

ROUNDTABLE  
SOVIET–ARAB LINKAGES AND MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

## When the Revolutions Aligned: Soviet Documentary Films of the Aswan High Dam

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The Aswan High Dam was a cornerstone of two overlapping political projects. For Egypt’s President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the dam symbolized a bright future in which the decolonized Egyptian people could finally claim their destinies and triumph over the twin forces of imperialism and nature. The Soviet-assisted megaproject acquired such symbolic importance that Nasser’s security apparatus carefully policed its representations in Egyptian society, culture, and intellectual life. For the USSR, by contrast, the dam symbolized Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s break with the Stalinist past, initiated in his famous February 1956 “secret speech” that criticized Stalin’s draconian repressions, isolationism in international affairs, and neglect of “the East.” Even as it led to economic, scientific technical, and cultural agreements with Afro-Asian states including Egypt, Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization agenda loosened controls over political speech at home, unleashing powerful new political ideas, forces, and artistic trends. This brief essay will explore the overlap between the two projects, asking where they met and diverged and what this means for studies of political, cultural, and environmental history.

The Egyptian–Soviet alliance was uneasy, strained by stubborn personalities and Egypt’s brutal crackdown on domestic communists. Downplaying these tensions while celebrating the first completed stage of dam construction in 1964, Nasser talked about the Arab–Soviet relationship as “a friendship between two great revolutions, and revolutions always meet ... because their aspirations are usually the same ... their goals are the same ... and their methods are also almost the same.”<sup>1</sup> What did it mean for two revolutions to meet?

Our historical understanding of Egyptian–Soviet cooperation remains fragmented. The voluminous scholarship about its centerpiece, the Aswan High Dam, is stuck in subfields: political, economic, environmental, and cultural histories of Egypt; histories of Soviet economic development; technical fields such as hydrology, engineering, and energy politics; and studies of the global Cold War.<sup>2</sup> These compartments reflect the legacies of

<sup>1</sup> Hami Salam, “Hadha al-‘Adad,” *al-Musawwar*, July 1964, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Some examples include John Waterbury, *Hydropolitics of the Nile Valley* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1979); Hussein Fahim, *Dams, People, and Development: The Aswan High Dam Case* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981); Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev’s Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (New York: Norton, 2006); and Nancy Reynolds, “City of the High Dam:

Cold War–era divisions of intellectual labor that relegated the Third World to anthropology and development studies, whereas the USSR was studied through political science and economics. This division has obscured the ways Soviet power shaped the discursive and practical relations that both enabled and undermined colonial projects as well as decolonizing ones.

One challenge relates to sources. The rich body of images, songs, and texts about the Aswan Dam has been analyzed by historians of Egypt interested in culture and the conflicting ways that the dam's history has been told by the Egyptian state and by the people who built it or were displaced by its construction.<sup>3</sup> Tightly guarded state archives in Egypt have meant that these histories are written mostly with reference to Arabic-language books, magazines, private papers, and oral histories, as well as state archives of European colonial powers and the United States. Soviet sources are rarely consulted.

In the Soviet field, by contrast, the dam figures more in debates among economic historians about the strength of the economy under Khrushchev. Was the Soviet decision to extend aid based on a successful Soviet economy and Khrushchev's optimism that socialism could beat the liberal capitalist model in a "peaceful" competition?<sup>4</sup> Or, on the contrary, did it reflect Khrushchev's realization that the USSR was too economically weak to sustain Cold War competition in isolation and therefore needed to cultivate Third World alliances to help integrate it into the global capitalist system?<sup>5</sup> Proponents of both scenarios tend to underrate the role of ideology. When Khrushchev's economic advisers asked whether the aid had any economic benefits for the Soviet side, their concerns were dismissed. The optics even made it hard to collect regular deliveries of Egyptian goods—long-fiber cotton, rice, and even Stella beers—as part of a mutually agreed debt repayment plan: Soviet leaders feared any perception of Western-like colonial extractive intent.<sup>6</sup> To counter such fears, they swallowed losses and produced

