malkonian would deliver a package of pamphlets to “Maurice.” Malkonian did not know who “Maurice” was until after the revolution, when he saw Nasser’s face in the newspapers. Not long after the revolution, however, Malkonian and his fellow printers were arrested and served five years in prison. See Khaled Mohi el Din, *Memories of a Revolution* (American University in Cairo, 1995), 136-7 and Botman, 122.

⁴ Abdel-Malek, *Military Society*, 91.

⁵ Beinín, “Nationalist Political Discourse,” 433 and Mohi el Din, *Memories*, 146.

⁶ Tareq and El Said, 75.

an officer or a soldier,” “Forbidden to receive newspapers, books, letters and to have any visit... [and] to receive food and medicine.”⁷ The young comrade recounts how the “brutal guardians...went as far as threatening... to put chains on my hands and feet whenever I asked to go to the lavatory.” The captain in charge of the inquiry threatened to send the prisoner to the Revolutionary Tribunal, established in February 1953, if he did not “confess everything.” To the questioner the young comrade was accused of being a “dirty sionist⁸ [sic], homosexual, son of a dog, etc.”⁹ The captain extolled the prisoner to “be thankful to god... that you are under 20 years of age, otherwise we would have hanged you.” The threat was not entirely empty as the military government had just hung two strike leaders from Kafr al-Dawwar, Mustafa Khamis and Mohammad Hasan al-Baqari. The young comrade recalls the story of fellow prisoner Abdel Latif Gamal, who “had been beaten so very hard on the sole of his feet that for 6 months running it was absolutely impossible for him to walk.” Gamal was not alone, as on the 18th of December the prison guards engaged in a “new offensive... savagely slapping” prisoners in the face. The young prison recalls “the whole day” hearing “the sounds of beatings and of chains that were put on the prisoners’ feet.”¹⁰ Many communists paid this price for their opposition to the new government.

In the spring of 1954, as Gamal Abd Al-Nasser was maneuvering his way into power at Mohammed Naguib’s expense, security forces arrested some 254 leftists and sent them

⁷ “Letter from a young comrade.”

⁸ The Egyptian communist movement had been plagued by accusations of Zionism on two grounds. First, both Egyptian Jews and relatively recent Jewish arrivals to Egypt had historically played an important role in the communist movement’s leadership. Some of these, like Henri Curiel, held positions on Israel that, while not openly Zionist, were certainly antithetical or at least conflicted with the pan-Arab nationalist sentiments many Arab communists adopted. The second reason is that in 1948 the Egyptian communists overwhelmingly accepted the Soviet Union’s support for the United Nation’s partition plan, a grave error that reverberated for many years.

⁹ “Letter from a young comrade.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

to prison camps. Sixteen leftist officers were removed from duty.¹¹ Both the Free Officers who had been most sympathetic to the communist cause, Khaled Mohieddine and Yousef Seddik, faced repression as well. Nasser forced Mohieddine into exile in Switzerland for over a year and arrested Youssef Siddique who was held until 1955, at which point he was placed under house arrest. On one day alone, November 8, 1954, security forces detained thirty individuals for belonging to the Egyptian Communist Party.¹² In April of 1955, coinciding with the Bandung conference, Nasser ordered the arrest of thirty leading leftists, interning them at the Abu Zaabal prison camp.¹³ By the first half of 1955, the Communist Party of Israel suggested that some 750 communists were imprisoned in Cairo alone.¹⁴

2.2 Repression in Context: Kafr al-Dawwar and U.S. Relations

Prior to the 1952 revolution, a series of strikes and nationalists demonstrations partially destabilized Egyptian society in the post-World War II era. Leading working class militants came together in this immediate post-war period to form the National Committee of Workers and Students (NCWS, *al-Lagna al-Wataniyya li'l-'Ummal wa'l-Talaba*) on February 18 and 19, 1946. The founders of the NCWS intended it as a vehicle to channel both class and nationalist demands.¹⁵ Workers representing the most advanced

¹¹ Abdel-Malek, 96.

¹² Report, "Conditions De Vie Dans Les Prisons D'Egypte," Folder 167.

¹³ Abdel-Malek, 105.

¹⁴ Beinin, "Nationalist Political Discourse," 575.

¹⁵ Following the Shubra al-Khayma strike of December 1945, nationalist students organized a march to 'Abdin Palace to present their demands to King Farouk that he stop negotiating with the British and demand immediate evacuation of British troops. Egyptian police and the army opened fire on the students as they attempted to cross 'Abbas bridge and many were injured after falling into the Nile. It was from this incident that the NCWS was born. See Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882-1954* (Princeton, 1987), 340-1.

sectors of the trade union movement came together with students to articulate these demands. Representatives from the General Nationalist Committee of Shubra al-Khayma workers, Cairo tram workers, the Congress of Private Sector Trade Unions, the Preparatory Committee for an Egyptian Trade Union Congress, and the Association of Egyptian Working Women, as well as other important leaders in the trade union movement were present. Within days they called for a general strike, titled “Evacuation Day,”¹⁶ which some estimates suggest brought out 100,000 workers and students. In response security forces killed 23 demonstrators and wounded hundreds more.¹⁷ The formation of the NCWS challenged both the Wafd¹⁸ and the Muslim Brotherhood for nationalist leadership, and significantly augmented leftist presence within the nationalist movement. This development was followed by a series of attempts which attempted to establish trade union unity, including the Preparatory Committee for a General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions (*al-Lajna al-Tahdiriyya li'l-Ittihad al-'Amm li-Niqabat 'Ummal Misr*) in 1951, initiated by the DMNL with Ahmad Taha acting as its general secretary. As Joel Beinin notes, the PCGFETU assumed “the dual character of a trade union federation and an expression of working class nationalism.”¹⁹ Tareq Ismael and Rifa‘at El Sa‘id contend that the PCGFETU represented some 65,000 workers in over a hundred unions, roughly half of all unionized workers during that period.²⁰ Due to its gravitas in the formation of the federation, the DMNL and its cadre were “unquestionably

¹⁶ As in “evacuation” of British forces.

¹⁷ See Beinin and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, 341-2.

¹⁸ The mainstream nationalist party dominated by large Egyptian land-owners.

¹⁹ See Beinin and Lockman, 408-9.

²⁰ Tareq and Ismael, 70.

the leading force in the trade union movement in 1951.”²¹ Furthermore, by this period workers were prominent in the communist leadership: Ahmed Taha, Anwar Makkaar, Muhammed Shatta, and Muhammed Ali Amer. Thus, prior to 1952 the communists established themselves through both the NCWS and the PCGFETU and, due to their independent influence and leadership, represented one of the primary threats to the Free Officers’ grasp on power after July 1952.

Within one month after the Free Officers seized power, the independent character of the trade union movement was juxtaposed starkly with the aspirations of the Free Officers. By late July the Free Officers, especially those who sought political and economic relations with the Americans,²² were desperately grasping anywhere they could for both legitimacy and foreign capital. One week after the coup the new rulers adjusted Law No. 138 from 1947, reducing a requirement stipulating corporations be composed of 51 percent Egyptian capital to only 49 percent, allowing foreign capital a majority share.²³ The Egyptian Federation of Industries, a representative body of large industrialists and financiers, positively hailed this adjustment.²⁴ Mining laws and regulations were lessened, which prompted increased interest in big oil exploration. The Free Officers sought foreign capital for government-initiated industrialization programs and securing American aid was one of the primary goals in the immediate post-coup

²¹ Conversely, the “influence of the communists in the nationalist movement was not as broad as it was in 1946” at the time of the NCWS. This is due to a variety of factors, but at least in part because of the 1948 Palestine partition decision, discussed later in this chapter. See Beinin and Lockman, 406-7.

²² Of those who were most explicitly pro-American in their foreign policy approach was ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Amin. Many of the Free Officers were less ideologically and politically tied to the United States, but were more than willing to work with them to meet desired goals. Thus, Nasser and others were obstinate that any references to “Anglo-American” imperialism, common in the communist lexicon at the time, be removed from Free Officer materials. See Abdel-Malek’s memoirs.

²³ Abdel-Malek, 88-9.

²⁴ “This law seems to want to put an end—once and for all, we hope—to that absolutely unjustified fear of foreign capital, a distrust that has haunted our whole financial policy in recent years and contributed to the backwardness of our economic development.” Egyptian Federation of Industries. See Abdel-Malek, 89.

period. During his stay in prison the unnamed “young comrade” recalled how Military Police explained to him that the communists “had been arrested to pay the price for american [sic] aid.”²⁵ The last thing the governing officers desired was independent, uncontrolled labor agitation, even if it contained within it nationalist aspirations and explicitly supported the revolution.

On August 12, just weeks after the Free Officers had assumed power, a strike at Kafr al-Dawwar became the first test for the new rulers. The small industrial area of Kafr al-Dawwar is located some thirty kilometers southeast from Alexandria and at the time was composed of two large textile factories. The Misr Fine Spinning and Weaving Company, the site of the strike, employed some ten thousand workers. The workers, tempted by the revolutionary slogans of the Revolutionary Command Council, took matters into their own hands to combat paltry wages and living conditions. After having previously appealed to management and receiving no response, the workers struck on August 12 for increased wages, paid vacation, recognition of their union, and dismissal of two managers. Clashes with the police erupted immediately, and finally the army was called in to quell the strike, ending in the death of a number of workers and two soldiers. Hundreds were injured.²⁶

Ironically, the workers had declared their strike “in the name of Muhammed Naguib and the revolution,” yet it was Naguib himself who was adamant that the workers be dealt with harshly.²⁷ Two individuals were identified as the supposed leaders, Mustafa Khamis, a well known trade unionist and communist sympathizer, and Mohammed Hassan el-

²⁵ “Letter from a young comrade.”

²⁶ Newsletter, *Solidarity*, October 1959, folder 182.

²⁷ Botman, 126.

Baqari, also alleged to be a member of a communist organization.²⁸ A kangaroo court quickly tried the two and within days both leaders were sentenced to death. Naguib and the majority of the RCC supported the death penalty against the wishes of Youssef Darwish, Khaled Mohi al Din, Zakaria Mohi al Din, and Gamal abd al-Nasser.²⁹ The military government executed Khamis and al-Baqari on September 7, 1952. Khamis' dying words were, "I am wronged, I want a retrial."³⁰ The lack of appeal became characteristic of such military rulings.

Khamis and al-Baqari were meant to be examples to militant trade unionists and communists who desired to push forward with social revolution independent of edicts from above. As Selma Botman notes, the Kafr al-Dawwar incident "marked the first signs of communist disenchantment with military policy."³¹ Later, after splitting with the Free Officers and leaving the RCC, Youssef Siddique would explain that "any chance I ever had of cooperating with them became impossible. I could not possibly allow myself to go down in history as someone who had remained a member of a Council that abolished civil liberties, sentenced workers to death and placed patriots in jail."³² In contrast, Naguib was adamant that "from the very first we had done everything that was necessary in order to eliminate the chief causes of Communism in Egypt, namely, a corrupt monarchy, an unjust system of landownership, the general contempt for the rights of workers, and the hated foreign occupation."³³ Indeed, both land reform and small labor reforms, such as one protecting workers from arbitrary dismissal, came on the heels of

²⁸ Botman identifies the second individual as "Ahmad al-Bakri." However, Joel Bein in refers to him as Mohammad Al-Bakri, as does various Solidarity reports.

²⁹ See Khaled Mohi al Din, 124.

³⁰ Bein in and Lockman, 423.

³¹ Botman, 125.

³² All the revolution's men," *Al-Ahram*, July, 2002, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/595/sc7.htm>

³³ Abdel-Malek, 96.

Kafr al-Dawwar. These attempts to placate the masses, however, fit in well with Nasser's formula for governing: "The workers don't demand; we give."³⁴ What Naguib fails to mention is that despite the hand-outs from above, it took an immense amount of state repression to smash the influence of the communists. While Khamis and al-Baqari became working class martyrs, their executions were the first warning shots to communist and working class elements that dissent would not be tolerated.

2.3 Establishing the Military Tribunals

Early on the RCC established "Revolutionary Tribunals" to handle certain key personalities from the era of the monarchy. However, these tribunals quickly developed into political tools to crush all opponents of the new ruling apparatus. One of the primary ways in which communists were attacked was through the tribunals targeting the National Democratic Front. Established in February 1953,³⁵ the NDF was an umbrella organization that brought together communists, Wafdists, social-democrats, trade unionists, and Muslim Brothers, among other groups.³⁶ It had two overarching goals, the first being the "realization of the national aspirations," namely "evacuation of the Nile Valley by the foreign occupation forces," and "the rejection of any aggressive military pact and the right of Sudan to self-determination." The communist influence here is very clear, as the "rejection of any aggressive military pact" was a common demand articulated by the communists. The second goal included "the restoration of constitutional

³⁴ Posusney, *Labor and the State in Egypt*, 73-4.

³⁵ Botman explains that the NDF was originally called the "United Revolutionary Front" in February and March. The name was not changed to the NDF until April.

³⁶ The National Front of 1951-2 was in a way the predecessor of the National Democratic Front of 1953, given the nature of the movement. Walter Laqueur astutely points out that the period of 1948-1950, when martial law was in effect and many communists were thrown in prison with other political forces, formed a crucial experience for the communists. As he suggests, "the new allies and friends won in the concentration camps were more important for the future development of the group than its temporary eclipse" from 1948-50. Laqueur, *Nationalism and Communism in the Middle East*, 46.

life and for the exercise of the fundamental liberties.”³⁷ Although security forces arrested all the prominent leaders of the NDF, including communists Ahmad Taha and Mohammad Shatta, on November 3, 1953, it was the network organized via the NDF that in large part led the 1954 March demonstrations against the government for the return to parliamentary life, opposed by most of the Free Officers.³⁸ The communists, despite their restricted size, acted in large part as the nexus through which all the political currents were banded together. Indeed, as one report explains, the DMNL “and its militants are undoubtedly the most active elements of the Front, if only because the activities of the Front are secret and the communists who have always worked in illegal conditions in Egypt, have gathered a wide experience in this field which the other parties lack.”³⁹ The experience of the NDF provides an example of Egyptian communists’ disproportionate influence in relation their numbers.

The Revolutionary Tribunal was officially established on September 13, 1953. It was created directly by the Revolutionary Command Council of the Free Officers and as per article two covered “all acts considered as treason against the country or directed against its interior or exterior security.” It was also mandated to “cover equally all acts which may be considered as directed against the present regime or against the principles of the

³⁷ “The Trial of the National Democratic Front,” folder 155.

³⁸ See Khaled Mohi el Din’s memoirs as well as Beinin and Lockman, 437-47. The “March Crisis” erupted because of the split between Muhammad Naguib, who had never been a part of the Free Officers but acted as chairman of the RCC, prime minister, and president of Egypt, at various periods, and Gamal abd al-Nasser, who held real power via the RCC. After a rally organized by Ikhwaan led to a clash with members of Nasser’s Liberation Rally, the RCC responded by dissolving the Society of the Muslim Brothers in accordance with the decrees of January 1953 outlawing political parties. The Muslim Brothers then threw their support behind Naguib, who had cultivated relations with the masses and had a broadly popular image, despite having rejected a return to parliamentary life in private RCC meetings. This led to a very public clash between Naguib and his supporters, especially the Ikhwaan, and Nasser and his supporters, especially various trade unions and organizations to which he promised a sort of reformist social contract. Nasser emerged victorious by mid-April 1954. Also see chapter one, “The Dark Side of Militarism: The March 1954 Crisis” in Hazem Kandil’s *Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen: Egypt’s Road to Revolt* (London: Verso, 2012).

³⁹ “The Trial of the National Democratic Front,” folder 155.

Revolution.” Article three stipulates that those “submitted to the Tribunal are punishable by death, hard labour for a time or for life imprisonment or detention for a period of time to be decided by the Tribunal.” Article four requires that the tribunal be “composed of military men and members of the public prosecutor’s offices designated by the Revolutionary Command Council. It has the right to order the arrest of the accused without the possibility of any kind of appeal.” According to article five the defendant only be required notice of charges 24 hours before the date of the trial, and would only hear defense witnesses if the tribunal thought it was necessary. The trial could be held in private, with the stipulation that the sentence would be passed in public. Only the RCC could alleviate the sentence. Finally, article eight stipulated that the “judgments of this tribunal are without appeal and no opposition to the procedure or to the execution of the sentence may be presented.”⁴⁰

A year later on November 1, 1954, noticeably after the schism with the Muslim Brothers,⁴¹ the only party not to have been dissolved in 1953, the Revolutionary Tribunal evolved into the “People’s Tribunal.” The major change with this transformation was article two, which now stipulated that the court could bring “any trials which the Council of the Revolution may find necessary to submit to it – whatever their character and even if they are pending before ordinary courts or any other judicial power, as long as no

⁴⁰ “Text of Decree for the Constitution of the ‘Revolutionary Tribunal’,” folder 154.

⁴¹ An interesting anecdote regarding this schism comes from the young comrade mentioned several times earlier who was himself a victim of the infamous “National Democratic Front” trial, judged by the Revolutionary Tribunal. After the mass round-up of Muslim Brothers in January of 1954, the prison guards changed their tune towards some of the communists. One of the captains explained that the imprisonment of the communists had been a “misunderstanding” and that they now realized the “real enemy” was the “fascist” Muslim Brothers. “You should support us against this enemy,” the officer explained to the young imprisoned communist. The young prisoner was kept in solitary confinement until March of 1954, when he and other communists were suddenly transferred to Cairo’s Central Prison. The authorities later transferred him yet again to the Tora prison complex in September of the same year. Folder 159, “Letter from a young comrade sent from Cairo’s Central Prison.”

verdict has been rendered.” Such ordinary courts would then relieve themselves of the case immediately and hand it over to the People’s Tribunal per request of the RCC. Thus, any pretense of “security” or “principles of the revolution” were dropped. Furthermore, article six now stipulated that “The Court is entitled to adopt such procedure as it will find necessary and no objection may be made concerning the Court of one of its members.”⁴²

In the early stages these trials were denounced loudly and widely as a farce by the international communist press. The *Daily Worker* explained that the “accused are notified of the charge against them only 24 hours before the hearing, the Tribunal decides whether the defence shall be allowed to call any witness and it can hold its sittings in secret if it wishes. There is no right of appeal.”⁴³ Another *Daily Worker* article from late 1953 explained how the “first president of the Military Court, col. Ahmed Shawki... was himself arrested after he had asked for a proper defence of the defendants. He is now accused of being pro-Communist.” The military court in this early period consisted of the Commander-in-Chief, Abdul Latif Baghdadi, the minister of the air force, Hasan Ibrahim, and Col. Anwar Sadat, “a notorious fascist who was interned during the war for being a pro-Nazi.”⁴⁴ At the time the international communist press was rather uniform in its assumption that the new military regime was a manifestation of American imperialism.

During the same month that the Revolutionary Tribunal became the People’s Tribunal, Nasser presided over a meeting of the cabinet which oversaw changes to the penal code that abolished “special prison treatment” ostensibly provided to those convicted of subversive activities. Changes to Article 98 read, in part:

⁴² “Decree of November 1st, 1954 Setting Up the So-Called People’s Court,” folder 154.

⁴³ “Pritt Denounces Neguib ‘Trials’,” *Daily Worker*, January 4, 1954, folder 284.

⁴⁴ “Nightmare for Neguib,” *Daily Worker*, October, 1953, folder 284.

