

Winds of cultural change are clearing away cobwebs. Eric Walberg reviews a Czech film and observes how Czechs are re-evaluating the 1940-50s 6/11/8 -- History just won't leave the poor Czechs alone. As the Czechs celebrated their National Day on 28 October, knives were drawn in Prague where accusations that the dean of Czech belles lettres, Milan Kundera, had collaborated with the Communist authorities to capture a Czech deserter and US spy, Miroslav Dvoracek, in 1950. Dvoracek is now feted as a hero

who risked his life to fight Communism, and perhaps the republic's greatest writer is vilified as a one-time Communist and -- now -- as a sort of Quisling. Kundera denies the charge, though even if the charge were true, surely it's at least debatable which side -- that of a US spy trying to undermine the country, or the then-popular Communist government trying to rebuild it after WW II -- deserves one's sympathy. There would probably be little doubt in an Egyptian's mind.

Cairenes too caught a glimpse of the re-evaluation by Czechs of their recent history on this 90th anniversary of Czech independence with the Egyptian premiere of a historical feature film Tobruk, which provided a chance to look at the republic's fascinating if checkered relations with the Middle East, in particular, Egypt. The film traces the fates of a group of Czechoslovak soldiers who fought in the desert near the Libyan port of Tobruk, focussing on events in the autumn of 1941, when the Czechoslovaks fought beside British and Australian divisions to defend the strategic port against German and Italian forces.

Director Vaclav Marhoul introduced the film, explaining the confusing situation, with Czechs who fought under the British Middle East forces at one point killing Czechs fighting with the pro-Nazi French Foreign Legion. He interviewed survivors of the battles and condemned the Communist government for suppressing this page in Czech history, which was not useful to the Communist cause. Marhoul was inspired by Stephen Crane's American civil war novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, showing the nightmare of war, the violence and the less-than-noble behaviour of soldiers. "This is the first time a Czech film shows soldiers acting like real soldiers," he told the audience. He insisted the film was not trying to unravel the complexities of the political situation in North Africa, but it is hard to ignore the Euro-centricity of a film taking place in European-occupied Arab countries about Europeans fighting a European war with nary an Arab in sight, good or bad. Its hero was a Czech Jew, who is ridiculed by his boorish mates till he saves two of them, and is the only one to survive. Marhoul explained his purpose was to show "anti-Semitism in the Czech army" and to emphasise that "we still live under the shadow of the Holocaust." Not much sensitivity to the legacy of WW II on Egypt here.

After Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic and Slovakia, was liberated from the Nazis by the Red Army, it became a socialist republic, and its relations with the Middle East lurched in an even stranger direction. In 1948 Stalin ordered it to sell arms to the new state of Israel, a policy which was lauded by David Ben-Gurion himself as key to Israel's survival. At the time the West was refusing to send arms to either the Jews or the Arabs, hoping to force them to settle the issue of dividing Palestine peacefully.

Pages from a checkered past

Written by Eric Walberg

This fateful aid to Israel 60 years ago is also being celebrated this year with an exhibit, curated by the Israeli historian Shosh Dagan, at the Military Museum in Prague. Ironically, given charges against the Communists for airbrushing inconvenient events out of pictures, Dagan admits she is also doing some airbrushing. It is no longer acceptable to acknowledge that it was Stalin who ordered the help, or that the Czech government was not acting on its own initiative. The war planes and arms which the Czechs provided played a very important role in halting the Egyptian army's advance south of Ashdod, at a place now called the Ad Halom Junction. Even less to cheer Egyptians in this historical reminder.

When Israel turned to the West, shunning the socialist bloc, Czechoslovakia embraced the Arab, in particular, Egyptian cause. A watershed event in Middle East history was when Czech arms arrived in Egypt in September 1955, which allowed Egypt to stare down the British and French during the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. Following the Arab defeat of 1967, Czechoslovakia again came to Egypt's aid. This period was the high point in Czech-Egyptian relations according to Czech Cultural Attaché Andrea Kucerova. The stunning Czech Embassy is a legacy of this, with its handsome architecture and beautiful gardens. Though relations cooled when President Anwar El-Sadat ended friendship agreements with the socialist bloc in the 1970s, he was nonetheless beholden to those countries for military aid that let Egypt defeat Israel in the 1973 War. Kucerova admitted that Czech-Egyptian relations hit a low point after that, but was happy to say they are "flourishing today".

After more than 40 years when historical events were filtered through a pro-Soviet lens, it is natural that events of the past would be given a fresh perspective. As the three events mentioned here show, there is not much yet which might spark Egyptians' interest. Perhaps Marhoul might want to reflect on how his hero, Johnny Lieberman, probably slipped away from the Czech army when it was stationed in Palestine in 1942, joined the Irgun as a terrorist, and then became a pilot of one of the Czech planes in 1948, killing and driving hundreds of thousands of Arabs into exile. "Living under the shadow of the Holocaust" took on a whole different meaning for the Palestinians and Egyptians when Czech arms helped defeat them in that decisive year.

In any case, Kucerova insisted that the republic no longer exports arms to anyone here. At least that page in Czech history is closed. And Marhoul, for all his apparent lack of awareness of Arab sensitivities, was clearly motivated by a deep antipathy to war, commenting in the discussion: "One day you may be a hero and the next a coward. I tried to show the horror of war, how the poor soldiers were mostly waiting -- waiting for death."

Cairenes can visit the embassy near the Urman Gardens in Giza for concerts throughout the

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year and the annual Czech film festival in March. Let's hope that as the republic rediscovers more lost pages in its history, it will be able to celebrate Czech support for Egypt and the Middle East in their struggle to achieve a worthy place among the family of nations.

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