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Aswan and the Promise of Postcolonialism in Egypt," *City and Society* 29, no. 1 (2017): 213–35. A rare scholar who has synthesized Soviet and Arab sources about the Aswan Dam is Elizabeth Bishop, in "Talking Shop: Egyptian Engineers and Soviet Specialists at the Aswan High Dam" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1997); and "The Great Industrial Project: Space, Sovereignty, and Production Cultures at Egypt's Aswan High Dam," in *Socialist Internationalism and the Gritty Politics of the Particular: Second-Third World Spaces in the Cold War*, ed. Kristin Roth-Ey (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 62–64.

<sup>3</sup> Alia Mossallam, "We Are the Ones Who Made This Dam 'High'! A Builders' History of the Aswan High Dam," *Water History* 6, no. 4 (2015): 297–314; Alia Mossallam, "Specters of Labor: The Builders of the Aswan High Dam, between Propagandic Depictions and Workers' Community Archives," in *Force Times Distance: On Labor and Its Sonic Ecologies; The Sonsbeek 20–24 Reader*, ed. Antonia Alampi et al. (Berlin: Archive Books, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Alessandro Iandolo makes this case, relying on economic historian Robert Allen's characterization of the USSR as "arguably the second most successful economy in the world" after Japan before 1970, in "The Rise and Fall of the 'Soviet Model of Development' in West Africa, 1957–64," *Cold War History* 12, no. 4 (2012): 683–704. He leaves this question open in Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955–1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), 14–15. The dam was part of an aid strategy that focused on particular regions: in 1958, Egypt, Ghana, Iraq, Syria, Algeria, Indonesia, India, and Afghanistan received 80 percent of Soviet aid; Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development: A Cold War History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 43.

<sup>5</sup> The latter argument is made in Oscar Sanchez-Sibony, *Red Globalization: The Political Economy of the Soviet Cold War from Stalin to Khrushchev* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> As historian Sanchez-Sibony concludes, unlike the United States and the European powers, which could afford to dally and politicize their aid as a tool of coercion and discipline, the Soviet Union fretted over delays, disorganization, and general ineptitude that might harm its image in the eyes of the aid recipients. Similar concerns about image—specifically the possibility that unwelcome conflicts with Egyptian workers might reflect badly on the first proletariat state—were the reason that the Soviet Union did not build on a contract basis, acting as employers as other aid donors did, but instead preferred to send technicians, engineers, and administrators to give technical direction and manage equipment deliveries to fulfill Soviet plans; Sanchez-Sibony, *Red Globalization*, 135. Egyptian shipments of Stella beer are mentioned in Sonalla Ibrahim, *Ice*, trans. Margaret Litvin (London: Seagull Books, 2018), 28.

narratives, images, and films portraying themselves as selfless benefactors of the wretched of the earth. Such cultural production, however, is rarely considered in studies of politics and economics.

A starting point for linking these fields is the empirical fact that Egyptian and Soviet management of culture was interconnected. In Egypt, bureaucratized control over representations of the Aswan Dam was coordinated by the Ministry of National Guidance, an institution created after the revolution of 1952 (it was renamed the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance in 1958 and then split in 1970). This institution was modeled on the ministries of culture in France and Eastern bloc countries that extended support to artists, gave them direction, and then used their creative outputs to uplift the “masses” by exposing them to the arts.<sup>7</sup> During the first phase of the Aswan Dam’s construction, this ministry signed a number of agreements with the Soviet Ministry of Culture. As a result of these agreements, Soviet writers, artists, and filmmakers were mobilized alongside Egyptian ones to respond to the Aswan Dam. Their work drew on a rich Soviet tradition of telling stories about the origins of revolutionary states, the power of scientific achievements to serve humanity, and the potential of great feats of engineering to forge “new people” by turning peasants into enlightened proletarianized workers.