Anyone who establishes, organizes, or runs associations, bodies, or organizations aiming at one social class dominating other classes, exterminating a social class, changing the fundamental social or economic systems of the state, demolishing any of the fundamental systems of society... shall be punished with a term of imprisonment up to 10 years with hard labor and a fine ranging between L.E. 100 and L.E. 1000... Anyone who joins any of the associations, bodies, or organizations referred to... or participates in them in any form whatsoever, shall be punished with a term of imprisonment and a fine ranging between L.E. 50 and L.E. 200. Anyone who personally or indirectly contacts any of the associations, bodies, or organizations, or their branches... shall be punished with a term of imprisonment up to five years... Anyone who possess or acquires either directly or indirectly manuscripts or publications embodying approval of, or propaganda for any of the actions specified... shall be punished with a term of imprisonment up to five years and a fine ranging between L.E. 50 and L.E. 500...⁴⁵

The law also provided for the closure of any such associations or organizations, as well as the confiscation of their property. The net was cast wide for all communists and their sympathizers. One handwritten report outlines twenty three trials carried out by military tribunals. Of them, at least five were trials specifically targeting communists.⁴⁶

2.4 A Quantitative Analysis of the First Wave of Repression

It is difficult to measure the exact number of communists rounded up and imprisoned in the early years of the Naguib and then Nasser government. Often the accessible reports, particularly various proclamations of solidarity from outside sources, provide conflicting numbers or only offer vague generalities with regard to numbers. Despite this, it is clear that a significant amount of those initially arrested were communists. One undated letter, presumably written in 1953 and sent to the Communist Party of Great Britain, suggests that some “4,000 Communists are in concentration camps and prisons.”

⁴⁵ “Tights Laws Against Subversive Activities,” *The Egyptian Gazette*, November 25, 1954, folder 285.

⁴⁶ Untitled handwritten report, dated sometime after January 25, 1955, folder 285.

The unnamed author explains that “altogether our comrades will have thousands of years in prison.”⁴⁷ This figure of 4,000 is difficult to confirm, however, and appears exaggerated.

A more detailed report written sometime between 1954-5 suggests lower figures for the total amount of communist prisoners. It maintains that 23 communists, each serving five to ten years of hard labor, were interned at Tourah prison in Cairo. About 200 communists and sympathizers were interned at Abu Zaabal camp, also in Cairo. One “incomplete” handwritten list documents the names of over seventy prominent leftists, including Anouar Abdel-Malek.⁴⁸ About 45 minutes outside of the city some 300 communists were detained at “Barrage Prison.” Meanwhile, around 15 communists were imprisoned in Alexandria. A large number of officers were imprisoned in Cairo’s Military Prison,⁴⁹ among them the Free Officer Youssef Siddique.⁵⁰ His wife, along with four other female communists, was held in Cairo Prison. It is not clear from the report if other communists were imprisoned with Siddique, although a separate report suggests that at least six other communists had been imprisoned there at some point.⁵¹ Although the report was unable to provide the number, it did certify that some communists were imprisoned in the Citadel Prison in Cairo as well. It remains unclear whether or not communist prisoners were located alongside Muslim Brothers in the Amria prison camp.⁵² Thus, around 550 communists are accounted for in this report, not counting an

⁴⁷ “Comrade Chairman,” folder 144.

⁴⁸ “Liste des Internes en Abou Zaabal,” folder 158.

⁴⁹ In Abbassia, a neighborhood of Cairo.

⁵⁰ Siddique had been a member of the communist DMNL prior to becoming a Free Officer. He quickly fell out with the Free Officers, however, a process which accelerated after the execution of two striking workers in Kafr al-Dawwar.

⁵¹ Untitled report documenting 48 political prisoners, folder 158.

⁵² “Bref Expose Sur les Methodes de Tortures et les Conditions Actuelles Dans les Camps de Concentration, les Prisons et les Bagnes Egyptiens,” folder 150.

unknown number in the Citadel, among other places. Joel Beinin cites the Communist Party of Israel's newspaper *al-Ittihad* which maintained that by the first half of 1955 some 750 communists were imprisoned in Cairo alone.⁵³

In September of 1954 twenty four high profile individuals were sent to trial and all but three were charged with propagating communism. A variety of sentences were handed down by the Military Tribunal, ranging anywhere from one to ten years in prison and 50 to 100 Egyptian pounds in fines.⁵⁴ All together the twenty one defendants were served 101 years of forced labor and fined 1800 Egyptian pounds. Among the twenty one communist leaders were Ahmed Taha,⁵⁵ Dr. Sherif Hatata,⁵⁶ Mohamed Fouad Mounir, Zaki Mourad Mohamed,⁵⁷ Mohamed Mohamed Shatta, and Mohamed Khalil Kassem.⁵⁸ This "Great Communist Case," as one newspaper referred to it at the time, was meant to destabilize, enervate, and undermine the legitimacy of the communist movement.⁵⁹ One month later, in November, security forces arrested 30 communists from the Egyptian Communist Party.

In 1955 military trial number 14 convicted eight military officers of having relations with the DMNL, including Captain Abdel Fatah Mahmoud Riad, Lt. Col. Hassan El Nosseilhi, Captain Ahmed Fathi el Ghamri, Captain Hamdi Saddique el Shankankiri, Captain Abdel Aziz el Mokdem, Moustapha Saad Allah, Col. Abdel Rahman Ashour, and

⁵³ Beinin, "Nationalist Political Discourse," 575.

⁵⁴ In 1950 one Egyptian pound was worth roughly three US dollars.

⁵⁵ Five years, 100 Egyptian pounds.

⁵⁶ Ten years, 100 Egyptian pounds. Later to become one of the sixteen members comprising the ASU's leadership.

⁵⁷ Eight years, 100 Egyptian pounds. Nubian Egyptian.

⁵⁸ Eight years, 100 Egyptian pounds. Nubian Egyptian.

⁵⁹ "Le verdict du Tribunal Militaire Supérieur dans la grande affaire communiste a été rendu hier," folder 151.

Ahmed Toussoun el Sayed.⁶⁰ As late as July, 1955 the government continued to attack communists from the DMNL, with 21 brought to trial before a military tribunal for the crime of desiring to establish in Egypt a “social plan” similar to the Soviet model.⁶¹ As late as April 1956 some 67 individuals were being tried by the Supreme Military Court on the grounds that they were communists. *Solidarity* notes that some of them had been detained for more than two years without being charged with a crime.⁶² This was despite Nasser appearing in a newspaper interview in March of 1956 proclaiming that by July, when the new constitution was supposed to come into effect, “There will be no one in prison for political offenses.”⁶³ Indeed, according to *Solidarity* any general “political amnesty” was not applied for the benefit of communists under the pretense that communism is not a “political” but a “social crime.”⁶⁴ Likewise, the deportations to the Kharga desert camp had not stopped. In July of 1956 *Solidarity* was reporting that 736 prisoners, not all communist, had been transferred to Kharga Oasis.⁶⁵

Estimates of the total number of political prisoners during this period fluctuate but remain within the range of a couple thousand to 25,000⁶⁶ at its highest point, the latter figure is likely hyperbole. By July 1956 *Solidarity* (*Al-Taḍaaman*), the intermittent bulletin that dealt with repression against political prisoners in Egypt, estimated that there were some 3,000 officers and a “few” thousand Muslim Brothers imprisoned in the Abbassia Military Prison, 750 political prisoners (including 67 Palestinians, many of

⁶⁰ “Liste des temoins a charge dans le Proces du crime militaire No. 14 de l’anne 1955 du quartie d’Abdine...” 1955, folder 284.

⁶¹ “Une Nouvelle Grande Affaire Communiste,” July, 1955, folder 284.

⁶² *Solidarity*, April 1956, folder 163.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ *Solidarity*, July 1956, folder 163.

⁶⁶ Untitled and undated report from this period cites 25,000 “political prisoners” who have been tried in front of the military tribunals, folder 152.

them communists) in Cairo's Central Prison, "hundreds" of political prisoners in Kanater Prison, and over 200 political detainees in Abu Zaabal who had not been charged with crimes.⁶⁷ Anwar Abdel Malek explains that some seven thousand Muslim Brothers were arrested after the uneasy alliance broke between themselves and the Free Officers. Military tribunals sentenced some 867 Muslim Brothers, condemning seven of them to death.⁶⁸ Yet another report places 3,000 officers in Military Prison, 750 political prisoners in Cairo's Central Prison, 300 political prisoners at Barrage Prison outside of Cairo, 350 in Abu Zaabal, and an unknown number held at Alexandria's Hadra prison, the site of a revolt amongst political prisoners crushed by authorities.⁶⁹ Added to the roughly 500 or so internees in Kharga at any given time, these reports suggest that the state held some 8000 to 11,000 political prisoners during this first wave of repression.

Detailed information regarding the demographic attributes of all the imprisoned communists is nearly impossible to ascertain. Despite this, one detailed report that adumbrates short biographies of 42 communists imprisoned in 1953 provides a glimpse into important data concerning the age, leadership position, occupation, and ethnicity of various communist prisoners. Although the 42 communists may or may not be fully representative of the entire communist prison population, the report does provide one of the most important samplings available to give an idea of who was imprisoned and when. The demographic data from this cannot be mechanistically extrapolated onto the entire communist prisoner population, but it can be utilized to garner a grasp of who the repressive state apparatus targeted. Understanding who the government targeted allows

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Abdel-Malek, 96.

⁶⁹ "Nouvelles Sur La Repression En Egypte," folder 152.

for a more thorough analysis of how the state utilized imprisonment and repression to undermine the communist movement.

In terms of age the communists identified in this report were overwhelmingly young, with over two-thirds (69%) in their twenties. Around seven were in their thirties, with one 18 year old and one in their 40s. This supports Selma Botman's assertion that communists "were attracted to the movement when they were under twenty-five years old."⁷⁰ At least five (12%) of the 42 were Nubian Egyptian, an interesting dynamic considering that historically Nubians have only numbered anywhere from one to four percent of the Egyptian population. Although not conclusive, it hints that Nubian Egyptians may have been disproportionately attracted to the communist movement. Three of the communists were Sudanese, another important component given the complex situation regarding the Sudan during this period.⁷¹

As for social class, it is important to note that the largest single group of communists imprisoned during this period was composed of workers. A total of fourteen, or one third, belonged to this group, including five textile workers, three mechanics, a carpenter, and a shoemaker, among others. The next largest group, almost a third as well, were thirteen student communist activists. Eleven of the communist activists occupied traditional middle class positions, including two lawyers, two professors, a doctor, and a journalist, while five of those imprisoned were government employees, including two officials from the Ministry of War.⁷² The fact that working class communists composed over one third of the 42 prominent communists arrested, and represented the single largest group of

⁷⁰ Botman, 19.

⁷¹ The Sudanese Communist Party was one of the more influential and successful communist parties in the Arab world.

⁷² Untitled report documenting 42 political prisoners from Ahmed Taha Ahmed to Taha Ibrahim El Adaoui "Zohdi," folder 158.

those documented, suggests that by 1953 communists had made significant inroads in some working class communities and trades. Even at Abu Zaabal, notorious for housing the leftist intelligentsia, particularly journalists, a large number of prisoners there were identified as workers and trade unionists. An “incomplete” list of 77 prisoners lists the number of workers at 19, a quarter of those cited.⁷³ Indeed, the *Daily Worker* reports that in September of 1953 some 800 workers were arrested at Shurbagi’s mills in Shubra el-Kheima. This was on top of the estimated 500 political activists, many communists, detained in Cairo the week of September 12-18.⁷⁴

These statistics, though not conclusive, suggest that during this period the communist movement had a large working class cadre and general working class support. The forerunner of the DMNL, the Egyptian Movement for National Liberation, claimed in 1946 that one half of its 500 members were workers.⁷⁵ Although one can look with some skepticism at this claim, it is not entirely without merit, given the number and percentage of workers arrested in this first period of repression. It also shows that one of the primary targets in the post-Kafr al-Dawwar period was the trade union movement, particularly working class movements in which communists were active leaders. Walter Laqueur could have been considered half correct in 1956 when he proclaimed that “The Communist movement in Egypt never was (nor is it not at the time of writing) a working-class movement...”⁷⁶ He may be right in his assertion that prior to World War II the communist movement had never established a mass working class base,⁷⁷ but by 1952 at

⁷³ “Liste des Internes en Abou Zaabal,” folder 158.

⁷⁴ IISH: ECE (RG) – Folder 284, “Nightmare for Neguib,” *Daily Worker*, October, 1953.

⁷⁵ Laqueur, *Nationalism and Communism in the Middle East*, 44.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷⁷ It should be noted that even this first contention is challenged. For instance, Tareq Ismael and Rifa‘at El-Sa‘id maintain that the early Communist Party of the 1920s “was so successful in mobilizing labor that the labor movement was born during this period... To crush the labor movement and bring unions under the

the time of the coup and immediately after, the communists had transcended their insular status, recruited vital working class cadre to positions of leadership, and secured a relatively large working class membership and sphere of influence.

Laqueur is not alone in this analysis. Even later historians such as Selma Botman have argued that despite some diversity in the social composition of the Egyptian communist movement, “in the main the communists were of bourgeois and petty bourgeois origin... from 1939 to 1970, leftists were inescapably middle class.”⁷⁸ Spanning those three decades broadly, Botman is undoubtedly correct in her argument that the communist movement was “inescapably middle class.” However, if the occupations and positions of those targeted for repression are any indication, it appears that the communists had succeeded in laying the groundwork for and developing a large working class base for a brief window of time in the immediate post-war period. The origins of this support stem from the tumultuous period beginning with the formation of the NCWS in 1946 and built up until the post-Kafr al-Dawwar period, when repression against working class communists reigned. Joel Beinin’s chronologically specific analysis of the class composition is more nuanced. He maintains that while the communists “did have significant working class support in the period 1952-4, by the mid-1950s the university-educated intelligentsia was the most important component of the movement, especially at the leadership level.”⁷⁹ This “significant working class support” for the communists amongst the most politically active working class elements meant that these working

tutelage of the government, in that year [1924] Egypt’s first nationalist government cracked down on the Communist Party.” See *The Egyptian Communist Movement*, 153.

⁷⁸ Botman, 19.

⁷⁹ Beinin, “Nationalist Political Discourse,” 569-60.

class elements were to receive the most vitriolic attacks during the first wave of repression.

Indeed, the process that occurred from January 1953 to mid-1956 was in some ways quite similar to the process that Tareq Ismael and Rifa'at El-Sa'id suggest occurred in 1924: "To crush the labor movement and bring unions under the tutelage of the government, in that year Egypt's first nationalist government cracked down on the Communist Party."⁸⁰ The communists had developed the infrastructure and apparatus to break out of their insular middle class composition and establish a large working class base, which they were doing even after the July 1952 coup. This trajectory was ground to a devastating halt with the immense repression beginning in 1953, a process that had to occur in order for the government to develop a large, state-sanctioned trade-union apparatus that nullified communist influence and established nationalist hegemony over the working class movement.

2.5 Dismantling Communist Leadership and Undermining Their Legitimacy

To understand the impact that this wave of repression had on the communist movement's ability to organize and engage with the population, it is important to juxtapose the repression against the Muslim Brotherhood with that of the communists. In terms of sheer numbers, it is undeniable that the number of Muslim Brothers arrested, imprisoned, and tried by the military government far exceeded the number of communists attacked. Yet, even if the lowest estimate of communists arrested and imprisoned is

⁸⁰ Ismael and El-Sa'id, 153.

accurate, around 550 (ignoring the almost certainly exaggerated 4,000 figure), the round-up of communists had a far greater impact, seriously enervating and debilitating the movement.

British intelligence estimates suggest that at most the Muslim Brothers had half a million members and sympathizers by the mid-1940s.⁸¹ The arrest of some 7,000 is certainly a staggering figure, but it only accounts for around 1.4% of the proclaimed membership. In contrast, while 550 is a nominally smaller figure, it represents a much higher ratio of imprisoned communists relative to their strength. The Democratic Movement for National Liberation, the largest communist party, had a party newspaper *Al-Gamahir (The Masses)*⁸² with a regular circulation of seven or eight thousand, reaching fifteen thousand in exceptional periods of struggle.⁸³ Nasser himself estimated that in 1956 there were “almost five thousand Communists in Egypt.”⁸⁴ Joel Beinin, citing figures provided by “several former communists,” suggests that in July of 1952 the DMNL had around 2,000 members, Workers’ Vanguard another 300, and al-Raya (“Communist Party of Egypt,” associated with Fouad Morsi) had yet another 100, totaling half the figure Nasser presumed.⁸⁵ Walter Laqueur is more generous, citing a total of 7,000 communists in 1954.⁸⁶ Either way, the DMNL certainly did not have 15,000 cadre or even active members, despite the occasional circulation of their

⁸¹ Brynjar Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement 1928-1942* (Ithaca Press, 2006), 154.

⁸² Al-Gamahir was a political newspaper which operated during 1947 and 1948. It was initially the organ of Iskra, but then became the voice of the DMNL. It was a vibrant political magazine with socialist discourse on a variety of topics. See Botman, 161-2.

⁸³ Beinin, *Red Flag*, 59.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Abdel-Malek, 307.

⁸⁵ Beinin, “Nationalist Political Discourse,” 573-4.

⁸⁶ Laqueur, *Nationalism and Communism*, 50.

newspaper at that figure. As the largest organization of communists in Egypt, the DMNL bore the brunt of repression during this period.

Being extremely generous to their numbers, including sympathizers and fellow travelers, and taking the lowest estimates of communists imprisoned, 550 accounted for in various reports, this number still accounts for 3.6% (550 of 15,000), almost double the ratio of imprisoned Muslim Brothers. Assuming Nasser's estimate of "almost five thousand" is closer to reality, the number of those arrested equals far over 11% of their total strength, a staggering figure. If Bein'in's estimates are accepted, nearly a quarter of Egyptian communists had been rounded up during this first wave of repression. Furthermore, if the figure of 750 imprisoned communists given by the Communist Party of Israel is embraced, the ratio becomes even direr. Whatever the actual figures, repression had a paralyzing impact on the communists as a whole.

Furthermore, the practice of targeting high-profile communists was important in the strategy of repression. Although not all the hundreds of imprisoned communists were leaders, as the sheer number alone necessitates that many were rank-and-file members, the rounding up of leading communists hampered the movement's ability to organize throughout the Nasser era. Many of those imprisoned were leaders not only in the communist movement, but held positions in civil society which allowed them to reach a far broader audience. One of the most high-profile prisoners was Ahmed Taha, discussed further below. Another prison was Dr. Sherif Hatata, hailing from the upper middle class, who was active in the National Committee of Workers and Students (NCWS),⁸⁷ as well

⁸⁷ The NCWS was a broad political front that united communists, Wafdists, and nationalists of various flavors in a united vehicle meant to facilitate nationalist struggle against the British. Communist presence was heavy in the NCWS. Anour Abdel-Malek explains that the "direct and daily influence" of the NCWS reached "the two universities of Cairo and Alexandria, to the students in the secondary and technical

as a member of Iskra and then the DMNL. Farouk's security forces first imprisoned Hatata in 1948, but the Free Officers released him after the coup of 1952 only to re-arrest him in November 1953⁸⁸ after accusing him of harboring two DMNL comrades in his home in the midst of the crackdown.⁸⁹ At the time he was on the editorial board of *Voice of the Peasants*, a communist paper meant for agitation amongst the *fellaheen*. Hatata later became a supporter of dissolution and the merger with the ASU, acting as one of the 16 member secretariat-general after December 1964.⁹⁰

Other important leaders were imprisoned during this period as well, including Zaki Mourad Muhammad Ibrahim, a leader in the Union of Nubian Youth and the Egyptian Committee of Peace Partisans,⁹¹ Mohammed Khalil Qassem, a member of the League of Nubian Students who had previously served time from 1949 until February 1953, Rif'at Sa'id, member of the NCWS and associated with the staff of three communist-inspired newspapers,⁹² and Mohammed Taher El Badri, a member of the NCWS in 1946 and the Peace Partisans in 1951.⁹³ Abdel Moneim El Ghazali El Guebeli, a 29 year old law student at the University of Cairo, was also arrested. His activist credentials were long and included being an elected member of the Union of Secondary Schools in 1942, a member of the Preparatory Committee for the Committee of National Students in 1945, a member of the NCWS in 1946, a member of the Committee for the Formation of the

schools all over the country, to the whole of the intelligentsia, to major sections of the professions and to all Egyptian trade unions without regard to allegiance or geography." Abdel-Malek, 23.

⁸⁸ Untitled report documenting 42 political prisoners from Ahmed Taha Ahmed to Taha Ibrahim El Adaoui "Zohdi," folder 158.

