4 The Dawn of Soviet Influence in Egypt

Part I outlined the foundations of the two global powers’ foreign policies, paying particular attention to the effect of US policy upon Soviet global calculations for establishing and maintaining influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. The following analysis of Soviet foreign policy seeks to explain both the various successes and failures of postwar Soviet policy towards Egypt, and the combination of different factors that determined the course of these relations.

Initially, in the early 1940s Soviet influence in Egypt was minimal, the Egyptian monarchy being extremely suspicious of the Soviet Union – Egyptian passports used to be stamped ‘Valid for all countries except the Soviet Union’. The sudden change that later occurred in Egypt’s position was more of a gesture to the USSR that anything else. Egypt anticipated that the Soviets would emerge from the war as a great power, able to support Egypt’s national aspirations – though there was disappointment when the Soviets refused to supply arms. According to Krushchev, ‘King Farouk had once asked Stalin to give him arms so that he could force Great Britain to evacuate its troops from Egypt, but Stalin refused.’ This refusal was attributed to Stalin’s acknowledgement that:

The near east was part of Britain’s sphere of influence and that therefore we [the Soviets] could not go sticking our nose into Egypt’s affairs. Not that Stalin would not have liked to move into the near east, he would have liked to very much, but he realistically recognised that the balance of power was not in his favour and that Britain would not have stood for his interference.²

The armed forces apart, the Soviet Union sought to provoke trouble in Egypt, to encourage the already existing discord and seeds of discontent.

It is probable that Egypt’s divided people felt that conditions would be no worse under a communist system. Soviet agents were active in influencing public opinion with the object of terminating Western influence and its military presence. The official Soviet press were clamorous in their condemnation of the continued presence of American troops in Egypt and the Middle East. Pravda and Red Star both
gave prominent display to a Cairo dispatch that ‘3000 to 4000 American officers and men were being kept on in Egypt under the pretext of guarding US army equipment’. In early 1946 such propaganda led to an early coincidence of views between the Soviet and Egyptian presses; the Egyptian newspaper Al Mussawar reporting that, ‘Last summer we were informed that American troops would leave before November 1945 ... November, December and January have already passed but the troops remain’.

Meanwhile, the Soviet exploited anti-British demonstrations in Egypt in order to heighten agitation and unrest in the country. Moscow Radio, in an English language broadcast, noted on 24 February 1946:

The Cairo demonstrations were not a matter of chance but a reflection of rising national aspirations on one side and stubborn attempts at maintaining the status quo on the other. The public in Egypt has rejected England’s intention to carry on its old policy of occupation ... on reading the great documents drawn up during the war, the average man will say that deeds do not live up to words ... the colonial power are making increasingly stubborn efforts to maintain the old state of affairs and to keep the colonial and subject people under the old intolerable regime.

The Soviet Union then endeavoured to gain military advantages at the expense of the Western powers. Soviet propaganda assumed a dual nature. Thus Pravda, in criticising American intentions to seize new military bases, argued on the one hand that:

Imperialists ... trying to seize new naval strategic bases in all parts of the world are meddling with the sovereignty and state interests of other nations and do not halt before blackmail and crude threats...so-called visits by American squadrons surrounded with noisy advertising alone is one of the numerous illustrations of the expansionist policies of American imperialism.

On the other hand, Soviet naval power was portrayed as the friend of other nations’ aspirations:

Our armed forces, including our navy, as distinct from the armed forces of the imperialist states, have no aggressive aims whatsoever. They are called upon to serve the great and exalted purpose of safeguarding the peaceful labours and security of the Soviet people.

Later, with the American initiative to establish a Middle East Com-