One expert Soviet storyteller mobilized to Egypt was the documentary filmmaker Mark Antonovich Troyanovsky (1907–67). His life and work make it possible to start connecting the histories of Egyptian and Soviet megaproject-driven modernity by asking new questions about the relationship between political economy and cultural production. For instance, what can Soviet sources tell us about Egyptian modernization under Nasser? What aspects of Soviet domestic empire-building, both contemporary and historical, were activated when the USSR extended economic, scientific, technical, and cultural aid abroad? And most excitingly for environmental history: can a transregional study of socialist state-led efforts to transform both nature and culture help us better understand why humans’ impact on the Earth’s ecosystems accelerated so fast in the mid-20th century, a global development that has so far been theorized primarily with reference to capitalism?

### Propaganda of Soviet–Egyptian Friendship

Troyanovsky and his camera were part of a larger package of cultural technologies mobilized by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in anticipation of the Aswan High Dam’s ceremonial inauguration in 1964. Like the Egyptian Ministry of National Guidance, which sent writers, artists, and filmmakers to the construction site to garner public support for the project and embed it within the nation’s cultural identity, the CPSU mobilized agencies responsible for print, radio, art, and film. The Soviet press agency (Agentstvo Pechati Novosti; APN) was instructed to prepare special issues of its Arabic-language magazines *al-Majalla al-Sufiyatiyya* (The Soviet Magazine) and *al-Sharq* (The East); posters and pamphlets about Aswan; and a booklet about the “the great construction site (*velikaia stroika*) on the Nile,” drawing on one of the principal cultural metaphors of the Stalinist first Five-Year Plan.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ala Younis, “No Soviet Engineer to Walk in Front of an Egyptian One: Youssef Chahine’s Two High Dam Films (1968 and 1970),” in *Russian-Arab Worlds: A Documentary History*, ed. Eileen Kane, Masha Kirasirova, and Margaret Litvin (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023), 285–97.

<sup>8</sup> APN (or Novosti) is purported to be an unofficial nongovernmental organ. It was formed in 1961 by a group of ostensible Soviet “public organizations”: the Union of Journalists, the Union of Writers, the Union of Soviet Societies of Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, and the National Union for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge.

Articles about the dam and Khrushchev's state visit were to be placed in APN regional publications distributed in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran, as well as in publications destined for other countries.<sup>9</sup> The Council of Ministers agreed to produce 10,000 gramophone records for free distribution in Egypt, containing speeches (translated into Arabic) by Soviet officials, writers, scientists, engineers, and technicians, as well as a song by popular Armenian Soviet composer Aram Khachaturian.<sup>10</sup> The records were encased in a high-quality paper packet which the Party instructed needed "to look so nice that Arabs, according to their habits (*v Sootvestsiii s ikh privichkam*) would place them in a visible place in their homes."<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the paper on which these directives were printed was of such poor quality that the archival document is barely legible.

Soviet audiences received less consideration in these plans than global ones. For instance, the Soviet Ministry of Culture planned to send a delegation of fifteen to twenty Soviet artists and writers whose work could be used for exhibitions at the Soviet Cultural Center in Cairo, at workers' clubs in Aswan, and at "evenings of friendship" hosted by the Union of Friendship and Cultural Relations with the Abroad (SSOD) around Egypt. This art also could be displayed at receptions in Moscow for Asian, African, and Latin American guests. In these plans, the Soviet public seemed like an afterthought, meriting only a party suggestion to send journalists from *Sovetskii Soiuz*, *Ogonek*, and *Novoe Vremia* and filmmakers to Egypt to collect material for Soviet news programs and documentaries for both Egyptian and Soviet audiences.<sup>12</sup>