⁸⁹ This anecdote is recounted in Botman, 70-72.

⁹⁰ Ginat, *Incomplete Revolution*, 26-27.

⁹¹ Untitled report documenting 42 political prisoners, folder 158.

⁹² Ibid. These newspapers included "*El Kateb*," "*El Milayin*," and "*El Midaan*." *El Katib* (The Scribe) was the organ of the Egyptian Peace Supporters, first published in May 1951. It featured many prominent leftists of all varieties. *Al-Milayin* was the organ of the DMNL in 1951 after *al-Gamahir* was forcefully shut down in 1948. See Botman, 162-3.

⁹³ Ibid., 7.

National Front in 1951, and serving as the administrative director of communist media outlets “El Kateb” and “El Malayine.”⁹⁴ Sa‘id Khalil Turk, secretary-general of the transportation workers syndicate in 1952 was also arrested.⁹⁵ Thus, those with the widest connections to various cross sections of society, namely communists active in broad political, social, and cultural fronts, were prime targets for the government during this period.

In the wake of Kafr al-Dawwar the early military government targeted communist trade union activists with zeal. Forty-three year old Mohammed Ali Amer was an example of this trend. He had earlier been secretary to a branch of the Wafdist Youth and then president of the Textile Workers Union in 1947.⁹⁶ Perhaps one of the most notable trade union leaders other than Ahmed Taha imprisoned during this period was Mohammed Shatta, a textile worker and member of the mechanical weaving syndicate of Shubra El Kheima. Shatta was notably active in textile work at Mahalla el Kubra (1932-40) and Kafr El Dawwar (1940-3) before arriving in Shubra El Kheima, all three historic sites of militant trade union struggle. He was a member of the NCWS as well as founder and secretary general of the General Committee of Shubra El Kheima Workers where he helped lead a 45 day strike in early January of 1946, one of the longest strikes in Egyptian history up to that time.⁹⁷ He was also a leader of the NDF.

Aside from enervating the communist movement through the neutralization of its leaders, both intellectually as well as organizationally, the government employed a variety of tactics to undermine the legitimacy of the communist movement as a whole.

⁹⁴ Untitled report documenting 42 political prisoners, 3-4.

⁹⁵ IISH: ECE (RG) – Folder 168, “Pour la Liberation Des Patriote Democrates Egyptiens,” July 1957, 3.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 5-6.

⁹⁷ Untitled report documenting 42 political prisoners, 3. For information regarding the strike, in which some six hundred workers were arrested, see Beinín and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, 338-40.

Anti-communist forces waged ideological war against the communist movement with two key arguments in particular. The first accused the communist organizations of either being infiltrated by Zionists or actually of being Zionists themselves. The second suggested that communists took orders from outside, especially from Moscow but from other communists parties as well. As such, the communists were not sincere or legitimate in their desire for national liberation. Although the reality is far more complex, the military used both the charges of “Zionism” and “outside directives” to undermine communist legitimacy during the various waves of repression by appealing to, at various times and contingent upon the context, Arab or Egyptian nationalism.

The first charge leveled against the Marxists was that they were the willing servants of outside Zionist agitators. That charge that the communist movement was Zionist or taking orders from Zionists was false, but within the context of Egyptian communism’s historical origins and its political choices, the charge held an enormous propaganda function for two reasons. The first is the historic overrepresentation of Egyptian Jews in the Egyptian communist movement, given that until the 1940s the number of Jews present in the movement was not representative of their small presence vis-à-vis the Egyptian population. Indeed, as late as 1961 in an effort to delegitimize the communists after the latest wave of repression the governor of Cairo, Major Salah Dessuki, denounced the “first Communist propagandists in Cairo” as “Zionist Jews.”⁹⁸

The second reason is that despite having opposed Zionism ideologically throughout much of the first half of the 20th century, the Egyptian communist movement, following the Soviet line in 1948, overwhelmingly accepted the 1947 partition plan for Palestine-Israel. As Abdel-Malek explains, the Left “was accused this time of treason, since the

⁹⁸ Abdel-Malek, 196.

various Communist parties, conforming to the Marxist-Leninist principle of the right of peoples to self-determination, called for acceptance of the state of Israel within the limits laid down the UN in 1947.”⁹⁹ This charge hit particularly hard during the September 1954 trial of the 24 communists. The court ruled that the communists were guilty of receiving “its guidance from two Zionists expelled the country for several years.” One of the two “Zionists” was Henri Curiel, the intellectual leader of the DMNL for many years who was forced to emigrate from Egypt to France in 1950.¹⁰⁰ Abdel-Malek, an ardent nationalist who supported the Egyptianization¹⁰¹ of the communist movement, challenged Henri Curiel’s leadership in the DMNL.¹⁰² Regardless, the Free Officers interned Abdel-Malek at Abu Zaabal during the first wave of repression. In March, 1955 the state rounded up 67 Palestinians accused of being “spies for the State of Israel.” Many were communists, either members of the Communist Party of Israel¹⁰³ or the Jordanian Communist Party.¹⁰⁴ The legacy of the 1948 decision on Palestine haunted the Egyptian and Arab communist movement for years to come, especially as the struggle over nationalist discourse become a pivotal political point in the Nasser years.¹⁰⁵ The charge that communists were taking orders from “dangerous Zionists” expelled from the country

⁹⁹ Abdel Malek, 28. There was also another debate within the Arab communist movement, namely regarding what the class composition and economic structures of the new Israeli state would be. Some communists argued that Israel would represent a capitalist bastion conducive to working class struggle in an otherwise feudal or semi-feudal and non-developed region. Therefore the overall working class struggle could move forward in the region by the development of such a state, even if it displaced the indigenous population.

¹⁰⁰ “Le verdict du Tribunal Militaire Supérieur dans la grande affaire communiste a été rendu hier,” folder 171.

¹⁰¹ The process of removing the disproportionate Jewish leadership in the communist movement to make it more authentically “Egyptian,” ie. Arab.

¹⁰² Abdel-Malek and Shohdi Attiya al Shafi split from the DMNL to form the Revolutionary Bloc (*al-Kutla al-Thawriyya*). See Beinín, “The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry,” chapter “The Palestine Question and the Jewish Communists.”

¹⁰³ At the height of its Arab phase, see Beinín, *Red Flag*.

¹⁰⁴ “Conditions of Life of the 67 Palestinians Emprisonned At the Cairo Central Prison,” folder 152.

¹⁰⁵ See Beinín, “Nationalist Political Discourse.”

dovetailed with the related but more general charge that Egyptian Marxists took their orders from “outside,” namely from Moscow. This is a charge that became particularly prominent during the second wave of repression, explored in chapter three.

2.6 Case Study: Ahmed Taha in the Kharga Desert Camp

One report on the prison conditions in Egypt suggests that there were in general three types of incarceration for political prisoners. The first, reserved for those condemned to forced labor sentences, generally included working the stone quarries of Tourah. The second included the prison network consisting of the Barrages Prison just north of Cairo, reserved specifically to detain communists, even those not convicted of any crime, Cairo Prison, which also doubled as the military prison for officers, and Alexandria’s Hadra prison for the city’s political detainees. The third type of imprisonment was the internment camps around Cairo and throughout Upper Egypt.¹⁰⁶ Some of the camps served unique functions. For instance, Abu Zaabal was generally where “communist sympathizers” and fellow travelers were sent, particularly those who were acquitted of being communists themselves but were generally associated with the leftist intelligentsia.¹⁰⁷ Some communists, such as Anouar Abdel-Malek, were themselves interned at Abu Zaabal, however.¹⁰⁸ Other internment camps, such as Kharga, housed a wide variety of political prisoners, including communists.

¹⁰⁶ To clarify this term, “upper” Egypt refers actually to southern Egypt, not the northern Nile Delta region, which is called “lower” Egypt.

¹⁰⁷ “Conditions De Vie Dans Les Prisons D’Egypte,” folder 167.

¹⁰⁸ “Liste des Internes en Abou Zaabal,” folder 158.

Ahmed Taha was one of the 21 communists sentenced to five years hard labor in September of 1954.¹⁰⁹ Taha was a member of the Progressive Liberation Front (*Al-Gabhat al-Tahrir al-Taqadomiyeh*, or GAT), the relatively small splinter organization that broke off from the DMNL in 1948. Despite GAT rejoining the DMNL in 1950, it remained a distinct and separate faction within the group during the early 1950s. Taha was the sole member from GAT to have held a position on the DMNL's Central Committee¹¹⁰ prior to his arrest in February of 1953.¹¹¹ Listed as a "post office worker" in a report condemning the "so-called trial of the National Democratic Front," he was one of the communists charged by the Revolutionary Tribunal.¹¹² A report, presumably compiled sometime in 1954, documented short biographies of political prisoners and listed Taha as 27 years old and in normal health. He had previously been Chairman of the Committee of the Preparatory Congress of Unions of Middle Eastern Countries, a leader in the National Committee of Workers and Students, and the Egyptian delegate to the World Trade Union Federation.¹¹³ The state targeted communist worker-leaders such as Taha in an attempt to enervate the ability of communists to organize politically.

Before the military tribunal in 1954 Ahmad Taha made a courageous speech denouncing the "agents of Anglo-American imperialism"¹¹⁴:

The agents of Anglo-American imperialism want to keep me in prison because I defend the workers who have elected me and whose sacrifices and history struggles for the national cause fill me with pride... When one appreciates what the unity of the workers and their struggles can do, it is easy to understand the reason for the bitter hatred of imperialism and its

¹⁰⁹ *Solidarity*, July 1955, folder 163. Although 21 were sentenced, 24 had stood trial. Three were acquitted.

¹¹⁰ Ismael and Sai'id, 65

¹¹¹ Untitled report documenting 42 political prisoners from Ahmed Taha Ahmed to Taha Ibrahim El Adaoui "Zohdi," folder 158.

¹¹² "The So-Called Trial of the National Democratic Front," folder 158.

¹¹³ Untitled report documenting 48 political prisoners, folder 158.

¹¹⁴ The term "Anglo-American imperialism" was a specifically communist term, as most strictly Egyptian nationalists at the time referred only to "Anglo" imperialism. See Khaled Mohi El Din's memoirs, 78.

agents for the Egyptian working class and also the reason for the relentless repression of the trade union movement. We remember with pride the work done by the National Committee of Workers and Students which led the demonstrations of February 21, 1945, as a result of which the imperialists had to pull out of the towns and remain in the Canal Zone... I represented the Egyptian workers at the meeting of the General Council of the World Federation of Trade Unions in 1951. I shall never forget the message of solidarity which came to us from the peoples of Korea, Vietnam, and Iran... The improvement of the living conditions of the workers, protection against unemployment, sickness, and old-age require a national and popular economic policy, peaceful relations with all countries on the basis of equality, and the repudiation of the designs of U.S. imperialism.¹¹⁵

In early June, 1955 the government deported Ahmed Taha and some 500 other prisoners¹¹⁶ to the prison camp “in the middle of the desert,” roughly twenty kilometers outside of Kharga Oasis.¹¹⁷ At least 60 of these were communists.¹¹⁸ Without too much hyperbole, the *Daily Worker* referred to it as “Desert Hell Camp,”¹¹⁹ giving an indication of the analysis by the international communist movement of the Nasser government during this period. The military directly administered the Kharga prison camp; most of the prisoners there had been condemned by military tribunals and sentenced to hard labor. One report suggested that “the terrible conditions under which they have to live put also their lives in danger.” These conditions included: twenty prisoners to a tent, tents which did “not protect them either from the burning sun or from the sand storms”¹²⁰ and in a place where the temperature often reached 48 degrees Celsius,¹²¹ one bucket of water per day for every twenty prisoners, low quality and insufficient foods, including no fresh fruits or vegetables, a camp area infested with snakes and scorpions, and little to no

¹¹⁵ “The Courage and Dignity of Our Brothers,” World Trade Union Movement, No. 1, January 1955, folder 285.

¹¹⁶ “The Deportation Camp of Kharga,” folder 155.

¹¹⁷ Letter dated “Paris, 2nd September, 1955,” folder 76.

¹¹⁸ “Conditions de Vie Dans Les Prisons D’Egypte,” folder 167.

¹¹⁹ “Egypt opens Desert Hell Camp,” *Daily Worker*, folder 284-5.

¹²⁰ “The Deportation Camp of Kharga,” folder 155.

¹²¹ *Solidarity*, July 1955, folder 163.

medical care.¹²² Indeed, one communist prisoner who went by the initials “A. A.” explains that “mosquitos buzz and sting in daytime; scorpions and rats make a nightmarish ballet at night... food is scarce and disgusting enough to keep the prisoners alive until the next day. No visitors are allowed and no parcels may be sent by families.”¹²³ Such horrendous living conditions resulted in “chronic dysentery, violent headaches, widespread Asiatic flu, severe undernourishment.”¹²⁴ These conditions enervated the prisoners and greatly depleted their health.

In Ahmed Taha’s case the lack of medical care was pertinent. A letter dated September of 1955 notes that Taha’s weight had dropped from 65 to 50 kilos, and that his “health has become so bad that he has been transported to the Tourah convicts hospital towards the end of June,” but that he had been “re-transferred, towards the middle of August, to Kharga’s camp, without having undergone any medical treatment.”¹²⁵ A letter from Taha himself dated June 21, 1955 confirms this: “I am alright, but my health is deteriorating... You know well that the medical treatment is insufficient and even bad, but what to do?”¹²⁶ Taha remained resilient, however, declaring: “Don’t worry about me, you know me well my friend, I will pass this crisis physically and morally successfully, because I love so many things, wider than our narrow world.”¹²⁷ By July 6, however, Taha himself further confirms that “my medical treatment had been stated as ‘finished,’ of course, without no treatment, and although I am still suffering the same things.”¹²⁸ Taha’s experience attempting to receive treatment in the annals and deserts of the post-

¹²² “The Deportation Camp of Kharga,” folder 155.

¹²³ “My Five Years in Nasser’s Desert Prison Camp,” *Reynold News*, April 26, 1959, folder 176.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Letter dated “Paris, 2nd September, 1955,” folder 76.

¹²⁶ Letter dated “Cairo, 21st June, 1955,” folder 76.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Letter dated “Cairo 6th July 1955,” folder 76.

revolutionary prison network serve as an important example of the specific mechanisms through which the government depleted the ability of communist leaders to organize.

Repression extended beyond the denial of adequate health treatment. Taha recalls learning on July 10, 1955 that the “number of the latest arrested is 80,” including 25 army officers. According to him:

One of them, Ismail Sarry, teacher in Faculty of Law, Fouad University, had been greatly tortured, they beated him for 3 days and had dropped on his body some alcohol after putting a layer of some oils on his skin and then matched it. It is a horrid thing. He collapsed after 3 days and confessed.¹²⁹

The use of torture and physical abuse is a recurrent theme in accounts of prison life under the military. The story of the unidentified “young comrade” concerning Abdel Latif Gamal, who “had been beaten so very hard on the sole of his feet that for 6 months running it was absolutely impossible for him to walk,” and the day where the prisoner heard nothing but “the sounds of beatings and of chains that were put on the prisoners’ feet,”¹³⁰ affirm this narrative.

By July 1955, *Solidarity* cited 405 prisoners who had been transferred to the “Kharga Oasis Concentration Camp.”¹³¹ Not all the prisoners were communists, though. As one report indicates, arrivals to Kharga often included “patriots of varied political tendencies such as Moslem Brethren, Partisans of the Peace Movement, Wafdists and communists.”¹³² Conditions were so abhorrent in Kharga that the prisoners’ main demand

¹²⁹ Letter dated “SAAD, 10th July,” folder 76. Taha claims to have heard this story from “the brothers [Ikhwaan], who arrived here lately, and who had seen him.”

¹³⁰ “Letter from a young comrade sent from Cairo’s Central Prison,” folder 159.

¹³¹ *Solidarity*, July 1955, folder 163.

¹³² *Solidarity*, October 1955, folder 163.

was to be transferred back to Tourah prison in Cairo, where most had come from.¹³³ Yet, by October 1955 *Solidarity* reported that the “Cairo military junta is sending more and more political prisoners to the concentration camp of Kharga, the Egyptian Mauthausen.”¹³⁴ The deportations to Kharga continued as late as July 1956, with *Solidarity* noting that 736 prisoners had been transferred there.¹³⁵ Although the number is certainly higher, at least fifty-three communists were identified as being in Kharga.¹³⁶

This repression was not without resistance inside the prisons, however. Many of the Abu Zabaal prisoners went on a hunger strike demanding improved living conditions, visitation rights, and access to reading materials and newspapers, among other things. Five female communist prisoners in Cairo’s Central Prison also launched a hunger strike, including Aleya Youssef Saddik, Magda Abdel Halim, Mary Kamel, Amal Abdel Nour, and Joyce Blau.¹³⁷ In Alexandria’s Hadra prison some political prisoners engaged in a physical confrontation with their jailors, resulting in many of the prisoners being severely beaten and three having their arms broken.¹³⁸ Resistance permeated the prisons and detention centers.

2.7 Nascent Reconciliation

By mid-1955 some communists opened up to the idea of reconciling differences with Nasser within the framework of national unity. This did little good for the communists

¹³³ *Solidarity*, July 1955, folder 163.

¹³⁴ *Solidarity*, October 1955, folder 163. This is a reference to the German Nazi concentration camp near the villages of Mauthausen and Gusen. It fits in rather well with the common trope from much of the left at the time that the Nasser regime was “fascist,” a position that was quickly reversed in the coming year.

¹³⁵ *Solidarity*, July 1956, folder 163.

¹³⁶ “Qaa’mah Ismaa’ Al-zamlaa’ Al-masjuuneen,” folder 152.

¹³⁷ *Solidarity*, July 1956, folder 163.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

until after Egypt's arms deal with the Soviet bloc and the Suez crisis, in which many communists participated. Thus, 1956 marks the year that many communists began to embrace Nasser as the anti-imperialist leader of the Arab world. Consequentially, many were released starting in 1956 as Nasser gravitated towards the Soviet Union. This turn of events by mid-1956 marks the end of the first period of repression.

Chapter 3

From Reconciliation (1956-8) to Repression (1959-1964)

3.1 The Period of Reconciliation

“In this letter we will try to give you a brief idea of the situation that followed the unexpected attack of the 1st of January. Many of our best cadres were taken.”¹ This is how Kamal Abd al Halim² and Muhammad al-Guindi³ begin their letter dated May 12, 1959 to the group of exiled communists in Paris, detailing the renewed attack in the beginning of 1959. Prior to New Years 1959, the period from mid-1956 until the end of 1958, known in much of the literature as the “Bandung Period,” was a period of relative relaxation for the communist movement as Nasser’s *realpolitik* gravitated towards the USSR. Yet, as Anouar Abdel-Malek maintains, it is impossible to stamp the Bandung conference (April 1955) as the end of repression for communists in Egypt. Economic talks with the United States over the Aswan High Dam continued until 1956. It was not until Egypt received the Czech arms deal, guarantee of Soviet funding for the Aswan High Dam, and the Suez Crisis that a period of cooptation and an easing of repression

¹ “Dear Comrades” Letter dated May 12, 1959, folder 67. The letter was written to “the beloved stubborn Younes” (“Younes” was Henri Curiel’s pseudonym) and “all those who fight (especially Salah)” (“Salah” was Joseph Hazan’s pseudonym).

² Penname “Kelly.”

