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Jesse Ferris. "Guns for Cotton? Aid, Trade, and the Soviet Quest for Base Rights in Egypt, 1964–1966." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13:2 (Spring 2011): 4-38. DOI: 10.1162/JCWS\_a\_00101. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/JCWS\\_a\\_00101](http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00101).

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Review by Yaacov Ro'i, Tel-Aviv University

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The article contains three main contentions. The first is that Soviet-Egyptian commercial relations and Soviet economic and military aid to Egypt were intrinsically linked as part and parcel of a single policy. The second is that when circumstances seemed appropriate, Moscow applied pressure and did not hesitate to tighten the screws on its client state in order to promote its own strategic interests in the region. And the third argument is that relations between Moscow and Cairo were strained even prior to the June 1967 Six-Day War, long before Anwar Sadat took the plunge and chose the American option as more likely to preserve and further Egyptian interests.

The thrust of all three points is that a country that had only recently broken the shackles imposed upon it by an imperial power - and a regime that legitimized its policies, indeed its very rule, as guarantees for and prerequisites of that country's national sovereignty - should have been wary of becoming dependent upon another great or super-power. Even if that power purported to be the antithesis of imperialist, the relationship that would unfold, especially in conditions of the Cold War, would inevitably be strewn with pitfalls. The erstwhile colonial country - in our case Egypt - especially if it had its own regional ambitions and sought to make its weight felt in Third World and "nonaligned" institutions and frameworks -- was in dire need of outside assistance to modernize, industrialize and maintain armed forces that would give substance to its aspirations. This need meant it had to find a patron.

The Soviet Union, for its part, had entered the Third World in the 1950s by carefully selecting a number of strategically situated states which had ongoing conflicts with neighbors linked somehow with the West and fostering a patron-client relationship with them. At first, as Ferris shows (9-10), both parties adhered to the illusion, or legend, of "no strings attached," essential to the logo persistently put forward by each of them - by

the Soviet Union in order to demonstrate that it was anti-imperialist by conviction and fundamentally different from the western powers, and by its new clients who prided themselves for the emphasis they laid on their nation's independence. Ferris suggests that Moscow had no long-term Middle East policy (fn.7). It is therefore difficult to know how cynical the Soviet leadership was in evolving its new ties, whether it envisaged *a priori* the growing dependence of Egypt – and other Third World clients – and the neo-imperial stance that the Soviet Union would eventually adopt. Be this as it may, Moscow enabled Egypt to become “an aspiring regional hegemon” (6) which involved it in undertakings that went far beyond its economic and military capabilities.

The most problematic of these adventures for a variety of reasons was the ongoing war in the Arabian Peninsula, where President Gamal Abdel Nasser sought to consolidate and maintain Republican Yemen.<sup>1</sup> That war showed the ineffectiveness of the Egyptian armed forces, broke down Arab unity - the Royalists were supported by Saudi Arabia - and forced Cairo to enhance its demands for Soviet economic and military aid, including concessions on repayment of debts. Seeing Egypt on its knees as it faced an economic crisis and military debacle, Moscow stuck in its teeth (16). This was the opportunity it needed to make good its own desire for bases in Egypt that would not, of course, be called so. The Kremlin urged Nasser to award facilities for its Mediterranean squadron, including rights for regular visitation in Egyptian ports and repair and other services. The Soviets had been asking for these since the rupture with Albania in 1961 and the loss of the base they had previously had access to in that country. The need had become increasingly acute following the U.S. Sixth Fleet's acquisition in 1963 of submarine-launched Polaris missiles that threatened the Soviet Union's industrial heartland (18). After the October 1964 ouster of First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, who had taken a personal interest in Arab affairs (7), the Kremlin under General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev and Prime Minister Aleksei Kosygin was more prone to applying pressure on Egypt (20-21) and relations deteriorated in a series of mutual visits by top political and military leaders which Ferris covers and analyzes in detail.

By the summer of 1965, when Nasser visited the Soviet Union to seek relief on the repayment of Egypt's debts for economic aid and military supplies over the past decade, it became clear that it was no longer possible to get something for nothing (22). The Egyptian President made a number of concessions but rejected demands for what he envisaged as jeopardizing his country's sovereignty. But the Soviets did not let up and by 1966, were requesting semi-monthly reconnaissance missions by Soviet aircraft based in Egypt to track the Sixth Fleet (28-29). The ensuing months saw continued bartering and bickering between the two sides. The Egyptian position showed signs of erosion when in December 1966 they agreed to on-shore facilities for Soviet naval vessels.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jesse Ferris's article, “Soviet Support for Egypt's Intervention in Yemen, 1962 – 1963,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 10:4 (Fall 2008): 5–36.

Ferris's meticulous analysis explains why the Soviet leadership took advantage of the political and military situation that evolved in the Middle East in the spring of 1967 to issue the false warning of an Israeli threat to Syria. The Syrian-Egyptian Mutual Defense Pact that had been reached on Soviet initiative just half a year before meant that Nasser could not ignore the threat without ceding his position as regional hegemon. Although Moscow certainly and Cairo almost certainly knew that the warning was based on misinformation, it in fact led to the outbreak of the June 1967 Six Day War. The Kremlin had clearly hoped that its disinformation would supply the backdrop Nasser needed to justify caving in to its demands that it spelt out in its messages to Cairo and Damascus on May 24, 1967. (Ferris puts a question-mark on whether the messages were sent, for the Soviet archives have preserved their draft only – fn.91; I am assured, however, that if Soviet archives preserve a draft, the original was undoubtedly dispatched.) The Soviet leadership does not seem to have envisaged even the possibility that war would ensue. Despite all the data its intelligence services supplied, it badly misjudged the large picture regarding both Israel and the Arab countries. However, as Ferris shows, by virtue of the Arab defeat the Kremlin finally achieved the strategic assets it had been striving for several years to obtain through diplomatic and economic pressure. Yet the very acquisition of these assets sowed the seeds of the Soviet Union's eventual downfall in the Middle Eastern country in which they had invested so much, far more than in any other. In the entire Third World only India and Cuba received comparable quantities of aid in the two decades under review.

Undoubtedly, the main lesson to be drawn from the unfolding of Ferris's story is that of the incompatibility of the interests of global and regional powers, given the constraints under which each of them operates and the differing perspectives of their respective leaderships. Even when at the start their objectives seem to coincide, that overlap will necessarily diminish and probably even disappear over time. As the relationship becomes more intricate, each side tends to forget even the common enemy, their hostility towards which had originally brought them together, and becomes bogged down in its more immediate and urgent needs and goals.

Ferris's case is coherent and convincing. He has made judicious use of the evidence that has mounted over the years in the research as well as in the documentation – in Russian, Arabic, Hebrew and English – leaving no stone unturned. Indeed, his source material is exhaustive, extremely variegated and always to the point.

**Yaacov Ro'i** is Professor emeritus, Tel-Aviv University and Co-editor of *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War* (Woodrow Wilson Center and Stanford University, 2008).

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