The director Troyanovsky was chosen as someone reliable and experienced. His colleagues described him as disciplined, energetic, politically literate, morally stable, and "modest" in his personal life. He had worked all over the USSR and abroad since 1932.<sup>13</sup> Most significantly, he had been working on and off in Egypt since 1956, when he had represented the Soviet Union in negotiations with the Egyptian Ministry of National Guidance about the coproduction of the first Soviet-Egyptian documentary film about Egypt.<sup>14</sup> As part of these negotiations, he had met with National Guidance representatives Yahya Haqqi and Naguib Mahfouz and told these two prominent writers how Soviet filmmaking was organized, from the education of young filmmakers to the economics of film screenings, rentals, and taxes. With film director Youssef Chahine, he toured Studio Misr and another smaller studio, remarking that both seemed "quite modest" in their capacities. He also reported back about his Egyptian counterparts' concerns that the Egyptian film market was being "being overwhelmed by American cinema of a light genre," a fear that resonated with Soviet officials and Orientalists also thinking about having to compete with Hollywood.<sup>15</sup> In April, Soviet ambassador Dmitry Kiselev reported that Haqqi and Anwar al-Sadat, at the time minister of state in the Egyptian government, had approved plans for a coproduction of a documentary about Egypt, directed by Troyanovsky,

<sup>9</sup> Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (hereafter RGANI) f. 89, op. 17, d. 33, ll. 122–23 (Memo to TsK by M. Kharlamov head of GosCommittee, 28 March 1964).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> RGANI f. 89, op. 17, d. 33, ll. 13–14.

<sup>12</sup> The memo concludes by stating that the ideological section and the international section of the party agreed it would be "useful" (*tselesoobraznym*) to use Khrushchev's visit to propagandize the Soviet Union's aid to other countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America; RGANI f. 89, op. 17, d. 33, ll. 1–3.

<sup>13</sup> By 1964 Troyanovsky had worked in Japan, Iraq, Italy, and France; RGANI f. 89, op. 17, d. 33, ll. 4–5, 117 (Evaluation of Troyanovsky by studio officials, 22 February 1964).

<sup>14</sup> Mahfouz was initially introduced by Haqqi as a potential coauthor for Troyanovsky's script, but he ended up primarily representing Egypt in negotiations and not coauthoring; Mark Troianovsky, *S Vekom naravne: Dnevnik, pis'ma, Zapiski* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2004), 246–47.

<sup>15</sup> On this tour, Chahine apparently told Troyanovsky that he "intended to exchange his Nile for our Volga" (*sobiratetsia meniat' Nil na nashu Volgu*); *ibid.*, 249.

on the understanding that “all production costs in Egypt would be borne by the Egyptian side.”<sup>16</sup>

As in economic and technical scientific cooperations between the Soviet Union and Egypt, money quickly became a source of tension. Funding for the film was so delayed that, by August, the Soviet Ministry of Culture was asking the Central Committee for guidance about how to proceed in light of “the events connected with the nationalization of the Suez Canal.”<sup>17</sup> In 1957 Troyanovsky was complaining that the Egyptians “don’t want to give us money.”<sup>18</sup> Similar delays in financing plagued Troyanovsky’s later Egyptian film projects. His crew often did not have enough funds left for return plane tickets and had to wait for boats to Odessa and rely on aid from the Soviet film trade organization Sovexportfilm.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these challenges, *V Egipte* (In Egypt, 1957) was completed and hailed as a political success. The film told a story about the Egyptian revolution that drew visually on the conventions of Soviet revolutionary cinema. It opened with shots of Egypt’s “prerevolutionary” history: Cairo’s pyramids, palaces, cafes, markets, mosques, parks, collections of the Egyptian museum (Fig. 1), the Archimedean tools used by peasants for irrigation, and a short history of foreign occupations. The “revolutionary” rupture was represented by the new Egyptian flag, with a black stripe for the dark past, red for revolution, and white for its bright future, scenes of destruction after the Suez War, and the 1956 anniversary celebration of Egyptian independence at which Nasser received a military parade. Like earlier Soviet propaganda films about the Bolshevik revolution, *V Egipte* celebrates the beauty of landscapes and the political commitment of people: peasants, students, and laborers rebuilding Port Said after the Suez war; teachers and intellectuals like ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi reading to villagers from his novel *al-Ard* (The Land, translated as *Egyptian Earth*); agronomists and irrigation engineers working on reclaiming agricultural land from the desert and solving other challenges on the road to the conquest of nature. Troyanovsky drew upon techniques of Soviet industrial photography to aestheticize Egypt’s technological modernity. Images of oil drills in the eastern regions, sugar factories, the metallurgical plant at Helwan, and plans for the hydroelectrical station at Aswan appear beautiful and transcendent.