³ Penname “Louis.”

against the communist movement could occur.⁴ Still, the “Bandung Period” from 1956-8 was a time of relative freedom for the Egyptian communists. The government released many communists from prison during this period. Issues of *Solidarity* run dry after late 1956, not to reappear again until early 1959. Yet, as one of these later copies explains, many of the communist prisoners who were released in 1956 were, despite their efforts in the resistance against the attack on Suez, subsequently rearrested in 1959 or forced in hiding.⁵

Furthermore, not all of the communists were freed during this period. Joyce Blau, a Jewish Egyptian communist, wrote on August 25, 1957 that “all the internees held in concentration camps have been released, but... most of the convicted prisoners are still at Kharga Oasis Camp... and their material conditions are getting worse with the worsening of the general economic conditions in Egypt.”⁶ One solidarity bulletin from July of 1957 shows that many important figures in the communist movement were still in Kharga, including Ahmed Taha, Fouad Habashi, Mohammed Shatta, Zaki Mourad, and Sayed Khalil Turk, among others.⁷ Although the names of only 73 communists at Kharga can be confirmed,⁸ one undated report from sometime between 1956 and 1958 notes that almost 200 of the communists rounded up during the 1953-4 period were still serving prison sentences and hard labor as late as 1956.⁹ This latter number likely includes communists throughout the entire Egyptian prison complex. A May 1957 letter written on behalf of

⁴ Abdel-Malek, 105.

⁵ “Solidarity,” October 1959, folder 182.

⁶ Letter from Joyce Blau to Roger Baldwin, International League for the Rights of Man, August 25, 1957, folder 167. Blau was writing to Baldwin to intercede on behalf of the Egyptian prisoners at Kharga by writing a letter to Nasser, noting that “for the first time, a campaign for the amnesty of political prisoners is taking place in Egypt.” This was in the context of “the recent period of elections and reinstatement of the National Assembly,” conditions which were “favourable for an amnesty campaign.”

⁷ “Pour la Liberation Des Patriote Democrat Egyptiens,” July 1957, folder 168.

⁸ “Kharga,” list of names and occupations of 73 prisoners in Kharga, folder 167.

⁹ “Note Concernant L’Amnestie Des Prisonniers Communistes Egyptiens,” folder 167.

150 communist prisoners addressed all voters, citizens, and candidates on the occasion of the upcoming electoral campaign. It states that amongst the 150 imprisoned comrades “some of us are in the Central Prison in Cairo, others in Tourah Prison, the vast majority in Kharga Oasis Prison.”¹⁰ Notably, of the 73 communist prisoners at Kharga, almost a quarter (18) were listed as “workers.”¹¹

It is important to note that during this period communists not arrested in the first wave of repression were not completely restricted, either. The New Dawn group, later emerging at the Workers’ Vanguard for Liberation, was the second largest communist political trend. It remained relatively unaffected by the first wave of repression from 1952-6. Consequentially, it grew during the period of repression as the other trends, including the DMNL and al-Raya, were devastated. By July 1957 Workers’ Vanguard claimed around 1,000 members, dwarfing its earlier status of around 300.¹² This increase in size, however, drew the attention of the government. Youssef Darwish, a well-known labor lawyer and communist associated group, was arrested in 1957 after the government shut down his law office.¹³ As Joel Beinin explains, even during the period 1956-8 “there was never any chance that [Nasser] would legalize the communist organizations or permit them to establish an independent base of political power which might challenge his own rule.”¹⁴ Similarly, Abdel-Malek confirms that as “early as the autumn of 1958, the machinery of repression and propaganda went into action, progressively increasing its pressure on the left... Trade union leaders were rearrested barely a year after they had

¹⁰ “Appel Des Prisonniers Communistes Exiles A L’Oasis De Kharga A L’Occasion De La Campagne Electorale,” May 1957. Found in solidarity Bulletin “Pour la Liberation Des Patriote Democrates Egyptiens,” July 1957, folder 168.

¹¹ “Kharga,” folder 167.

¹² Beinin, *Red Flag*, 185

¹³ Faiza Rady, “Youssef Darwish: the Courage to Go On,” *Al-Ahram*, Dec. 2, 2004, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/719/profile.htm>

¹⁴ Beinin, “Nationalist Political Discourse,” 579.

been released from Abu Zaabal. The military tribunals resumed jurisdiction over Communist defendants.”¹⁵ Thus, the “Bandung Period” can only be understood as a period of openness in relation to the periods immediately preceding and following it.

Despite this periodical repression, however, the independent trade union movement was largely subdued during this period. The official, state-sanctioned Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was established in 1957. The ETUF was a highly centralized structure whereby the higher the position in the bureaucracy the more state-screening the individual was exposed to. By 1961 the ETUF had nearly 346,000 members, and by 1964 it had nearly 1.3 million.¹⁶ At the same time, the populist social contract established by the Nasser government, including increased wages and benefits and shorter workweeks in exchange for obedience, gave it significant legitimacy among large sectors of the working class. As Marsha Pripstein Posusney has argued, the “etatism” of the Nasser government “cemented among workers belief in a moral economy”¹⁷ in which their wages and benefits came to be viewed as entitlements in exchange for their contribution to the cause of national economic development.”¹⁸ The establishment of ETUF was coupled with “repressive controls” on the hierarchically structured federation. However, as Posusney points out, “this structure was not one imposed from above on reluctant unionists. Rather, significant segments of the labor movement, including the communist forces who played a key role in establishing many of the unions, advocated the singular,

¹⁵ Abdel-Malek, 127.

¹⁶ Posusney, 93.

¹⁷ The term “moral economy” was developed originally by E.P. Thompson. Thompson asserted that “collective actions are a response to anger generated by violations of norms and standards that the subaltern class has become accustomed to and expects the dominant elites to maintain.” Whereas Thompson utilized this framework to understand the collective actions on behalf of the English working class, Posusney posits that this framework adequately captures the patron-client relationship established between Egypt’s working class and Nasser. See Posusney, 15-6.

¹⁸ Posusney, 4.

centralized structure as the best way for unions to advance workers' interests."¹⁹ Therefore, Nasser's state capitalist reforms initiated a new social contract, from which a "moral economy"²⁰ blossomed that allowed workers to ameliorate many of their material conditions in exchange for a level of acquiescence. This is not to say independent trade union activism or the subjective capacity of working class struggle was entirely eliminated, but it did not present the same threat to the government's legitimacy that the independent working class organizations and federations had in the immediate post-coup period. Consequently, the demographic reality of those targeted in the second period of repression reflected this shift.

The situation prevailing during the "Bandung Period" had changed dramatically by the end of 1958. On January 8, 1958, three weeks before the proclamation of the United Arab Republic,²¹ all the main currents of the Egyptian communist movement merged to form the Communist Party of Egypt.²² As Abdel-Malek explains, "this represented the culmination of the extremely arduous efforts maintained since 1945 in a climate of persistent persecutions and at the height of the upheavals in Egyptian society."²³ A week prior to this merger marked the end of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference, held in Cairo from December 26, 1957, to January 1, 1958. This was the second factor precipitating with the Nasser government as the communist left was at the forefront of

¹⁹ Posusney, 245.

²⁰ This "moral economy" that workers had come to rely on was dramatically reversed by Anwar Sadat, and further eroded by Hosni Mubarak.

²¹ The merger of Egypt and Syria which lasted until 1961.

²² Here the Communist Party of Egypt (CPE) is used to differentiate from Fouad Morsi's *al-Raya* (Egyptian Communist Party, ECP), which was part of the merger. By February 1955 the DMNL had merged with six smaller trends to form the Unified Egyptian Communist Party (UECP). In June of 1957 *al-Raya* and the UECP merged to form the United Egyptian Communist Party, which lasted until January 8, 1958 when the Workers' Vanguard (which had changed its name to the Egyptian Communist Party of Workers and Peasants) joined the UECP to form the CPE. See Abdel-Malek, 126 and Beinín, "Nationalist Political Discourse," 579-80.

²³ Abdel-Malek, 126.

this initiative, and their enormous influence threatened the regime's legitimacy vis-à-vis the third world nonaligned movement.²⁴ The final, and most important event, was the Iraqi revolution of July, 1958, which brought General Abd al-Kareem Qassem to power with the backing of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). During this period the ICP was one of the most influential and best organized parties in Iraq, and far larger than its Egyptian counterpart. Qassem represented an alternative to Nasser, and the ICP as well as Qassem rejected Nasser's leadership, instead calling for a federal structure that united the Arab nationalists along pluralist lines.²⁵ Most important, the ICP refused to liquidate itself as per Nasser's strict hardline requirements. The fate of the Syrian Communist Party under Khaled Bakdash had been prefigured with the UAR merger,²⁶ and the ICP hoped to avoid this outcome. By time the 1959 repression occurred, *Solidarity* proclaimed it was a result of the "fierce hatred of the democratic revolution in Iraq."²⁷ The unification of the CPE,²⁸ the growing influence of the left as manifest in the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference, and the alternative to Nasser presented by Qassem and the ICP in Iraq coalesced to form the collective justification for the repression of the communist movement beginning New Year's Day, 1959.

²⁴ See Abdel-Malek, 126.

²⁵ For a full recounting of how this dynamic played out within the Iraqi communist movement, see Tareq Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and (the much more accessible) Illario Salucci, *A People's History of Iraq: The Iraqi Communist Party, Workers' Movements, and the Left 1924-2004* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005).

²⁶ Bakdash and the SCP were also hesitant throughout the 1950s to join with Nasser. Under popular pressure, however, they reluctantly avoided opposing the merger. By the end of 1958 they had begun to feel the repression levied against themselves and the ECP. Communists in both Syria and Egypt were arrested en masse during 1959, until the dissipation of the UAR in 1961.

²⁷ "Solidarity," October 1959, folder 182.

²⁸ It should be noted that despite unification the CPE soon split into the CPE and the CPE-DMNL. The CPE looked to Iraq and Qassem as a model for federal Arab unity, whereas the CPE-DMNL, about one third of the community movement, loyally attached themselves to Nasser. The loyalty of the CPE-DMNL did not win them much favor, however, as they faced repression alongside the larger CPE from 1959 on.

On December 14, 1958, the *Arab Survey* from the *Reynolds News* ran a headline article titled “Let’s Face It—Nasser is the West’s Best Friend.”²⁹ In it the author proclaimed that “instead of opposing his influence, we should now encourage it” considering his “Anti-Red” credentials. Indeed, for some opinion leaders in the West Nasser was “the main force preventing Arab nationalism from being perverted and converted into Communist-puppet Governments throughout the Middle East.” Economic aid to “raise the Egyptian standard of living” should be immediate. After all, in any “prolonged conflict with Nasser” the only “winner” would be “Communism.” Less than ten days later Nasser announced the second purge of the left.

3.2 The Second Wave of Repression

New Year’s 1959 represented the “surprise attack” by the Nasser government in which many of the “best cadres were taken.”³⁰ In fact, Nasser utilized his speech at Port Said on December 23, 1958, the anniversary of the victory against the tripartite aggressors, to presage this second wave of repression a week before it began.³¹ According to Nasser a host of “new enemies” who purportedly rejected “Arab nationalism and Arab unity” were putting forward what “amounts to a call to Zionism to infiltrate itself into Arab nationalism, a call to the reactionary elements to return and exploit our country.”³² The second wave of repression began in the early morning hours of January 1, 1959. The tidal wave of repression that locked up some 280 communists

²⁹ “Let’s Face It—Nasser is the West’s Best Friend,” *Arab Survey*, Reynolds News Service, December 14, 1958 folder 175.

³⁰ “Dear Comrades” Letter dated May 12, 1959, folder 67.

³¹ Anglo-French forces were forced to withdraw from Egyptian territory on December 22, 1956. Port Said became a symbol of nationalist pride.

³² Quoted in Abdel-Malek, 128

both shocked many communists and rolled back the political advances they had made vis-à-vis unification of the disparate parties.³³ Between January and April 1959 some 700 communists were arrested, with more arrested throughout the year.³⁴ Abdel-Malek suggests that after March 20 “many hundred, even thousands of people” were arrested in Egypt and Syria. Indeed, Abd al Halim and al-Guindi explain that the “second blow that took place at the end of March was a severe blow.”³⁵ One report maintains that as a result of the second wave of repression there were “more than 2,000 new prisoners in Egyptian concentration camps; plus 1,000 in the Syrian camps.”³⁶ Some reports go so far as to proclaim that from January to March 21 there were 15,000 people arrested.³⁷

The communists bore the brunt of this second wave of repression. From 1959 to 1960 at least nine communists died in prison,³⁸ including prominent communist leader and editor of the communist paper *al-Gamahir* (The Masses), Shuhdi Atiyya al-Shaffi, who was beaten to death in Abu Zaabal prison camp, and two prominent textile union leaders, Ali Metwalli el-Dib and Sayed Amine.³⁹ Fresh inmates were sent to the Kharga camp as well. On March 21, 1959, 153 political prisoners were sent from the Citadel to Kharga.⁴⁰ Dr. Farid Haddad, “the doctor to the poor” who was said to serve communist patients at his free clinic in a working class district, was tortured to death at Kharga after refusing to

³³ Beinín, “Nationalist Political Discourse,” 581 and Abdel-Malek 128. It should be noted that some sources cite slightly lower figures. For instance, the *Daily Worker*’s article from April 20, 1959 cites “nearly 200 active communists” arrested on January 1.

³⁴ Beinín, “Nationalist Political Discourse,” 582.

³⁵ “Dear Comrades” Letter, folder 67.

³⁶ “Lettre du Caire,” folder 176.

³⁷ “Quelques verities sur les process d’Alexandrie,” 1. Also “Le Persecution des Intellectuels en Egypte,” folder 176.

³⁸ Beinín cites nine prisoners, 582. Abdel-Malek cites eight, including Mohammed Osman, Mustafa Shawki, Dr. Farid Haddad, Ali Metwalli el-Dib, Shohdi Attia el-Shafi, Mohammed Rushdy Khalil, and Sayed Amine, 134.

³⁹ Abdel-Malek, 134.

⁴⁰ “Les Seviles et les Tortures des Detenus Politiques,” Document No. 7, folder 176.

give up patient names and political affiliations.⁴¹ During the same month the government removed Khaled Mohieddine and twelve other editors of *Al-Masa* from their positions. In October and November of 1959 two large trials were held against communists: one group of 64 leaders of the Egyptian Communist Party and another group of 48 leaders who had broken away and demanded that communists work inside the National Union. The detainees were charged in July, but as late as October *Solidarity* was complaining about the “conspiracy of silence against any news of the arrests and trials”⁴² by the Egyptian government. The trials were not announced to the public until the first of November.⁴³ These special military tribunals, despite handing out a few acquittals, mostly sentenced defendants with hard labor.⁴⁴ On November 8 *L'Humanite Du Lundi* reported that 12 new persons accused of communism had been arrested.⁴⁵ In December of 1960 the repression continued when three prominent leftist figures, Abu Seif Yussef, Ismail el-Mahdawi, and Ahmed Salem were arrested along with 200 other militants.⁴⁶ It was not until March and April 1964 that the communists were released en masse from the various prisons and concentration camps.⁴⁷

3.3 A Quantitative Analysis of the Second Wave of Repression

There are quite varied estimates of the number of those arrested during this period. However, *Solidarity* maintained that at the end of April there were 1,185 political prisoners: 400 in the Citadel, 80 in Cairo Women’s Prison, 87 in Cairo Central Prison,

⁴¹ *Afro-Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1960, folder 182.

⁴² *Solidarity*, October 1959, folder 182.

⁴³ *Afro-Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1960, folder 182.

⁴⁴ Abdel-Malek, 135. Even those acquitted were kept in prison.

⁴⁵ “Nouvelles Arrestations de Communistes en Egypte,” November 8, 1959, folder 176.

⁴⁶ Abdel-Malek, 134.

⁴⁷ Abdel-Malek, 350. Bein, “Nationalist Political Discourse,” 583.

168 at Kharga, 350 at Fayoum and Qena prisons, and around 100 at various local police stations.⁴⁸ By July this number had been adjusted to 1,230 total prisoners.⁴⁹ Beinín and Abdel-Malek estimate that some 700 communists were rounded up during the period from January to April. Marsha Pripstein Posusney maintains that throughout 1959 around 1,000 communists were arrested.⁵⁰ Thus, the vast majority of arrests made during this period were of communists. In other words, whereas the first wave of repression rounded up a variety of political dissidents, this was a specifically anti-communist crackdown.

There is significant evidence to suggest that the principal targets of this crackdown were communist intellectuals. While militant and entrenched trade unionist were still victims of the repression, the number of trade unionists, communist or otherwise, arrested during this period was smaller than the number of thinkers and intellectuals. The juxtaposition between the targets of the first wave of repression and the second wave are important to consider. Although both waves targeted left-wing elements, particularly communists and those who empathized with them, the demographic make-up of the two communities targeted are quite distinct. Whereas in the first wave of repression the single largest group of communists targeted were workers and trade-union activists, this was hardly the case in the second. While the normal caveat applies, namely that the two trials of 64 and 48 cannot be mechanically extrapolated to represent the exact figures of all imprisoned communists during this period, knowing who the government focused on and publicly tried is useful for understanding which elements were most threatening to its power.

⁴⁸ *Colonial Freedom News*, November 1959, "Solidarity incorporating Egyptian T.U. News," folder 182.

⁴⁹ "Solidarity," July 1959, folder 176.

⁵⁰ Posusney, 67.

Within the “trial of 64,” the sixty-four communists rounded up from the Egyptian Communist Party, only nine (14%) were identified as workers. Instead, traditional middle class elements within the intellectual community composed the vast majority of those arrested: eighteen professors and heads of academic societies (28%), eight engineers (12.5%), six lawyers and six students (9% each), five government officials (8%), including a host of various other intellectuals, including writers, translators, a librarian, etc.⁵¹ This trial, at least, was certainly a manifestation of “persecution of the intellectuals,” as one report titled it,⁵² and the communist intelligentsia was the primary target.

Regarding the “trial of 48,” those who had broken away from the party line of the ECP and demanded that communists work within the National Union, the results were closer to the first wave of repression. Twelve of those tried were workers (25%), while eight were students (16.5%), six professors (12.5%), three lawyers (6%), three officials (6%), and a few other traditional middle class positions. Still, altogether only 19 of the total 112 tried (17%) were identified as workers, much less than the one-third identified in the first wave of repression.⁵³ Similarly, whereas two-thirds of those analyzed in the first wave of repression were in their 20s, the numbers were far different the second time around. Of the 112 communists in the two trials, over half (63 total or 56%, at least, since some ages are not provided) were thirty or older,⁵⁴ signifying that the primary targets were older and more established intellectuals.

⁵¹ “Qualques verities sur les process d’Alexandrie,” folder 176.

⁵² “Le Persecution des Intellectuels en Egypte,” folder 176.

⁵³ “Qualques verities sur les process d’Alexandrie,” folder 176.

⁵⁴ “Lettre de Titi/Roby No. 18 du 28 aout 1959,” August, 1959. Also “Baiyaan ila al-itihaad al-‘aalami l’amaal al-naqil” (check transliteration) or “Statement to the World Union for Transportation Workers,” folder 176.

The May 1959 issue of *Solidarity* lists the names and occupations of some 193 prisoners and the quantitative data provides roughly the same results. Only 38 of the 192 (not quite 20%, or almost one in five) are identified as workers or in some way associated with the workers movement, such as having been affiliated with the NCWS. The rest are those who traditionally compose the middle class intelligentsia: students (24), lawyers (23), teachers and professors (19), writers and journalists (16), government employees and functionaries (13), engineers and technocrats (12), and a few editors, doctors, and artists.⁵⁵ By July a list of 220 prisoners showed some 60 were workers (27%), a much higher percentage, but this increase could be attributed to the mass arrest of railway ticket collectors in retaliation for their strike.⁵⁶ However, by January of 1960 the number of workers and trade unionist prisoners listed stood at 52 out of 234 prisoners, only 22%.⁵⁷

What all of this suggests is that the second wave of repression overwhelmingly targeted writers, journalists, lawyers, engineers and technocrats, teachers and professors, students, doctors, civil servants, and bibliophiles of all sorts, including publishers, booksellers, librarians, etc. This appears to confirm Beinín's argument that whereas the communist movement had "significant working class support in the period 1952-4," by the mid-1950s, especially during the period of "reconciliation" between 1956-8, "the university-educated intelligentsia was the most important component of the movement, especially at the leadership level."⁵⁸ Furthermore, the fact that communist traditionally associated with the intelligentsia also lends weight to Abdel-Malek's claim that the second wave of repression "cut down the Marxist Left in full flight, at the very time [after

⁵⁵ Folder 176, *Solidarity*, May 1959, folder 176.

