

## *Loquacious Sphinx*

**The Sphinx and the Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Middle East**, by Mohamed Heikal, *New York: Harper & Row, 1978. 304 pp. \$12.95.*

MOHAMED HEIKAL, the former editor of *Al Ahram*, a long time friend of Nasser, and one of the foremost journalists in the Arab world, here gives us an account of Arab relations with the Soviet Union from the 1950's to the late 1970's. Heikal tells the reader in the Introduction that this book is not intended as a general or academic history of Arab-Soviet relations, and indeed there are somewhat inexplicable gaps in his narrative. There is only tangential treatment of Arab states other than Egypt, and the account of Nasser

and his era is much fuller than that of Sadat and his. Moreover, the central character from the Russian side is Nikita Khrushchev, and Leonid Brezhnev fails to emerge as more than a shadowy figure. Yet, if Sadat and Brezhnev come off poorly, American diplomats—and indeed the U. S. itself—are hardly even present, except as rather ham-fisted agents of the C.I.A. or the State Department, often in league with “Zionism.” Heikal does not appear to know very much about America, and his occasional lapses into broken English reflect his shallow understanding of the United States and of the West in general.

Despite these shortcomings, however, *The Sphinx and the Commissar* is a valuable book, if only because it reveals how a major leader of public opinion in the Arab world thinks about his culture and its future, about the West, and about the Soviets. Recent events, portrayed in the Western media from a particular perspective, are depicted very differently in the presence of Heikal’s non-Western mind. Thus, the Kennedy assassination, the civil rights movement, the counter-culture and the new left, the Vietnam War, the conflicts of the Nixon Administration, and the Watergate epoch—all of which have altered the thinking of Americans about themselves and the world and of which American liberals are either so ashamed or so proud—are rarely if ever mentioned by Heikal. What is important to him are things that most Americans have long forgotten or were never aware of—coups in Iraq or the Sudan, the ethnic composition of Arab Communist Parties, the emergence of an Arab bourgeoisie with ambiguous ties to the past and to its counterparts in the West, the bitterness of the European imperialist legacy. Heikal, in short, comes from a world where Americans are alien, where their writ does not run, and where their values are regarded at best as transparent rationalizations for continued domination. It is thus both humbling and invigorating

for an American to read Heikal’s book: humbling, because it demonstrates that the non-Western world is not America in embryo, and invigorating, because American realization of this fact can lead to a whole new range of policies and options in our relations with non-Western countries.

Yet, if Heikal remains alien to America, he harbors few illusions about the Soviets and their system (he does harbor some). Communism he rightly regards as inherently hostile to nationalism and to religion, and he shows no sympathy for the Marxist doctrine of history or for the Leninist idea of politics as bureaucracy tempered by conspiracy. He regards the Middle Eastern policy of the Soviet Union between 1955 (when Nasser made the first purchase of Soviet arms) and 1977 (the year his narrative ends) as one long record of failure. At various times, it is true, the Soviets appeared to dominate in Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, and Sudan, yet almost all of these states in the last few years have either cut the Soviets off cold or have moved to a much cooler relationship with them. Heikal analyzes why the Soviets failed and why the Arab states have thus far rejected their overtures.

The Soviets, according to Heikal, have persistently underestimated the strength of Arab nationalism and the importance of the Arab middle class in the leadership of the Middle East. Furthermore, he perceives a contradiction between the Soviets’ position as a superpower, driven by conventional national and international motivations, and as the headquarters of a world revolutionary movement, concerned with the development of the Third World as a revolutionary center. The second role involves Moscow in commitments to local Communist Parties as well as to certain local strategies dictated by ideology, whereas the former role requires the Soviets to deal with local leaders who enjoy more support than Arab Communists ever had and to consider the international implications of

their ideology. Yet, despite the failure of the Soviets to entrench themselves in any Arab state or to make converts to Communism, they have made more progress than Heikal seems willing to admit or perceive. South Yemen, at the time of this writing, is virtually a Soviet satellite, and Moscow continues to use Libya as a funnel of regional destabilization in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The Soviet relationship with post-Pahlavi Iran remains open, and on the nature of this relationship depends much of the Soviet future in the surrounding Arab states. In Ethiopia also the Soviets appear to have obtained a lock on the present regime, and their relations with the Arab and Moslem states of North Africa will be affected by their position on the Horn.

Heikal, then, is mindful of the cultural disparities between Arabic states and the Soviets, but he minimizes the importance of what the Soviets do have to offer—namely, weapons. In both Ethiopia and Libya it is through the supply of arms that the Soviets have continued to maintain their influence, and it was through massive arms shipments to Egypt before the October War that they re-entered that country less than a year after Sadat's expulsion of their advisers. It is therefore in the interests of the Soviets to promote narrowly based regimes that must rely on force and to continue to try to upset the more consensual governments of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. The Soviets will therefore rely less on cultural and economic diplomacy, as they tried to do in the 1950's and 1960's, and more on the arts of subversive conspiracy, propaganda, and internal and regional destabilization. Yet Heikal is largely oblivious of this aspect of Soviet activities. He records a conversation he had with an Arab Communist in which he urged the revolutionary to modify those aspects of Marxism that conflict with the local culture and to "participate with the national elements in a dialogue"; "For you to think that the Communists will one day be in a

majority is absurd." The Communist did not give him a very satisfactory reply, and this is not surprising. Where, he must have wondered, have successful Communists ever been a majority, and what does it matter, in the long run? What is necessary to take and keep power is not a majority, but a well-organized and disciplined minority in the right place at the right time. This was a lesson well understood by Lenin as well as by Mohammed, and if the modern Sphinx has forgotten it, it is certain that the Commissars have not.

Reviewed by SAMUEL T. FRANCIS

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## *A Lesson to Learn*

**The Secret Betrayal**, by Nicolas Tolstoy, *New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979. 503 pp.*

MORE THAN three decades have passed since the Western Allies turned over millions of Russians to Stalin. Many of them were civilians deported from Russia by the Germans and kept in slave labor camps during the war. Others were ordinary prisoners of war, captured at the Eastern Front. But there were Russians, Ukrainians, Cossacks, Kalmucks, Georgians, and Azerbaidjanis who defected to the German side to fight Communism in German uniform. The majority of these were enrolled in German-officered regiments, called the Eastern Legions; others were members of the more or less paper "Vlasov Army of Liberation." There were also the Russian forced labor battalions, which were incorporated in the Tods organization and used in military construction works. The fate accorded to almost all of the repatriated men and women was monstrous. Members, or suspected