The theme of Soviet–Egyptian friendship is woven into this story of modernization. Soviet ships unload flour and other goods in Alexandria; Egyptian and Soviet youth strike up epistolary friendships; Egyptians students raise their qualifications in Moscow; Cairenes purchase Moscow journals *Novoe Vremia* and *Sovetskii Soiuz* from bookstalls, read them in Arabic, or use them to study Russian at the permanent exhibition of the Union of Friendship with Foreign Countries. In one scene, Nasser personally extends his gratitude to the Soviet people, mediated by Soviet journalists and Troyanovsky’s camera.

The scene in which Nasser expresses gratitude to the Soviet people stands out for the relative absence of Soviet audiences in considerations in the Soviet documents. Troyanovsky’s film’s Moscow premier, hosted by the Ministry of Culture for “workers in culture and

<sup>16</sup> RGANI f. 5, op. 36 (Cultural Section), d. 30, l. 80 (Memo from Minister of Culture to TsK KPSS). On the 23,000 Egyptian pounds that the Egyptians agreed to allocate for the film’s production, see *ibid.*, l. 177 (Memo from Minister of Culture to TsK KPSS, 14 August 1956).

<sup>17</sup> The Soviet Ministry of Culture estimated that if the Egyptian side was to refuse to participate financially, the film would cost 149,000 rubles in foreign currency. Eventually the funds were shared. The Ministry of Culture hoped to receive 42,000 rubles in foreign currency from Egypt to add to its own commitment of 100,000 rubles in foreign currency, but Troyanovsky complained about his team’s inability to pay for basic needs; *ibid.*, l. 177. It proposed to cover the film’s expenses. The Ministry of Culture through the embassy in Egypt negotiated aid in the form of bundling a state cinema factory to produce black-and-white and color films and a state studio to produce feature, popular science, and documentary films; RGANI f. 5, op. 36, d. 51, ll. 32–35 (Directive of TsK KPSS, May 1957).

<sup>18</sup> Troyanovsky’s diary from 25 January 1957 in *S vekom naravne*, 253.

<sup>19</sup> Troyanovsky’s diary from 1 March 1957 in *ibid.*, 257.