⁵⁶ Folder 176, *Solidarity*, July 1959, folder 176.

⁵⁷ *Solidarity*, January 1960, folder 176.

⁵⁸ Beinín, "Nationalist Political Discourse," 569-60.

unification] when it was laboring to develop a close theoretical analysis of Egyptian society.”⁵⁹ Indeed, Nasser took the initiative to reconstruct and reorient the trade unions during this time; likewise, he placed workers loyal to himself and the ideals of the government in positions of leadership. There was undoubtedly resistance, but independent worker activity posed far less of a threat at this point than during the tempestuous period immediately after the 1952 coup.

3.4 Clearing Out Communist Workers and Intellectuals

The “unexpected attack” of January 1st was particularly pernicious for the communist movement. These difficulties are noted in the letter from Kamal Abd al Halim and Muhammad al-Guindi:

The first days of the January attack were very difficult for us organizationally as well as politically. From 1st of January till 21st of February we maintain relations with Nasser’s government and stressing to liberate our comrades... During and after the visit of Nasser to Syria everything developed contrary to our plans and analysis. Nasser maintained and led a campaign against the World Communist Movement and of course against the Arab Communists... [our] leading cadres were scattered in separate places.⁶⁰

On top of this, Abd al Halim and al-Guindi explained to their exiled comrades that they were unable to print anything “after the fall of the printing machine on the 1st of January,” essentially cutting off communication with their base. Not only had the “best cadres” been rounded up in the New Years’ attack, during the “severe blow” at the end of March even “Ordinary people and sympathisers as well as some new cadres were taken.” By mid-May the conditions were “more and more difficult... Few cadres are left and the

⁵⁹ Abdel-Malek, 298.

⁶⁰ “Dear Comrades” letter, folder 67.

contacts with the oasis, and other prisoners, which were regular, are now nearly cut.”⁶¹ Thus, whereas January was a direct attack on communist cadre and leaders, the round-ups of late March included many with whom the communists organized.

By 1957 the Nasser government was already in the process of subduing and coopting the labor movement vis-à-vis the formation of ETUF and the improvement in their material condition. The 1959 removal of communist workers from civil society cemented this process. Law 91 of April 1959 paved the way for the reorganization of the labor movement into 65 federations along industrial lines and united into a single confederation. Although some right-wing elements within the government opposed the confederation model on the grounds that centralization would augment labor’s strength, as Posusney explains, “the incarceration of the communists weakened the arguments of the security forces against consolidation of the confederation.”⁶² As a result, “Egypt’s leftist labor activists, who had first proposed the idea of a confederation in the period before the coup... were virtually completely excluded from the labor movement when the organization was finally formed.”⁶³ Indeed, the 1959 re-imprisonment of the old communist working class leadership and the few new recruits garnered in the mid-1950s allowed the state to take full control of the labor movement via the Egyptian Trade Union Federation.

It would be false to claim that trade unionists were not repressed at all during this period. On the contrary, intractable trade union militants were still desirable targets for the Nasser government. One report cites the names of 30 trade union activists in prison, including those like Ahmed Taha and 51-year old Mohammed ‘Ali Amer who had

⁶¹ “Dear Comrades” letter, 2, folder 67.

⁶² Posusney, 67.

⁶³ Posusney, 68.

previously been imprisoned and were subsequently detained in the 1959 arrests. The government also detained Samira Taha, Ahmed Taha's wife, along with four other women. Mohammed El Sayed Younes is a particularly prime example of the trend targeting entrenched trade union activists. A textile worker involved in NCWS, he had been arrested and condemned to prison under Farouk in 1949, was released in 1952 and rearrested in August 1953, sentenced to 5 years yet again, released in June 1958 and arrested for third time in the January 1959 round-up.⁶⁴ However, some new names appeared on the list, including Mohamed Youssef el Medarak, secretary of the hotel and restaurant workers' syndicate, Mohamed Abdel Wahid, secretary of the National Spinners' Syndicate in Alexandria, and Anwar Mahmoud, vice president of the Federation of Construction Workers. Textile workers formed the majority of those listed: Ahmed Kheidr, Azzab Shatta (Vice President of the Shubra union), Abdel Mohsen Hamaoui (Kafr al-Dawwar), and many others. There were also transport workers, mechanics, hotel and restaurant workers, oil workers, and a variety of other trades represented.⁶⁵

Security forces also arrested non-communist trade unionists during this period. The ticket collectors of the Egyptian railways in Lower Egypt who attempted to strike for better living conditions and higher pay were met with harsh repression. Some two hundred were arrested and the leadership was given prison sentences. Authorities handed down sentences of two years prison time for the union's president and vice president, while other executive committee members were given anywhere from one to two year

⁶⁴ "Liste et quelques Biographies des inculpés du process des 48," folder 176.

⁶⁵ "Nouvelles des Syndicats Egyptiens." Also see Folder 182, *Colonial Freedom News*, November 1959, "Solidarity incorporating Egyptian T.U. News," folder 176.

sentences.⁶⁶ The state removed officials from the Union of Arab Workers, such as the non-communist Fathi Kamil,⁶⁷ when they did not follow directives and openly declare their hostility to communism and the communist movement. Anwar al-Sadat, described in one *Solidarity* bulletin as representing “the extreme Right of the Free Officers Movement and self-admitted collaborator of Nazi spies and Moslem Brothers,” hand-chose officials to replace those removed from the Union of Arab Workers.⁶⁸ Similarly, even non-communist nationalist lawyers such as Ahmed Al Badini were arrested simply for appearing on the communists’ defense council.⁶⁹

Establishing a trade union federation free of communists was an important priority for the government. However, many of the primary targets during this period were communist intellectuals who were able to articulate a competing discourse and theory that challenged Nasser’s conception of Arab Socialism. Youssef Darwish, already mentioned, was one of those targeted during this period. He was not alone, however, Ibrahim Abdel Halim was a writer and manager of *Dar el-Fikr* (House of Thought), a well-known left wing publishing house that was shut down in December of 1959.⁷⁰ Abdel Halim was also a founding member of the Union of Intellectuals in the United Arab Republic.⁷¹ Fouad Morsi was the intellectual leader of the communist current *al-Raya* (the Banner). Shodi Atteya El Shaffi, associated with the communist group Iskra, was a professor who had a lifelong engagement in anti-imperialist work. He was an editor for

⁶⁶ *Colonial Freedom News*, November 1959, “Solidarity incorporating Egyptian T.U. News,” folder 182.

⁶⁷ For more on Kamil’s story, see Posusney 64-9.

⁶⁸ *Colonial Freedom News*, November 1959, “Solidarity incorporating Egyptian T.U. News,” folder 182.

⁶⁹ *Afro-Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1960, folder 182. Darwish also recounts this story. Al-Badini was given a year in prison for defending the communists. As Darwish recounts: “We had a brilliant lawyer, Ahmed El-Badini. Arguing our case, he said: ‘How can you criminalise communists? Don’t you know that half the world has communist governments?’ His defence cost him a year in jail.”

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/719/profile.htm>

⁷⁰ *Colonial Freedom News*, November 1959, folder 182.

⁷¹ *Solidarity*, December 1959, folder 182.

al-Gamahir (The Masses) and author of the important work on the development of the Egyptian national movement from 1882-1958.⁷² His comrade and close associate Anouar Abdel-Malek fled during the midst of the 1959 repression. After settling in France only a few years later, he published his groundbreaking analysis of the Nasser government and its relationship with the left.⁷³ Ahmed El Rifai, active in the university student movements of the 40s and involved in the struggle against the British in Port Said, was also a member of the executive committee of a Cairo neighborhood council for the National Union and the author of several books.⁷⁴ The government also arrested Rifa'at El Sa'id, a communist intellectual associated with the DMNL, during this time.⁷⁵ Most of the editors of *Al-Misa*, the tolerated left-wing theoretical journal under the auspices of Khaled Mohieddine, were also dismissed and arrested during this period.

3.5 Methods and Conditions of Repression

A level of continuity existed regarding the ideological justifications for repression between the first and second period of repression. Yet, for critics of the communist movement in the public sphere it was becoming more and more difficult to assert the “Zionist” character of the communist movement for many reasons. First, distance from 1948 assuaged the blame placed upon communists for supporting partition, especially as the Soviets moved to a position more and more critical of Israel and in line with Arab nationalism. Second, “Arabization” of the Egyptian communist movement was more or less complete as Jews either left Egypt or were excluded from leadership positions.

⁷² *Solidarity*, December 1959, folder 182.

⁷³ See Abdel-Malek.

⁷⁴ *Solidarity*, December 1959, folder 182.

⁷⁵ He spent four years in prison, and would go on to write, in conjunction with Tareq Ismael, one of the few book-length works on the Egyptian communist movement.

Finally, communists and those influenced by them were some of the staunchest fighters forming the self-defense brigades and popular resistance committees against the 1956 tripartite aggressors in Suez. Thus, although the “Zionist origins” arguments occasionally resurfaced during this period, a much more common assertion during the second wave of repression was that the communists were guilty of taking orders from outside.

This “outside directives” charge was one that not only the Egyptian bourgeoisie and Nasser maintained, but was a thesis developed further by the earliest historiographical works on Egyptian communism.⁷⁶ The same right-wing governor in Cairo who in 1961 had accused the communists of being Zionists also charged them with forming “ranks behind the writings of Moscow” every time “it came to the point of having to choose between the desires of the people and instructions sent from afar.”⁷⁷ This argument arose again in June, 1959 after one British MP and one Italian MP wrote a letter to Nasser complementing the UAR but asking for political prisoners to be released.⁷⁸ Nasser replied with a letter displaying an incisive intellectual capacity, justifying the repression in explicitly philosophical terms. In it he delineated the philosophical reflections that ostensibly justified the repression, going on to explain that “foreign ideologies in direct contradiction to national philosophies serve only foreign disruptive policies.”⁷⁹ Nasser reiterated this argument yet again in 1961, arguing that “we are not against Marxism any more than we are against the Left in any way whatever; what we are against is only the act of taking instructions from a foreign power.” He went on to suggest that are various

⁷⁶ See Laqueur and Shamir as examples of this trend. Abdel-Malek is the first to attack the argument. Joel Beinín further challenges the “outside directives” thesis. Tareq Ismael and Rifa’at El Sayed explicitly reject it in the introduction to their monograph.

⁷⁷ Abdel-Malek, 197.

⁷⁸ Letter from Fenner Brockway and Lucius Luzzatto to President Nasser, Athens, June 1, 1959, folder 176.

⁷⁹ Letter from Nasser to Fenner Brockway, June 13, 1959, folder 176.

times they had taken directives from Bulgaria, Rome, France, and England. Nasser maintained that “we allow plenty of Communists in the country... [to] voice their opinions with impunity as long as they do not take their orders from abroad, from a foreign power.”⁸⁰ The “foreign directives” line was common trope that ran through both waves of repression from 1952-6 and from 1959-64. This was in spite of the fact that the communists had no unified party until 1959, and no single communist party in Egypt held monopoly status nor had been recognized by the international communist movement as the sole representative of communist forces.

Repression was once again severe. New laws raised the maximum penalty for the nebulous crime of “communist activity” from ten to fifteen years of hard labor. Meanwhile, the possession of Marxist or left-wing books could carry up to a five year sentence.⁸¹ Furthermore, as one issue of *Solidarity* poignantly explained, “In Egypt the term ‘communist’ is even more elastic than in most countries, in that there is no Communist Party” officially recognized by the international communist movement. Instead, “all organized socialist bodies there claim to be Marxist and though some, e.g. the small Trotskyist sect, would repudiate the orthodox Communist Party label, most of the others would not...”⁸² In other words, “communist activity” meant nearly anyone who identified as such politically, even if they had no outside recognition. This gave the authorities immense leeway in charging and convicting defendants. The “outside directives” charge proved remarkably difficult to substantiate given the lack of official recognition by the international communist movement for any single party. Still, “communist activity” was a manifestation of “foreign ideology” and was grounds for

⁸⁰ Abdel-Malek, 182.

⁸¹ *Colonial Freedom News*, November 1959, “Solidarity incorporating Egyptian T.U. News,” folder 182.

⁸² *Solidarity*, October 1959, folder 182.

imprisonment. Indeed, as *Solidarity* pointed out at the time, “Egyptian law defines a communist as anyone who carries out any ‘propaganda’ or activity aimed at changing the established socialist system. This of course means everyone – Nasser included!”⁸³ The state systematically denied amnesty to communist prisoners, and even refusing to grant the remission of one quarter of the sentence generally provided to common criminals.

Conditions were reminiscent and in some manners worse than those experienced during the first wave of repression. Youssef Darwish, a veteran of both King Farouk and Nasser’s prisons, juxtaposed imprisonment under the monarchy as favorable to the conditions under Nasser: “Under the monarchy there was no torture in jails... Some things [in Nasser’s prisons] I can’t even talk about. At one point I couldn’t take it anymore, I stopped eating.” Torture was a common practice carried out against communists and sympathizers. Some prisoners were “violently beaten about the head and nape of the neck, others hung upside down by their feet, others tormented by thirst. More serious still, Nasser’s torturers are now using ‘modern techniques’ – the electric current method perfect by the French in Algeria, and the inflation of the bowels with air pumps.”⁸⁴ At least nine prisoners were murdered as a result of particularly violent beatings by guards, including Shohdi Attiya El Shaffi. Others, such as Sayed Turk, were at various points in a “very dangerous state” after being “savagely tortured.”⁸⁵ One report cited that at the Citadel “hundreds of prisoners are suffering from acute dysentery.” The same report described Sayed Awad, a rank and file textile worker from the Shoubrah Textile Union, as being “a mass of wounds” upon transfer to the Citadel.⁸⁶ Lutfi Al-Khuli

⁸³ *Solidarity*, October 1959, folder 182.

⁸⁴ *Colonial Freedom News*, November 1959, “Solidarity incorporating Egyptian T.U. News,” folder 182.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

had his knee cap broken.⁸⁷ Farouk Sabet, a prisoner at Fayoum, was given fifty cane strokes on the soles of his feet for having the audacity to tell a guard there remained ten minutes left during their exercise period.⁸⁸ Such conditions spurred resistance as well. Yet again, resistance to these conditions persisted. Some 187 prisoners signed a statement of solidarity with Lebanese communist Farjala Helou who was arrested in Damascus and hunger strikes were recorded in August by prisoners at both Fayoum, the Citadel, and the Barrage Women's Prison.

3.6 Dissolution and Absorption

This wave of repression lasted until 1964. Throughout March and April 1964 all of the communist political prisoners were released from the various concentration camps. Immediately after that and preceding Khrushchev's visit to Egypt, communists who had been tried and sentenced to prison terms were also released.⁸⁹ In tandem with the release, a new general secretariat of the Arab Socialist Union was appointed, including six communists: Zaki Mourad, Mohammad Shatta, Sharif Hatata, and others.⁹⁰ Nasser also initiated the new secret Vanguard Organization, a tantalizing intellectual and ideological apparatus he desired to lure the communists with by placing them in leading positions of the organization.⁹¹ As Joel Beinin has pointed out, while some communist intellectuals were welcome in the ASU, "erstwhile communist workers, however, generally were not."⁹² Thus, cooptation was immediate and efforts are "voluntary" communist

⁸⁷ *Afro-Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1960, folder 182.

⁸⁸ *Solidarity*, October 1959, folder 182.

⁸⁹ Abdel-Malek, 350.

⁹⁰ Ismael, 123.

⁹¹ Botman, 145.

⁹² Beinin, *Red Flag*, 252.

dissolution were undertaken. By 1965 both the United Egyptian Communist Party and the DMNL, which had once again split from the UECP, decided to dissolve themselves.

Chapter 4

First Period of Repression, 1953 to 1956

4.1 Background and Trajectory of the Communist Movement

The Egyptian communist movement contained three distinct currents by 1950. In order of numerical strength, these were the Democratic Movement for National Liberation (DMNL),¹ the Workers' Vanguard (*Tali'at al-'Umal*, previously known as the New Dawn, *al-Fajr al-Jadeed*), and the Egyptian Communist Party (*al-Raya*). Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s a number of smaller, transient organizations were present as well.² Of the three, Egyptian Jews and foreigners played a prominent role in the formation and leadership of both the DMNL and Workers' Vanguard. The DMNL undertook a policy of "Arabicizing" itself from 1950 to 1951, when much of the Jewish leadership either left or was deported by the Egyptian government. During this time the organization made a conscious effort to recruit Arab cadre into positions of leadership. Workers' Vanguard, however, remained centered on Youssef Darwish, an Egyptian Jew,

¹ The DMNL (*Haditu*) rejoined with The Progressive Liberation Front (*Gabhat al-Tahrir al-Taqaadomiyah*) and Toward an Egyptian Communist Party (*Nawha Hizab Suyu'ie Misri*), two splinter organizations, in 1950.

² Throughout 1948-9 the DMNL produced a number of splinter organizations, at least seven at one point. See Ismael and El-Sa'id, 51-67.

until 1957.³ Fu'ad Morsi established the Egyptian Communist Party, known better as al-Raya after its main news outlet *Rayat al-Shaab* (People's Flag), in 1949. Two of *al-Raya's* main principles were the exclusion of Jewish members⁴ and the raising of its slogan "no communism outside the party."⁵

In 1947 the two largest competing elements of the communist movement, the Egyptian Movement for National Liberation (EMNL) and Iskra, merged to form the DMNL. Henri Curiel, a wealthy Jew with Italian origins born in Cairo in 1914, was the paramount intellectual leader of the DMNL until 1950, when he was deported from Egypt. After his exile to Paris he continued to play a role, albeit a significantly less prominent one. The DMNL held the largest membership of any communist organization throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. Joel Beinin estimates that by July 1952 it had a membership of some 2,000.⁶ Members of the DMNL played a prominent role within the various attempts to form a unified communist party. The Workers Vanguard-New Dawn group, which was to rebrand itself the Workers and Peasants Communist Party in 1957, was also led by three Egyptian Jews: Ahmad Sadiq Saad, Youssef Darwish, and Raymond Douek. Founded in September 1946, it was quite hostile to the old bourgeois parties, particularly the Wafd. The group went through a series of name changes due to security concerns.⁷ By July, 1952, Beinin suggests that the group had no more than 300

³ Darwish converted to Islam in 1947. Others, like Ahmad Sadiq Saad and Raymond Douek converted to Islam in 1957, on the eve of unification. Still, those of "Jewish origin" continued to be problematic for some members of the Egyptian communist movement.

⁴ Beinin cites his interview with Fu'ad Morsi who explained that not only were some communists weary of the possible "Zionist" proclivities amongst certain Jewish members, but that the "libertarian sexual morals of the Jewish communists had given communism a bad reputation among Egyptians." See Beinin, "Nationalist Political Discourse," 571.

⁵ Ismael, 87.

⁶ Beinin, "Nationalist Political Discourse," 573-4.

⁷ Ismael, 83-4.

members,⁸ although by 1957 this number had increased to 1,000.⁹ In contrast, al-Raya, despite its emphasis on maintaining an indigenous Egyptian Arab identity and not being tainted by having to defend the Soviet partition decision,¹⁰ only claimed around 100 members by time the Free Officers took power in 1952.¹¹

The trajectory of the Egyptian communist movement as a whole tended towards multifariousness. Sectarianism and division was the principle, unity the anomaly. Thus, it was not until 1957 that the prospects for unification of the major tendencies within the movement brightened. During the more lenient “Bandung Period” from mid-1956 to early 1958 the various communist organizations made significant overtures towards unity. In February 1955¹² the DMNL merged with a variety of splinter organizations to form the Unified Egyptian Communist Party (UECP), including the DMNL-Revolutionary Current, Red Star (*al-Najim al-Ahmar*), The Vanguard of Communists (*Tali‘at al-Shuyo‘ieen*), the Nucleus of the Communist Party of Egypt (*Nauat al-Hizb al-Shuyo‘ie al-Misri*), the Unity of the Communists, and Towards an Egyptian Communist Party.¹³ The DMNL had already consumed Ahmad Taha’s Progressive Liberation Front (*Gabhat al-Tahrir al-Taquadomiyah*) and one other splinter organization in 1950.

During late 1956 and 1957 the three remaining tendencies sought assistance from the communist parties of both Italy and Iraq in order to conduct negotiations for a merger. In June 1957 both the Unified Egyptian Communist Party and al-Raya merged to form the

⁸ Beinín, “Nationalist Political Discourse,” 573-4.

⁹ Beinín, *Red Flag*, 185

¹⁰ The Soviet decision to accept the U.N. partition of Palestine.

¹¹ Beinín, “Nationalist Political Discourse,” 573-4.

¹² Beinín cites February 1955, “Nationalist Political Discourse,” 575.

¹³ Ismael, 80. See also the bulletin by the UECP, “The Middle-East Peoples’ Fight, No. 7,” April-June 1955, folder 144.

United Egyptian Communist Party. The Workers' and Peasant's Communist Party (WPCP) resisted the call for unity given al-Raya's strict adherence to an exclusionary policy restricting Jewish members from holding leadership positions. Ultimately, however, the WPCP conceded this point to al-Raya and on January 8, 1958 the Communist Party of Egypt (CPE)¹⁴ united all but two marginal communist organizations.¹⁵ A permanent committee of three was established, including Abu Sayf Youssef (WPCP), Kamal Abd al-Halim (UECP/DMNL), and Fouad Morsi (al-Raya). From this point on, as Beinín explains, "the key political question throughout its existence was its relationship to the pan-Arab nationalist movement and to Abd al-Nasir's claims to the leadership of that movement."¹⁶ Immediately after the Iraqi revolution of July 1958 the CPE split into two competing organizations, the CPE and the CPE-DMNL. The former supported the Iraqi communists and Iraq's revolutionary leader Abd al-Kareem Qassim against Nasser, whereas the latter sought Nasser's patronage. By early 1959 most of the old DMNL members, although not most of members of splinter organizations who had merged with the DMNL in 1955, had reorganized under the CPE-DMNL banner.¹⁷ In March and April 1965 both the CPE-DMNL and the CPE dissolved themselves.

Marxist analyses of the social composition of the Nasser government vacillated frequently depending upon time and varied amongst various organizational currents. Abdel-Malek explains that the DMNL and the right-wing of the Unified Egyptian Communist Party branded the government as "representative of the national middle

¹⁴ The CPE is to be distinguished from al-Raya's official name, the Egyptian Communist Party (ECP).

¹⁵ Beinín 580.

¹⁶ Beinín, 580.

¹⁷ Beinín, 581-2.

class,” whereas al-Raya labeled it “the instrument of the monopolist upper middle class.” The New Dawn-Worker’s Vanguard group, along with much of what Abdel-Malek refers to as the “left center” of the Marxist movement, was “inclined toward a more subtle analysis, which began to make way for the idea of an alliance among various sectors of the Egyptian middle class under the leadership of big banking and monopoly capital.”

In the end nearly all Marxist currents acquiesced to a “nationalist hegemonic discourse” and identified Nasser as the unconditional leader of the national movement. Despite theoretical debates about the class nature of the Egyptian government under Nasser, class politics themselves were largely subdued during this period, arising only infrequently and inconsistently, and most often only in the service of the nationalist movement. Serious class politics that embraced class struggle as the vehicle through which socialism would arise were sublimated to the needs of the national movement. In this way the potential for class politics to challenge the neoliberal reforms in the post-Nasser era was in large part enervated by the communists themselves.

4.2 Initial Post-Coup Reactions

In the immediate post-coup period serious discussion and division presented itself concerning the nature of the Naguib government and the Free Officer movement as whole. Criticisms of the DMNL’s welcoming the coup were present as early as August 1952. One report criticizing the DMNL’s position maintained that “the main instigators”

of the coup were “undoubtedly the Americans.”¹⁸ American oil exploration, the lifting of restrictions on foreign investments, and the possibility of American military aid were cited as main impetuses for the coup. It was “not accidental,” the author explained, that the arrests of communists began immediately after the pro-American Prime Minister Ali Maher publicly requested American military aid. The DMNL, it was argued, “misunderstood what is meant by contradictions in capitalism.” The author continued:

They are interpreting... that it is well to utilize the difference between the Americans and the British to weaken British imperialism, the main enemy in Egypt, and thereby to facilitate the penetration of American economic domination which they consider is the lesser evil... The DMNL view is to weaken one at the expense of another, and they do not see also the very powerful common objectives of American and British imperialism in their joint plans for war against the Soviet Union and exploitation of the Middle Eastern peoples. Thus the fight against imperialism can only be led jointly against the two imperialisms. Finally... [the DMNL] have allied themselves with the Moslem Brethren, an alliance of a highly dubious character. The Moslem Brethren are known to be basically reactionary and many of their elements are pro-American. An alliance with the Moslem Brethren can only be justified if our people dominate the National Front, and are deeply rooted in the working class... today the Moslem Brethren are the driving force of the military camp, and the first results of the coup are pro-American... [The DMNL] has been taken for a nasty ride. In the long run it may isolate them from the Egyptian people...¹⁹

Thus, even many of the communists critical of the DMNL’s initial acceptance of the post-coup government critiqued the position in a manner subservient to the Soviet Union.

“War against the Soviet Union” and “exploitation of the Middle Eastern peoples” were

¹⁸ Warnings against American imperialism were already prevalent prior to the Free Officer coup. For instance, a 1951 draft program of the Egyptian Communist Party maintained that after the Second World War the “American capitalists are the leaders of the Imperialist camp,” a phenomena “corroborated by the increased links between monopoly capitalism in Egypt and American capitalism.” As military, political, and economic links between Washington and Cairo were augmented, it was clear that “American imperialism has become a reality in Egypt.” Program, “Draft Programme for the Egyptian Communist Party,” folder 120.

¹⁹ Report, “Points of difference between Bernard and myself on the situation in Egypt,” August 1952, folder 111.

two intrinsically linked concepts, and thus defense of the Soviets took on an importance that paralleled nationalist or socialist aspirations inside Egypt.

Glorification of the individual savior as the harbinger of socialism was not unusual for the Egyptian communist movement as a whole. As for the DMNL itself, its legacy of “socialism-from-above” was a large part of its intellectual legacy. One telegram from the CC of the DMNL to the Communist Party of the USSR on the occasion of Stalin’s death declared that:

Stalin had the unwavering support of all oppressed peoples; it is thanks to him, his work and his fight that our liberation has become possible. Stalin died for us, but his work and his teaching and example are immortal. We always build on his work and foremost on the glorious Soviet Union and Party... Eternal glory to Stalin, the benefactor of all the oppressed people.²⁰

The Nucleus of the Communist Party of Egypt (NCPE), formed in 1950, issued a report not long after the Free Officer coup that raised a critique suggesting the communist movement had been led by opportunists who were far too malleable in their approach to the national movement. The opportunists put forward the slogan “struggle comrades, struggle comrades,” but had “no strategy or program to direct the struggle.” Instead, “all Marxist work in Egypt was spontaneous and ‘suiviste’”. The Marxists followed every spontaneous popular movement and adopted its slogans.” This resulted in a parroting of bourgeois slogans that did not further Marxist aims. The report was especially critical of the DMNL, who it proclaimed “has never been a party” as it “had no strategy, no program and no statutes... On the contrary, 90% of its members do not know the basic

²⁰ Letter, “Au Comité Central du Parti Communiste de l’U.R.S.S.,” folder 138.

principles of Marxism.”²¹ The NCPE went on to accuse Fu’ad Morsi’s al-Raya of hyper-sectarianism; for Morsi and al-Raya “any discussion between its members and the members of any other organization” was treated as “treason and a crime.” Most importantly, the sectarianism of the Egyptian communist movement meant that the “weakness of revolutionary traditions” and a “lack of discipline” were both conducive to repression under Egypt’s authoritarian conditions: “A member expelled from an organization can always find another organization happy enough to receive him. This spoils the elements and helps police agents to make their way in the various organizations as there is no centralized control.” The immediate necessity for the communist movement was unification.²² To accomplish this the NCPE issued a forum for Marxist debate called “The Battle” which was intended to iron out disagreements prior to unification, encouraging all Marxist currents to participate.

As to the NCPE analysis of the Free Officer movement, they proclaimed that “recent events” involving a “movement of the upper classes... without a popular revolution, prove that the bourgeoisie holds the state power.”²³ According to their view, “Mohammed Neguib has very well expressed the aims of his movement... a movement by which the bourgeoisie purges the state apparatus in order to execute its plans locally and to establish international links.”²⁴ The NCPE hints at the close US-Free Officer relations, explaining that “the US Ambassador was the only ambassador to visit Farouk

²¹ At one point while criticizing the DMNL for essentially accepting everyone they work with into the organization, the authors of the report proclaimed, with some hyperbole, their fear that “the DMNL leaders will grow up to considering the US Ambassador as a member in the DMNL!” Report, “Report presented by the nucleus (Nawat) of the Egyptian Communist Party,” folder 111.

²² Report, “Report presented by the nucleus (Nawat) of the Egyptian Communist Party,” folder 111.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

before his departure together with Maher and Naguib.”²⁵ Even the NCPE was ideologically committed to Stalinism, however, accusing the DMNL of publishing positions contradictory to “Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism.” Later they explain, “as our great master Stalin said: link theory with the working class movement and you will get a sane socialist movement.”²⁶ Thus, even oppositional elements justified their stands vis-à-vis the position of the Soviet Union.

4.3 After Kafr al-Dawwar, 1952-5

The DMNL had begun to change its position on the new military rulers by December 1952, not entirely without outside influence. One letter exchanged between the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Rome Group explains that since December the DMNL “has changed its political position towards the present regime under the influence of the political positions adopted by the democrats outside Egypt and mainly by our respected comrade Palme Dutt²⁷... It stands since then in total opposition to the regime.”²⁸ This was a public reversal of its earlier position, which unabashedly supported the coup, even after the events at Kafr al-Dawwar made it significantly more difficult to do so.²⁹ Yet another letter to the CPGB expressed the opinion that “wide discontent among the people and the Communists mistaken attitude” toward the Free Officer clique “permitted its coming to power.” The letter went on to explain that the “Neguib regime of military dictatorship demonstrated as soon as it came to power its anti-working class

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Palme Dutt was a leading journalist and theoretician of the CPGB.

²⁸ Letter, “Dear Comrades,” Undated (1953), folder 144.

²⁹ The letter notes that the DMNL “has severely blamed itself following the stand it took on the occasion of Kafr El Dawar’s events.”

policy by the hanging of two textile workers of Kafr el-Dawar, Khamis and Bakri.”³⁰

Despite such exchanges, it should be noted that the DMNL relationship with the CPGB remained highly complicated for a variety of reasons.³¹

Such denunciations of the Free Officers were commonplace throughout 1953 and 1954. In November, 1953 a letter from Paris to the CPGB suggested the need for a “wide campaign of solidarity in favour of all the Egyptian Democrats” who were victims of repression.³² A letter dated on May Day, 1954 to the World Federation of Trade Unions from 200 political prisoners, including Ahmed Taha, Mohamed Ali Amer, Mohammed Shatta notes that “the military dictatorship, agent of Anglo-American imperialism has committed the greatest crimes in the history of our people. The execution of Khamis and Baqari, the imprisonment and internment en masse of patriots, unemployment and the deterioration of living standards are consistent policy of our governments.”³³ Yet another letter from Taha and Shatta refer to the “assassins of Khamis and Baqari” and celebrate “the worker-heroes of Kafr al-Dawwar.”³⁴ The DMNL polemicized against the “cruel repression” of the “dictatorial regime” again in April, 1954 when they were “prevented from sending representatives” to attend an April 1954 conference organized by the Communist Party of Great Britain for other communist parties within the British

³⁰ Letter, “Comrade Chairman,” Undated (1953-5), folder 144.

³¹ One memorandum complaining of mistreatment essentially begs the CPGB to treat the DMNL “as you treat other Egyptian organizations or groups.” The DMNL explains that these complications arose due to “the DMNL attitude towards the Army Coup d’etat in July 1952” and the “complicated situation of the Egyptian communist movement.” The DMNL was repeatedly forced to apologize for publishing in Egypt a copy of a solidarity message it sent to a London conference hosted by the CPGB. The reason was that the DMNL was supposed to keep secret that a representative attended the conference, given the lack of official recognition of the DMNL as the representative of communist forces. See Letter, “Dear Comrades” and “Memorandum,” folder 144.

³² Letter, “Dear Comrade,” November 16, 1953, folder 144.

³³ Letter, “Message Adresse Par Les Prisonniers Politiques En Egypte a la Federation Syndicale Mondiale,” 5/1/1954, folder 79.

³⁴ Letter, Ahmed Taha and Mohammed Chata to Giuseppe di Vorrotio, 4/14/1954, folder 79.

Empire's sphere of influence. At this point the DMNL still held the position that the "Anglo-American imperialists are curtailing democracy in our region and imposing military puppets and reactionary governments." The DMNL, they explained, headed an "underground front comprising communists, wafdist, and certain sections of the Moslem Brotherhood as well as socialists" to "wage a hard struggle against military dictatorship." The military government, it explained, was "becoming weaker and weaker." Popular pressure was forcing schisms within the military clique, revealing "their incapacity to continue to rule by the same way."³⁵

Debates over the role and nature of what an Egyptian communist party should look like took place of the course of 1953 to 1955 as well. By February of 1955 the DMNL merged with a variety of splinter organizations to form the Unified Egyptian Communist Party (UECP), and the debates over the possible draft program are indicative of the problems the Egyptian communists faced. The program itself is relatively unremarkable. Around 25 pages in length and split into three sections, it deals first with the communists theoretical understanding of the two great camps (the imperialists led by the United States and the democratic camp led by the Soviet Union), the material conditions in Egypt, and then posits a long list of democratic and working class demands.³⁶ More interesting were the critiques of the draft program, highlighting some of the areas of disagreement within the movement.

³⁵ Telegram, "Salutations du MDLN a La Conference Des Partis Communistes des Pays Dans la Sphere de l'Empire Britannique que s'est Tenue a Londres En Avril 1954," folder 138.

³⁶ Program, "Draft Programme for the Egyptian Communist Party," folder 120. One of the most interesting insertions is a paragraph maintaining that the Nubian minority "has besides the general rights of the citizens, a right to a just compensation for the damages suffered through the building and the raising of the Aswan dam." The Communists were one of the first and only parties to explicitly recognize and articulate demands vis-à-vis the Nubian population, which may explain the relatively high Nubian presence within the Egyptian Communist movement. See chapter two.

A recurrent theme of the discussion during this period was the overemphasis on theoretical debates amongst party intellectuals. For instance, one of the immediate criticisms of the plan was that the Egyptian communist movement was “composed of a few hundred isolated comrades, divided among themselves on theoretical questions... and while comrades are wasting their efforts in such futile discussions, they are neglecting their duty to participate and try to lead the actual, concrete struggle going on in Egypt.”³⁷ Yet another communist drew on Maoist philosophy, suggesting that:

...the theoretical discussion in Egypt has followed the wrong track. In trying to formulate a communist policy for Egypt, there has been very little information, analyses, studies about Egyptian conditions and too many references to the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin. The discussion therefore degenerated into a struggle between different interpretations of Marxist texts. Each faction reply by more texts and more interpretations... A proof of this attitude is found in the type of questions sent to me for a reply. For ex., the question sent to me as to whether there is a principle according to which the comr. are, for a certain period, to work exclusively among the working class, etc... This question is wrongly formulated. As it stands it can only receive one answer: there are no such principles; everything depends on the concrete conditions.³⁸

Yet another one of the criticisms was that the “immediate demands” articulated were not at all immediate, but instead a laundry list not conducive to a party program. The purpose of any such program, according to this critic, should be “for unity of action amongst the communist vanguard, the left wings of the bourgeois parties and the democratic and liberal elements and associations generally.”³⁹ Yet another proclaimed that “Communist leaders all over the world have emphasized the importance of giving up the ‘Marxist vocabulary’ and replacing it by concrete everyday language and terms.”⁴⁰ Thus, while

³⁷ Commentary, “Short commentary on the draft programme,” folder 120.

³⁸ Commentary, “The following is the result...,” folder 120.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Commentary, “Remarks on the programme sent,” folder 120.

internal schisms within the Free Officer movement were playing out⁴¹ internal division and repression paralyzed Egyptian communists.

4.4 The “Honeymoon Period”: 1955-8

It was clear that the communist response to Nasser was shifting by April of 1955, just two months before the nationalization of the Suez Canal. One letter dated in April, written from Henri Curiel to Khaled Mohi al Din in exile, implored him to “try to re-establish certain links with the present regime,” especially through the sending of a letter to Nasser wishing him luck at Bandung and congratulating him on the “positive” aspects of his policies.⁴² Another letter to Henri Curiel from an unspecified “André”⁴³ explained that “if Chou-en-Lai has established cordial relations with the regime, nobody will be able to reproach [Khaled Mohi-al-Din] for the same thing.” Indeed, André argues that “Abdel Nasser’s attitude must be considered as a victory for the Camp of Peace, even if Abdel Nasser is otherwise a tyrant.” As for the political prisoners, including the hundreds of communists still locked up, some freshly detained in April, André explained pragmatically that “the liberation of political prisoners is another demand which seems unacceptable under present circumstances.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ In particular the conflict between Nasser and Naguib, but also between those who sought US backing and those who desired either a more neutral or pro-Soviet orientation.

⁴² Letter, April 1955, folder 121.

⁴³ Perhaps André Blum, a French leftist and Zionist.

⁴⁴ Letter, April 21, 1955, folder 121.

This idea of reconciliation was expressed further in another April letter suggesting that “notwithstanding the numerous positive aspects of his policy, Nasser has failed in his efforts to obtain a wide support; either in the popular masses or even in the bourgeoisie, the reason being of course the absence of democratic liberties.” As such, the role of communists in such an atmosphere should be to “unite the forces that give a ‘conscient backing’ to the healthy tendencies of the regime.” These forces were to “convinced Nasser” that such liberties could “give stability to the regime.”⁴⁵ Similarly, yet another letter encouraging a rekindling of relations between the exiled Khalid Mohi al Din and the Nasser government explained:

In the political fight, one almost always work under a regime one does not approve of. This does not mean that there exists only one position which is an opposition of principle to the regime, under the pretence that it is a reactionary regime. This position is what is called the sectarian position which leads to isolation and powerlessness. It looks as if it was a “revolutionary” one but as a matter of fact, it is an opportunist one. The situation in Egypt is a lesson for the sectarians... The only eventuality where work in the cadre of the regime is an error, is when this regime is on the point of collapsing and when this work may prolong its existence... Under the present circumstances, one must unfortunately not think of the eventuality of an overthrowing by organized democratic forces because the latter are too weak...⁴⁶

During this period one letter expresses joy that “our friends are no more attacking but supporting Nasser. We have in hands several tracts confirming this.”⁴⁷ This behind-the-scenes, private correspondence presaged the rekindling of relations between Nasser and the communists in 1956.

Although such private proclamations were common by April, the DMNL-dominated UECP was still subjecting the Nasser government to critique as late as September 1955,

⁴⁵ Letter, undated “Dear Friends” letter in response to a 19th April letter, folder 121.

⁴⁶ Letter, April 25, 1955, folder 121.