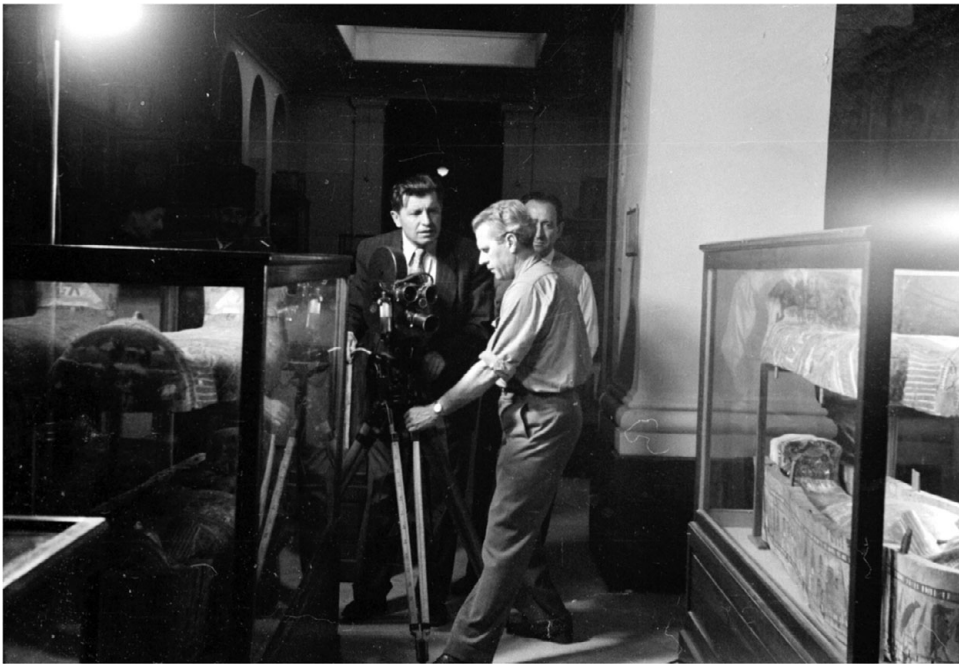


Figure 1. Troyanovsky setting up his camera in the Egyptian Museum. From the private archive of Alexei Troyanovsky.

the arts and representatives of the society of the capital” (*predstaviteli obschestvennosti stolitsy*) included the temporary charge d’affaires of Egypt, the Syrian ambassador, and their embassy employees.<sup>20</sup> Based upon newspaper coverage and classified reports about these films, what mattered more was approval of Egyptian authorities. It was praised by a visiting delegation of Egyptian cultural officials headed by the new Minister of National Guidance Fathi Radwan and, most importantly, by Nasser, who had sent a note to the premier describing the film as an “honest” portrayal of his country.<sup>21</sup>

This approval was hard-earned. As Troyanovsky recorded in his diary, he wanted to make a film that “shows change, not just views of the pyramids” because “only such a film would be greeted favorably by the Egyptian government, and I think our leadership as well.”<sup>22</sup> In general, the Soviet filmmaker fretted more about pleasing Egyptian censors—his “Arab bosses” (*nashi Arabskie shefy*) as he sometimes referred to them in his memoir—than Soviet ones, illuminating a power dynamic at the heart of this collaboration.<sup>23</sup> It also reflected greater oversight by Egyptian censors than Soviet ones. Youssef Chahine reported similar

<sup>20</sup> *Pravda*, 5 December 1958, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Soviet audience demand for such films is difficult to gauge. Anecdotally, people recall being forced to watch short educational political and documentary films because they were screened as previews before more popular “main” feature films. Yet there was interest in “geographical” documentaries like Troyanovsky’s, fed by Thaw era openings to new parts of the world and difficulties of travel. Troyanovsky’s son recalled that the proceeds from one of his father’s films about the Arctic managed to cover the cost of its production and the expedition, however he estimated that it was unlikely that any of the Egyptian films were at all profitable; conversation with Alexei Troyanovsky on Zoom, 28 September 2024. On Nasser’s approval, see RGANI f. 5, op. 36, d. 51, ll. 118 (Memo from Minister of Culture to Tsk KPSS, 21 November 1957).

<sup>22</sup> Troyanovsky’s diary, 1 March 1957, in *5 vekom naravne*, 256.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 273. Troyanovsky described waiting for the Ministry of National Guidance approval, being able to show the film only to a closed audience (the “democratic” diplomatic corps) in the Soviet Embassy; *ibid.*, 259.

struggles with Egyptian censors who rejected his first film about the Aswan Dam in part because of its choreography that showed Soviet engineers walking in front of Egyptian ones.<sup>24</sup>