⁴⁷ Letter, Undated, folder 121

albeit in a manner that encouraged reform rather than presenting it purely as an agent of American imperialism. In a public statement titled “Manifesto to the Egyptian People,” the UECP argued that “during this difficult time” it was the duty of any “truly patriotic” government to grant “all public freedoms, remove censorship, free the political prisoners and the return democratic life. Only thus can the people be the guardian and defender of an independent Egypt and economic policy and maintain its refusal to participate in military alliances, contributing to the consolidation of world peace.” All “honest citizens,” the UECP declared, should “struggle for the reestablishment of public liberties” as the only way to defend against “imperialist pressure.”⁴⁸

By the end of 1955, however, the Unified Egyptian Communist Party, released an official statement containing a fundamentally different tone:

We fell into a leftist deviation that is expressed by an attitude of opposition to all the actions of the military dictatorship, even when those actions were correct and they represented objectively to be a contribution to the cause of peace, or strengthening the cause of national independence... [Our support was] based on the analysis that they represented only demagogic maneuvers by the lackeys of imperialism aimed at strengthening their position for their haggling with the imperialists.⁴⁹

The UECP now revised its erroneous “leftist deviation” by adopting a new approach. While the “immediate goal” was still the abolition of military dictatorship, no longer would “leftist deviationism” inhibit the communists from exploiting “differences and contradictions that appear in the [national] front by imperialism and the big Egyptian bourgeoisie.” This meant that the UECP was now ready to “support any independent

⁴⁸ Statement, Unified Egyptian Communist Party, “Manifeste au Peuple Egyptien,” September, 1955, folder 122.

⁴⁹ Report, Unified Egyptian Communist Party, “Notre position sur la Dictature Militaire,” November 12, 1955, folder 122.

position, whatever the cause” and “no matter how weak” that moves the regime away from the imperialist camp. Likewise, the UECP intended to agitate amongst the masses for demands that would augment the gap between the regime and the imperialists, including: a return of democratic liberties, recognition of Popular China, creation of heavy industry with the help of the Eastern camp, increased connections between the government and the working class and intellectuals, maintenance of the UN resolution concerning the right of Palestinian refugees, and denunciation of any imperialist military pacts.⁵⁰

Some contact seems to have existed between the triangle of Egyptian communists, exiled communists in Paris, and the Nasser government. At one point a short letter in Henri Curiel’s possession, presumably composed in early 1956, implored an “opinion about making a sound and convincing plan to create a massive front backing Abdel Nasser and the regime. He had asked to prepare him such a plan.”⁵¹ Evidence of attempts by communists to build this “massive front” appeared as early February 1956 as earlier denunciations turned to overtures. Even some communist prisoners directly appealed to Nasser. One of these attempts, signed by Ahmed Ali Khadr, Fakhri Labib, Mohammed Shatta, and Zaki Mourad, attempted to utilize Nasser’s nationalist sentimentality by explaining that “our desire is for peace to reign throughout our country” and, for this to occur, “it is indispensable that all the nationalist forces unite.” The letter continues: “The Egyptian people and their government are now united and proud of their independent national policy that contributes to the reinforcement of peace and opposes world

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Letter, Undated, “Lettre No. I.” This letter immediately preceeded a March 15th, 1956 letter titled “Letter No. 2.”

imperialism... We, communists, give your policy full support. We support your attitude at the history Bandung Conference.” Despite languishing in prison, they attempted through sheer zeal to strengthen the bonds between themselves and Nasser. Closing the letter emphatically, they exclaimed “Long live the united front of the people and Government!”⁵²

One letter exchanged between a communist in Cairo and an exiled comrade detailed an exchange between an unidentified individual (referred to as “Joe,” presumably communist) and Nasser.⁵³ The exchanges outlined “Joe’s” belief that Nasser did “not want to indulge in war with Israel unless he is obliged to,” and that Nasser was concerned the Western press was doing its best to portray Egypt and himself as preparing a Muslim “crusade, etc.” The author of the letter implores the recipient to “Please ask our comrades to stop insulting and criticizing [Nasser] and the regime. These tracts make [Nasser] distrust us. [Nasser] showed Joe some of these tracts mockingly just when he mentioned the leftist people’s support to him.”⁵⁴ Tensions continued to exist for the Egyptian communists even after their acquiescence. For instance, one letter explains that Nasser still “refused to permit” some “leftish writers and communist men” to work in a state-sanctioned newspaper “or any other.” According to the letter Nasser’s explanation was that “the communists proved to be double faced. He says they delivered tracts in Cairo in favour of the regime and in Syria and Lebanon they did quite the opposite.” Even while the Egyptians had begun the process of acquiescence to Nasser, Syrian and Lebanese

⁵² Letter, Ahmed Ali Khadr, Fakhri Labib, Moh. Moh. Chata, Zaki Mourad to Gamal Abdel Nasser, 4/14/1954, folder 79.

⁵³ Letter, April 5, 1956, folder 121. Nasser’s identity is concealed with the codename “Jim” here, whereas the unidentified individual is referred to as “Joe.”

⁵⁴ Ibid.

communists distributed pamphlets continuing to attack Nasser as an “American agent.”⁵⁵ This anecdote speaks to the level of pluralism that existed within the Arab communist movement and belies the claim that Arab communism was simply a mechanical reflection of Soviet foreign policy.

During this time the UECP attempted to further establish links with other communist parties and solidify its status as the de facto representative of the Egyptian communist movement. A report concerning the establishment of relations with other communist parties expressed the hope that even if they were not the officially recognized party, “we are at least a communist organization expressly claiming Marxism-Leninism” and, as such, “our experience brings us to the conclusion that we must first establish bilateral relations with a number of parties.” The Communist Party of Great Britain is not mentioned in this particular report, although earlier reports suggest a consistently troubled relationship with the CPGB.⁵⁶ As for the French Communist Party, the UECP explained it had a “list of problems” to discuss with them, with the Rome Group organized around Henri Curiel acting as the mediator between the two parties. The UECP proclaimed its success at establishing a “permanent link” with the Italian Communist Party, which Beinín notes was influential in negotiating unification.⁵⁷ Regarding the Algerian Communist Party, relations appeared more abject, with the report noting that “we should give up making new attempts to try to establish relations... by our

⁵⁵ Letter, Undated, “Letter 4,” folder 121.

⁵⁶ One memorandum from May of 1954 highlights the schism that existed between the DMNL and the CPGB. “We cannot understand the general hostility shown towards the DMNL in general... our group has for several years now, developed its activity in France and Italy. The French and Italian C.P. are perfectly aware of the particularly complicated situation of the Egyptian communist movement. This situation has however, never been an obstacle for the establishment of cooperation... Unfortunately, we have not been able until now to have with you the same kind of relations.” See Memorandum, 1954, folder 144.

⁵⁷ See Beinín, “Nationalist Political Discourse,” 579.

intermediary.” The document also discussed continuing to develop links with the communist parties of Yugoslavia, Spain, China, and Greece.⁵⁸

Despite such varied contacts, and the direct influence of certain other parties in helping negotiate unification, Egyptian communists were particularly keen to reference the Indian communist model. Such references to Indian communists were third only to the Soviets and, prior to the Sino-Soviet split, references to Mao. At one point in 1956 an Egyptian communist proposal for a “progressive economic policy” looked with praise toward the Indian communist movement for inspiration. It argued that within the present “non-socialist country,” such as India and Egypt, the function of the left should be to have a “long range economic policy” that it can push forward from inside a non-communist regime. Thus, according to the Egyptian Marxists their Indian comrades were able to push “progressive principles” into India’s Second Five Year Plan (1956-61) where such principles were absent in the First Five Year Plan (1951-56). The proposal suggested that Egyptian Marxists should study the Indian economic plans and, like their Indian counterparts, work for progressive “five year plan” models in Egypt. At the time, the proposal explained, if “a country having an authoritarian government as Egypt has no such plans, it is because, on one side, the present regime lives on improvisations in this field... and from the other side because it keeps itself in power, not thanks to an independent economical base, but thanks to an unbalanced equilibrium between antagonist forces.” As such, the role of the left was to infuse progressive economic policies into the authoritarian regime.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Report, “Note Concernant l’Etablissement Des Relations Entre Le P.C.E.U. et Certains Partis Ouvriers,” folder 144.

⁵⁹ Report, Unified Egyptian Communist Party, “For a Progressive Economical Policy,” 1956, folder 121.

In June 1957, just one month after the merger between the UECP (DMNL-majority) and al-Raya in the midst of what became known in some circles as the “honeymoon period of ’56-58,”⁶⁰ the new United Egyptian Communist Party put forward its “Proclamation to the Egyptian People.” The shift from the previous period was immense. All of the work from April of 1955 until July of 1957 to reconfigure the communist approach to Nasser was manifest in this document. The Nasser government was hailed in full glory:

Our country is in a glorious period and significant history. Egypt became an independent republic, it enjoys for the first time in its recent history of a national government... Egypt is on the eve of parliamentary life of a new type, it took another step in strengthening democracy and political and trade union freedoms. Our economic independence is being strengthened. We see already dawning prospects for a life of well-being, in which we can begin to recover the fruits of our struggle and construct a thriving national economy based on free trade, a modern industry, and an advanced agriculture.⁶¹

The UECP announced a “new historic victory: the unity of the overwhelming majority of Egyptian Communists in a new party.” All Egyptian revolutionaries suffered from the division of the communist movement, they argued. As such, the Egyptian working class could now rejoice at the “unity of its political vanguard in a single communist party.”⁶² In direct juxtaposition with earlier statements, now the Egyptian communists considered themselves the “best defenders of our national government who has at its head president Gamal Abdel Nasser.” Likewise, the communists considered their alliance with the national bourgeoisie as solidified, explaining that they were “the best militants for the

⁶⁰ Report, *Solidarity*, folder 181.

⁶¹ Statement, United Egyptian Communist Party, “Proclamation au Peuple Egyptien,” July 1957, folder 122.

⁶² They note at the end that the UECP is doing everything in its power “to realize unity with the Communist Party of Workers and Peasants,” the sole main communist organization to remain outside of the framework of the UECP until January, 1958.

edification of our national economy in which the Egyptian capital will have an effective role.” The document ends with “Long live our government chaired by Gamal Abdel Nasser.”⁶³ Astoundingly, the protection, promotion, and fostering of Egyptian capital’s role in governing Egypt became a badge of honor for the UECP.

The emergence of the Communist Party of Egypt in January 1958, representing “the fruit of the revolutionary unity of the Egyptian Communist Party of Workers and Peasants and of the Unified Egyptian Communist Party,” clearly represented the embrace of nationalist overtones at the expense of class principles. While the CPE paid lip service to the idea that it was the “party of the Egyptian working class,” the purpose of the party was to struggle “at the vanguard of the working class and the working masses for the consolidation of our national independence, for the defense of world peace, and for the edification of a national society democratic and flourishing, and for the realization of complete Arab unity.” Although “socialism and then communism” were abstract goals set in the distant future, the immediate struggle was for national independence and Arab unity.⁶⁴ These overt goals represented grave concessions to the “hegemonic nationalist discourse” that Joel Beinin has explicated upon in depth.⁶⁵

4.5 From Repression to Release, 1959-64

The May 12, 1959 letter from Kamal Abd al Halim and Muhammad al-Guindi explaining the “unexpected attack” of January 1 suggests the level of nuance that existed

⁶³ Statement, United Egyptian Communist Party, “Proclamation au Peuple Egyptien,” July 1957, folder 122.

⁶⁴ Program, “Statuts du Parti Communiste Egyptien,” folder 138.

⁶⁵ See Beinin, “Nationalist Political Discourse” and *Red Flag*.

among the Arab communist parties at the time. As the authors explain, “The Party [CPE] had not declared its attitude towards the new clash between Irak and UAR. Nevertheless our Political Bureau as well as the Political Bureau of the Sudanese Communist Party criticized a tract published by the Political Bureau of the Irak Communist Party, concerning the question of the unity. The Sudanese protest was written, ours was not.” Despite the attack, from January 1 to February 21 the communists “were maintaining relations with Nasser’s government and stressing to liberate our comrades.” However, during and after Nasser’s February 1959 visit to Syria “everything developed contrary to our plans and analysis. Nasser maintained and led a campaign against the World Communist Movement and of course against the Arab Communists. This changed our attitude towards Nasser.”⁶⁶

This changed attitude was less a shift in a policy than tone, however. According to Abd al Halim and al-Guindi, the new policy was one “of warning the Nasser government from going on along the anti-communist road.” However, they continued to press for an “alliance of the patriotic forces” despite the repression. Although the communists attacked “the campaign against communism,” they did not assume that the government “has finally sided with the imperialist camp.” The tactics were to warn without “cutting all the threads of hope for a change... nor calling for the overthrow of the government by force.” They rejected accusations that “the Nasser regime is an agent of the americal imperialism and of the monopolies.” Their policy on reestablishing a national front was clear: “We still fight for Arab solidarity that can and should embrace all national characteristics and of course the National regime of the National bourgeoisie that can

⁶⁶ Letter, Kamal Abd al Halim and Muhammad al-Guindi to Henri Curiel, May 12, 1959, folder 67.

embrace in every nation the widest front of the national forces.” Their suggestion was to avoid any call for increased conflict, and to do this meant that “all communists, especially iraki communists follow better tactics.”⁶⁷

Even during the midst of the repression *Solidarity* was forced to tone down its criticisms while still criticizing the imprisonment of “Egyptian patriots.” Whereas earlier issues of *Solidarity* during the first wave of repression referred consistently to the “military dictatorship,” new issues of solidarity almost exclusively referred politely to the “Nasser government” or “President Nasser.”⁶⁸ One editorial in *Solidarity* asks “What is next in the U.A.R.? Are we about to see a rapid degeneration of the regime into a fascist dictatorship, dependent on foreign arms and money?” The editorial argued that the “monopolies have regained a lot of ground lost since 1956” and the Nasser government “has switched from an alliance with the left to an alliance with the right,” but “itself remains the same – a middle class, not monopolist” government. At any rate, the prison sentences at this point were “relatively light... compared with the 1953-54 period,” and the “U.A.R. government is planning some spectacular social reforms.” Thus, the editors were confident that “the present reactionary policy will be defeated and the unity of the national forces restored on an even firmer basis than before.”⁶⁹ Yet, *Solidarity* still ventured into highly pejorative territory on occasion. The October 1959 English-language

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ See *Solidarity* report from April 1959 until January 1960, folder 181. This is especially true of the French-language copies of *Solidarity*.

⁶⁹ Report, *Solidarity*, Undated (1959 or 1960). In this regard the English edition of *Solidarity* seems to be far more critical of Nasser than the French language counterparts. A text within the English report called “Guided Democracy in Egypt & Iraq” clearly expresses its disdain for the National Union (predecessor to the ASU) and the naivety of the “honeymoon period of ’56-58.” Furthermore, it unfavorably compares “Nasser’s concept of guided democracy” (“control and domination of the political and social organizations”) with “Sukarno’s concept of guided democracy” (“partnership between the government and population organizations”).

issue of Solidarity is almost unique in this regard, providing significant insight into the attitude of Egyptian communists before and after the repression:

Thus, [The Nasser government argues that] they are obliged to exterminate the partisans of all other ideologies, in order to preserve the purity of their “ideals.” No other regime, however dictatorial, has ever made such an absurd claim, or been so blatant in justification of repression for its own sake. Even the most brutal have always at least pretended that their acts were directed against overt enemies of the regime or the nation. Here, however, there is no such pretense, nor could there be. Most of the groups under attack loyally and enthusiastically supported the government, not only during the black days of 1956, but right up to their arrest – some, indeed, maintaining that the arrests were an “administrative mistake” until the Mosul putsch⁷⁰ completely unmasked the new anti-national, pro-imperialist policy of the U.A.R. authorities. Even now, the more responsible groups refuse to indulge in wild talk of “overthrowing the regime,” but insist instead on the need for sweeping reforms.⁷¹

As the report explains, the Egyptian communists remained generally supportive of the government, despite the level of repression directed against them.

A letter from Ahmad al-Rifʿat al-Said, Hussein Ghoneim, and Saʿad Abdel Latif to the International Democratic Jurists Association further elucidate this support: “We are among the 48 political internees to be tried in case No.28 of the year 1959 before the Higher Tribunal of State Security... We are all sincere patriots... Since the Revolution of the 23rd of July 1952 we have been amongst those who defended Nasser’s government and supported it in all its patriotic actions.” Similarly, they partially justify the repression against them, explaining that “Imperialism has continually plotted to split the national forces and set our country against the Iraqi Republic,” and the arrest of “patriots and trade unionists... in light of this situation” is “easy to understand.” They go on:

⁷⁰ The “Mosul putsch” here refers to an unsuccessful March, 1959 attempt by pro-Nasser Arab Nationalists to overthrow Qassem in Iraq and force Iraq to join the United Arab Republic.

⁷¹ Report, *Solidarity*, October 1959, folder 181.

Since our interment we have continued to publish several manifestos affirming our support for a national government, our defense of the unity of all national forces and all Arab forces, and our readiness to deploy all our energies in order to resolve the differences which have appeared in the Arab world and thus defeat the plots of the imperialists and domestic reactionaries. To this end we have called on the Egyptian government to release us and to stop the campaign of slanders which it has been directed against us.⁷²

Such slander did not dissipate until March and April of 1964, when the communists were released en masse. This coincided with Khrushchev's visit to Egypt.⁷³ A new general secretariat of the Arab Socialist Union was appointed, including six communists: Zaki Mourad, Mohammad Shatta, Sharif Hatata, and others.⁷⁴ Nasser also initiated the new secret Vanguard Organization, a think tank of sorts designed to lure communist intellectuals by placing them in leading positions within the organization.⁷⁵

4.5 Dissolution, 1965

As other scholars have pointed out, documentary evidence for the period of the early 1960s is extremely scarce. However, one of the most important documents available is the dissolution proclamation of 1965. On March 24, 1965 the CPE-DMNL convened to unanimously announce its dissolution. The CPE followed suit a month later, with much of the same reasoning. The March 24 declaration begins by citing its September, 1964 political position, in which it argued that the "focus of our current efforts is the creation of a party unilaterally oriented towards social revolution." This implied the "total

⁷² Letter, From Ahmad al-Rafa'it al-Said, Hussein Ghoneim, and Sa'ad Abdel Latif to the International Democratic Jurists Association, Afro-Asia, January 1960, Vol. 1, No. 1, folder 182.

⁷³ Abdel-Malek, 350.

⁷⁴ Ismael, 123.

⁷⁵ Botman, 145. Notably no communist workers were lured into the regime in the same manner.

cessation of anti-communist politics” within the “socialist society” organized by Nasser and the Arab Socialist Union along scientific socialist principles. More importantly, the September position denounced “sectarianism within the Left,” which was an implicit call for unity behind the left. Yet in September the party explicitly stated its will to not yet “dissolve itself, but rather finalizes one of the revolutionary phases of its organization, namely, that of independent existence.”⁷⁶ This analysis was not to hold for long.

Six months later, in March of 1965, the CPE-DMNL argued that conditions had fundamentally changed. The “revolution under the direction of Gamal Abdel Nasser brought numerous victories to the working class, as well as other victories in the ideological and organization realms.”⁷⁷ Nasser had “enriched revolutionary thought” and “emphasized the leading role of the working class and the vital importance of political organization of the party and of the unity of socialist forces in the face of a reactionary coalition supported by imperialism that wrap themselves in anti-communist ideology.” The CPE-DMNL maintained that it had “always placed the unification of socialist forces into a unified revolutionary party above all other considerations,” despite the fact that the Arab Socialist Union had not yet fully integrated communists as such into the organization nor fully excluded anti-communist forces. Even though the “unified party of the revolution” had “not been realized like we desired and hoped,” the “party has decided for its part and by volition of its members... a new revolutionary measure,” one which “embodies the spirit of the revolution.” This measure was complete dissolution.

⁷⁶ Statement, March 24, 1965 Dissolution text of DMNL, folder 138. Translated from French by Eric Wistrom.

⁷⁷ This was despite the slowdown and temporary reversal in the 1965-6 period immediately preceding the 1967 war, when wages were lowered and working hours increased as part of the national “sacrifice” campaign, spearheaded by the ASU but willingly corroborated by the ETUF. See Posusney.

The dissolution decision went as such. First, the CPE-DMNL was to reduce itself to a sole political representative, a representative who “is one of the most loyal and sincere constituents of the revolution... under the direction of Gamal Abdel Nasser.” The statement declared the end of the existence of an independent party, and as such “all older adherents to the DMNL, which are no longer members of this organization conforming to the present decision, will follow the struggle... in order to realize the establishment of a wholesome unified a party of the revolution, like the relationship defined in September.” It further explained that “all comrades which cease to be members of the DMNL should implement that decision and conform to it as a starting point for our action in the service of the revolution in and the establishment of socialism.” The statement prefiguratively condemned “all future attempts at succession,” even from “within the interior of the unified political organization [ASU].” The statement ended with a triumphant declaration of solidarity with Nasser:

We make this collective decision on the eve of the presidential election and we, the isolated politicians,⁷⁸ raise our protest against the maintenance of the standards of political isolation⁷⁹ and count on using our electoral right in giving our voice to Gamal Abdel Nasser as president of the Republic, leader of the revolution, and of his unified and militant revolutionary party. We consider our decision as that which we can best offer to him on this historic occasion.⁸⁰

Thus, the CPE-DMNL was dissolved. The rest of the remaining CPE cadre followed suit in April. This marked the end of any organized communist presence until 1975, when some remnants of the old communist movement announced the reestablishment of the new CPE in opposition to Anwar al-Sadat, Nasser’s successor.

⁷⁸ All prior communists were no longer members of a communist organization, as such, and were not “individual politicians” seeking entrance into the ASU.

⁷⁹ Anti-communist tendencies which kept communists from assuming leading roles in the ASU.

⁸⁰ Statement, March 24, 1965 Dissolution text of DMNL, folder 138.

Chapter 5

The Communists After Nasser

The military government of the Free Officers launched their attack against the communists in January of 1953, only months after the military government hanged two workers accused of being communists in the aftermath of the Kafr al-Dawwar strike. Within months the government had rounded up hundreds of communists, at least 550 by 1954, with some sources claiming 750 by the first half of 1955. The process of repression continued even after Nasser had fully secured the reins of power after March 1954. Aside from communists being imprisoned, the government shut down communist offices and either destroyed or confiscated their printing presses. The new rulers tried communists under the most arbitrary of conditions, without adequate representation and no right to appeal. Torture was rampant in the various prison camps. Food, sanitary, and health conditions were disastrous. The primary current affected by this first period of attack was the DMNL, by far the largest of the communist organizations, although al-Raya bore the brunt as well.

Immediately prior to this wave of repression communist elements, particularly the DMNL, had been relatively successful at organizing the working class and establishing a socioeconomic base within it. Many workers became important cadre during in the mid to

late 1940s and early 1950s. Through joint nationalist-class initiatives such as the National Committee of Workers and Students (NCWS), the Preparatory Committee for a General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions (PCGFETU), and the National Democratic Front (NDF), the communists had displayed a level of organizational strength and influence that far outweighed their relatively small number. Subsequently, when the new government took power in July, 1952, one of the main sources of independent political activity came from the communists, particularly cadre and leaders within the urban working class. The somewhat limited demographic evidence available on communist prisoners suggests that a significant portion, anywhere from one quarter to one third, of those who faced repression, and thus were viewed as a threat by the state, were working class. Most were young, in their twenties, and had some limited organizational experience, either in the NCWS, the PCGFETU, the NDF, or simply as local trade union militants in Kafr al-Dawwar, Shubra el-Kheima, or elsewhere. Likewise, the numbers suggest that the level of repression directed at the communists was amplified beyond what their numbers dictated. Indeed, the communists were rounded up at a far greater ratio than *Ikhwaan*, even if the nominal number of those arrested from the latter group is higher. Thus, whereas some historians have pointed to the lack of a working class base or the perpetual middle class status of the Egyptian communist movement, the period of repression from 1952-6 suggests otherwise. Indeed, the new government feared the working class support of the communist movement, given their level of organizational activity preceding the Free Officers coup and immediately after. As a result the communists bore the brunt of the repression during this period.

Although repression never subsided entirely from July 1956 to December 1958, this period did mark a relative easing of repressive controls over the communist movement. At the same time Nasser and the Egyptian state instituted various reforms, including agrarian reform and improved labor conditions, which in part helped to solidify legitimacy and a mass base. Most importantly for the purposes of this study, Nasser institutionalized the trade union movement with the establishment of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) in 1957. Within four years it boasted hundreds of thousands of members, and within seven years it claimed over a million. Thus, a new social contract had been established in which workers envisioned themselves in a moral economy where they exchanged their loyalty to the Nasserist project for improved material conditions. This was a marked contrast from the tumultuous period immediately preceding the coup and immediately after it.

In contrast with the first wave of repression, which made a special effort to target communist trade union activists, the wave of repression beginning in January, 1959 marked a vicious assault against communist intellectuals. The *raison d'être* for this repression was the ostensible threat posed by communist unification, the growing influence of the Egyptian Marxists, and the challenge to Nasser presented by the Iraqi revolution of 1958. Yet, Nasser had effectively neutralized the communist control over the trade union movement through a combination of repression against communist workers from 1952-6 and the cooptation of the movement afterwards. Thus, the communists lost much of the support they had won in the post-World War II period. In turn, while recalcitrant communist trade unionists continued to be persecuted, the primary target of the second wave of repression was the communist intelligentsia, further

neutralizing the communists' ability to articulate platforms and ideological challenges to Nasserist legitimacy.

Egyptian Marxists vacillated between a variety of analyses of the Nasser government depending upon both the organizational current in question and the chronological period addressed. Initially the DMNL embraced the Free Officers despite the new rulers' maneuvering towards the United States. Other smaller currents criticized the DMNL for this stand, particularly after Kafr al-Dawwar, but often within the trappings of a Stalinist discourse which placed loyalty to the Soviet Union on par or above other considerations. With the advent of the Bandung Conference by April 1955, overtures were being made towards the Nasser government. By 1956 the Suez crisis had solidified communist support for the government against imperialist machinations. After the merger of the DMNL-dominated Unified Egyptian Communist Party with al-Raya, the United Egyptian Communist Party issued a proclamation in July 1957 hailing the Nasser government in all its nationalist glory.

This "honeymoon period" showed signs of weakness throughout 1958. In January the EUCP merged with the Workers' and Peasant's Communist Party (WPCP) to form the Communist Party of Egypt (CPE). This groundbreaking achievement for Egyptian communism did not last long, however, as by mid-1958 the CPE had split due into the CPE and the CPE-DMNL over conflicting positions vis-à-vis Abd al-Kareem Qassem and the Iraqi Revolution of July 1958. Despite the CPE-DMNL's support for Nasser the Egyptian state cracked down on all communist activity in January 1959, effectively nullifying the "honeymoon period." Criticisms of Nasser were largely muted as the communists viewed their primary duty as nurturing the left-wing tendencies within the

regime while criticizing the reactionary ones. After years of repression the communists dissolved themselves in 1965 to join the Arab Socialist Union as individuals, thereby disavowing their previous communist organizations in favor of unity of the nationalist forces.

During this period class politics were largely sublimated and working class revolution was in no manner entertained as either a long-term prospect or a desired goal. Nasser's "non-capitalist" path towards development was sufficiently revolutionary for the communists, who embraced the "hegemonic nationalist discourse" and were consumed by it. This fact that this path did not clash with Soviet policy, and in many ways aligned with strategic Soviet objectives, facilitated the Egyptian communists' ability to embrace it. While there is little evidence to suggest that the Egyptian communists were taking orders from Moscow, it is clear that their perspective maintained a level of ideological continuity with the Soviet government. Any tincture of "socialism-from-below" was abandoned, and the "non-capitalist path of development" under a nationalist, anti-imperialist ruler took its place.

A convoluted combination of state-capitalist reforms, intense state repression, pragmatic influence of the Soviets, capitulation to a hegemonic nationalist discourse, and imperialist threat converged to direct Egyptian communist thought. Unfortunately for the communists, the Marxist movement failed to act as the vanguard of the revolution. Although some of the policies it promoted came to fruition, such as closer relations with the Soviet Union and the People's Republics, as well as limited land reform and large-scale nationalizations, the communists were almost always acting in response to the Nasser government, trailing it and responding to its initiatives and vacillations. The left

was often at the vanguard of the struggle during the tumultuous period immediately after World War II before the Free Officers' coup. This was not the case during the Nasser years. As Joel Beinin has argued elsewhere, Nasser's Arab nationalism was not adequately explained by Marxist theory. As such, many Marxists "found themselves minimizing the undemocratic and anti-working class aspects of the Egyptian regime and emphasizing its pro-Soviet international orientation, as though this would in and of itself transform the regime's character."¹ In the end, the communist abandonment of "socialism-from-below" and embrace of "socialism-from-above" allowed Nasser to legitimize an economic formulation predicated upon "socialism without socialists." The "socialism" was state-capitalism, and it was a model "without socialists" because for the majority of the period in question the socialists were in prison, exiled, killed, or their organizations dissolved. The dialectic which played out between the Nasserist state and the Egyptian Marxists during the 1950s and 1960s proved fundamental in undermining the struggle against the neoliberal reforms undertaken by Nasser's two successors, Anwar al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak.

After Nasser's death in 1970 Anwar al-Sadat ascended to power and was confronted with both the internal contradictions of Nasser's state-capitalist model and the legacy of defeat in the 1967 war with Israel. With these factors in mind, as well as the inability of Egypt to make any serious gains in the 1973 war, Sadat took the unprecedented step of opening Egypt up to the West, eventually leading to an array of neoliberal reforms. Egypt became a sort of testing ground for what was at the time a nascent neoliberal phenomenon which would soon be applied to other third world states. Sadat's *infitah*,

¹ Beinin, *Red Flag*, 250

literally “opening,” was ostensibly meant to deal with the debt,² inflation, and high oil prices that came to represent the later stages of the Nasserist model. Politically, however, the primary motivation for the new economic policy was a strategic realignment with the West. The reforms included the establishment of tax-free business investment zones, the privatization of state industries at fire sale prices, and the relaxing of currency controls. The implementation of this neoliberal model resulted in two concurrent phenomena: the concentration and centralization of wealth and increased misery for the Egyptian people.

This trend characterized the trajectories of a wide range of third world countries in Asia, South America, and Africa during and after the 1970s. Nazih Ayubi articulates how this dynamic specifically played out in the Arab World:

If the period of the 1960s and early 1970s was the era of *étatisme* [process of expanding both the size and role of the state in the economy] and bureaucratic expansion in the Arab World, the late 1970s and 1980s were to usher in a new discourse of ‘opening up’, liberalisation and privatisation. Privatisation programmes in the Middle East have not, however, followed from empirical evaluations of the performance of the public sector... Rather, they represent mainly a *public policy*, carried out in response to the ‘fiscal crisis of the state’ and under pressure/temptation from globalised capitalism and from its international institutions... It was only by the end of the 1980s that Arabic coinages for the concept [of privatisation] started to emerge: *takhsisiyya*, *khawsasa*, *khaskhasa*... [and] *tafwit* – literally ‘passing on’ from the public to the private sector...³

After 1973 Egypt would spearhead this process, moving itself away from the state-capitalist model built by Nasser and towards one imposed by the West.

One of the most important popular uprisings in the post-Nasser period occurred in 1977 when Sadat, under pressure from the IMF, reduced subsidies to several goods, bread in particular. Coming on the heels of a major transport sector strike the year before, a

² Egypt’s total deficit rose from 47 million Egyptian pounds in 1970 to nearly 3.2 billion Egyptian pounds in 1979. Waterbury, *Nasser and Sadat*, 114.

³ Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State*, 329.

massive uprising dubbed the “bread intifada” lasted two days after Sadat announced the subsidy cuts. This left the government very cautious about abruptly implementing such harsh austerity measures in such a quick manner. Yet, the policies continued, especially as no concrete political opposition arose from the spontaneous uprising. This left remained disoriented and unable to capitalize on the popular uprising, despite the reestablishment of the Egyptian Communist Party in 1975.

Sadat’s successor, Hosni Mubarak, significantly expanded the neoliberal regimen in Egypt. From roughly 1975 to 2005, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased anywhere from 1% to almost 15% annually, while GDP per capita increased an average of around 2% every year.⁴ At the same time, *infitah* policies significantly decreased the standard of living for Egyptians. Wealth inequality increased dramatically and the state slashed, via direct cuts or privatization, the social services and public sector Egyptians had come to rely upon. From 1961 to 1981, Egypt went from being one of the world’s largest food exporters to a nation dependent upon food imports to survive.⁵ In 1961 the ratio of food imports to total agricultural exports was 0.47; in 1981 it was 4.38.⁶ The US invested some \$1.26 billion in the agricultural reforms and a complete reversal of Nasser’s agrarian reform took place when Law 96 was passed in 1992. This law, a pillar upon which Egypt’s World Bank imposed Structural Adjustment Program rested, encouraged the landlords of old to dispossess peasants of their land through various market mechanisms. This dispossession forced many peasants into the informal sector of urban economies, as

⁴ *World Bank*. 1961-2011. s.v. “GDP growth (annual %) and GDP per capita (current US\$).” <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG/countries/eg?display=graph> (accessed April 11, 2014).

⁵ Manitra A. Rakotoarisoa, Massimo Iafrate, Marianna Paschali, “Why Has Africa Become a Net Food Importer,” Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/015/i2497e/i2497e00.pdf> (accessed April 14, 2014).

⁶ *Ibid.*

the percentage of the population in urban areas rose from 50.5% in 1990 to 57.3% in 2000.⁷ From 1981 to 1991 the rural poor rose from 16.1% to 28.6% percent of the total rural population. If those deemed “moderately poor” are included, the percentage rose from 26.9% to 39.2% during the same period. By 1996, this last figure rose to 50%.⁸

Meanwhile, the picture in urban areas was just as severe. During the same time span from 1981 to 1991 those deemed poor and moderately poor in urban areas increased from 33.5% to 39%. In terms of expenditure and purchasing power during the same period, the top 20% was the only section of society which fared better, while the expenditures of the bottom 80% actually decreased. This trend continued from 1990 to 1996, signifying a sharp decline in household consumption per capita. By 1996, some 45% of urban dwellers were considered poor or moderately poor, and real wages in some sectors such as manufacturing had dropped 40% from their 1985 levels. Unemployment increased from 8.6% in 1990 to 11.3% in 1996.⁹ Some estimates claimed that around half of all consumer spending, roughly \$30 billion in 1991-92, was done by 1.6% of the population.¹⁰ The Egyptian elite augmented their economic power during this period by extracting wealth from the poor:

While the lowest 20 percent of the population held 6.6 per cent of national income in 1960 and had improved their share to 7.0 per cent in 1965, they

⁷ “Patterns of Urban and Rural Growth,” United Nations, Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, [http://esa.un.org/unup/Archive/wup-archives/studies/United%20Nations%20\(1980\)%20-%20Patterns%20of%20Urban%20and%20Rural%20Population%20Growth.pdf](http://esa.un.org/unup/Archive/wup-archives/studies/United%20Nations%20(1980)%20-%20Patterns%20of%20Urban%20and%20Rural%20Population%20Growth.pdf)

⁸ Kienle, “More than a Response to Islamism,” 232.

⁹ Ibid., 232.

¹⁰ Timothy Mitchell explains that the “estimate is based on the assumption that all the missing expenditure belongs to this group. The plausibility of the assumption rests on factors such as the character of the missing expenditures and the relative proportion of incomes that different groups spend of food.” Original statistics come from Ulrich Bartsch, “Interpreting Household Budget Surveys: Estimates for Poverty and Income Distribution in Egypt,” *Working Papers of the Economic Research Forum for the Arab Countries, Iran and Turkey*, No. 9714. Cairo, 1997, pp. 17-19. For more on the neoliberalism under Sadat and Mubarak see Timothy Mitchell’s *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (University of California Press, 2002).

dropped to 5.1 per cent by the late 1970s. By comparison, the income of the highest 5 percent dipped slightly to 17.4 per cent from 17.5 per cent between 1960 and 1965 but increased markedly to 22 per cent after several years of Sadat's policies.¹¹

This concentration of wealth among the elite was centralized within a small handful of families and two dozen or so major conglomerates, like the Osman, Bahgat, and Orascom Groups, and their tentacles extended widely across various private sector industries.¹²

Accompanying the slashed public resources affecting the Egyptian masses, the state selectively retargeted the remaining state resources towards the rich. One example of this was when tax-payer money was funneled directly into a prodigious bank bailout in the 1990s. "Profligate" public subsidies were simply redirected from the masses to bankers and financiers. Law 203, passed in 1991, led to the privatization of over 300 public firms.¹³ A 2010 World Bank report celebrated the fact that Mubarak had "enhanced the business environment" and "rationalized the tax system" by slashing corporate taxes, previously ranging from 34% to 42%, to a paltry 20%, and widening the tax base to include more lower income earners. In a further display of this blatant upward redistribution of wealth the executive cabinet implemented a tax cut for the wealthy in the same year, dropping personal tax rates from 32% to 20% for the highest income earners.

These harsh economic policies were in place for a decade under Sadat and three decades under Mubarak's regime. By the end, the World Bank was exuberantly hailing the regime for its "solid track record as one of the champions of economic reforms in the

¹¹ Marvin Weinbaum, "Egypt's 'Infitah' and the politics of U.S. economic assistance," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 21 no. 2 (April 1985): 217.

¹² Mitchell, "Dreamland: The Neoliberalism of Your Desires."

¹³ Joel Beinin, "The Rise of Egypt's Workers," *The Carnegie Papers* (June 2012). http://carnegieendowment.org/files/egypt_labor.pdf (accessed April 15, 2014).

Middle East and North Africa region.”¹⁴ Out of 314 public sector companies 209 had been privatized, either in whole or in part, by 2005. After massive reductions in the labor force, companies were sold off at fire sale prices¹⁵ to private investors with the result that some 12% of government proceeds came from the sale of public companies during the mid-1990s.¹⁶ Egypt’s informal sector absorbed many of these workers, like it did with many of the peasants removed from their land.

The left, while not totally absent, contested these new state policies in a highly enervated manner. There was no communist presence for the decade from 1965 to 1975 and scholars are nearly unanimous in acknowledging the impotency of the left after the dissolution of 1965. Some former communists, such as Fu’ad Morsi and Isma’il Sabri ‘Abd Allah, even transitioned from Nasser’s Arab Socialist Union to becoming government ministers under Sadat.¹⁷ Despite such opportunism, however, even when the Communist Party was reestablished in 1975 many old communists refused to rejoin it. Instead, two years after the still illegal Communist Party reemerged, a legal opposition party called the National Progressive Unionist Party (*Tagammu*) gathered together leftists, Nasserists, and others moderately opposed to Sadat’s neoliberal reforms. *Tagammu* drew on the legacy of the 1952 revolution and, while it supported Nasserist style improvements in the living conditions of workers, it lacked any serious class-based analysis of society. With no organized Marxist presence for over a decade, socialists and communists rebuilt from scratch in the 1970s and 1980s. This allowed some segments of

¹⁴ World Bank, “Egypt Country Brief.”

¹⁵ To illustrate the pillaging by the ruling class of the public sector, one mill, estimated at \$60 million in 1999 with an additional \$7 million in capital investment through tax-payer money in 2003, was sold on a three year lease of \$2.5 million and a final buyout of \$4 million. This means a mill worth roughly \$67 million was sold for just above \$11 million, slightly less than 1/6 of its actual value. See Beinín, “Popular Social Movements and the Future of Egyptian Politics.”

¹⁶ Beinín and El-Hamalawy, “Egyptian Textile Workers Confront the New Economic Order.”

¹⁷ Beinín, *Red Flag*, 253.

the left to explore alternatives to orthodox communist parties, but it also meant that the left was unprepared, both organizationally and ideologically, to combat the neoliberal onslaught in the post-Nasser period. For many within the traditional communist movement, after attaching themselves uncritically to the failed Nasserist model, an appeal to nationalist legitimacy and glorifying the days of Nasser was the only possible recourse. The articulation of a class-based politics proved an immensely difficult path to pursue after years of acquiescence to such nationalist discourse. The communist left's attachment to "socialism-from-above" left them ill-equipped to handle the material realities of Egypt after Nasser's death. Their impotency made them incapable of positing an alternative to neoliberalism after Nasser, an impotency which has carried forward into the present.

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