Troyanovsky's success with Egyptian censors and politicians made him a natural choice to film the opening of the first phase of the Aswan High Dam. *Vosmoe Chudo Sveta* (The Eighth Wonder of the World, 1964) also draws upon the innovations of Soviet industrial cinema. Members of his team recall how he scaled rocks and chose difficult-to-access locations to capture with his camera desired angles and frames.<sup>25</sup> His decisions about how to shoot industry, workers, and crowds were informed by decades of training in some of the harshest contexts of Soviet state-building, including in the Arctic and Magnitogorsk, the steel plant and surrounding socialist city in western Russia that became emblematic of the triumph and violence of the Stalinist first Five-Year Plan. Historians of the Aswan Dam have often drawn parallels with Stalin-era industrialization. Elizabeth Bishop used biographies of Soviet engineers to trace the roots of the production culture at Aswan to Magnitogorsk.<sup>26</sup> Other historians have drawn parallels between Aswan and Magnitogorsk in how both helped to transform their respective revolutions into a living "set of values, a social identity, a way of life."<sup>27</sup> Literary scholars have compared Sonallah Ibrahim's 1967 account of the Aswan Dam to Soviet writers, photographers, and filmmakers' depictions of other Stalin-era projects, such as the Belomor Canal, intended to transform Gulag prisoners into productive Soviet citizens but resulting in the death of over 10 percent of the workforce.<sup>28</sup> Troyanovsky's films illustrate another way in which the legacies of the Stalin-era visual culture were manifested in Egypt.

These legacies suggest new linkages between Soviet foreign development and domestic empire-building. The film provides evidence of these linkages. It profiles Aswan's worker-heroes, some of whom previously worked on the Volga and Dnipro hydroelectrical projects. Longer-term Soviet expats, who call themselves "African old-timers (*Afrikanskii starozhyl*)," speak Arabic; some of the Egyptians tell stories in Russian about studying and working in Angana, in Siberia, and other Soviet locales. Their memories and forms of expression illuminate the way the Aswan Dam was embedded in multiple processes of Soviet state building and empire-making. It illustrates internal-external connections forged around the conquest of nature in the service of hydropower and around the production of narratives in the service of connected Soviet and Egyptian projects to produce new people. Troyanovsky's scenes of jubilant Egyptians crowds celebrating Khrushchev's arrival evoke mass scenes from films about the Bolshevik revolution by Sergei Eisenstein. These shots link the Egyptian revolution to the history of images of the Bolshevik revolution and nostalgia for world revolution.<sup>29</sup> Clips from Eisenstein's films would resurface again on Egyptian Facebook posts

<sup>24</sup> On the recording and film *al-Nil wa-l-Hayat* (Once Upon a Time ... the Nile, 1968) and its remake *al-Nas wa-l-Nil* (The People and the Nile, 1970/72), see also Younis, "No Soviet Engineer," 287. The film also is discussed in Masha Salazkina, *World Socialist Cinema: Alliances, Affinities, and Solidarities in the Global Cold War* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023), ch. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Georgii Kublitskii, *Vosmoe chudo sveta* (Moscow: 1966); see also Troyanovsky, *S vekom naravne*, 291.

<sup>26</sup> Bishop argues that it was at Magnitostroi (the construction project at Magnitogorsk), the White Sea–Baltic canal, and the Volga–Don canal projects that many of the Soviet technical specialists who would later work on the Aswan High Dam project started their professional careers. She gives the example of Malyshev, whose first job out of school was as a designer for the White Sea–Baltic canal project, who acknowledged that his first bosses when he left school, Rapaport and Zhuk, had been there "since the very beginning," when a prison camp was established during the 1930s to provide labor for construction of the dam near Kuibyshev. Bishop, "Talking Shop," 171–72.

<sup>27</sup> Alia Mosallem, "Hikayat Sha'b: Stories of Peoplehood Nasserism, Popular Politics and Songs in Egypt, 1956–1973" (PhD diss., London School of Economics, 2012), 20–21.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 49.

<sup>29</sup> Such nostalgia is amplified in later Soviet Orientalists' writings and films about other revolutions in the Middle East. See Philipp Casula, "Symbiosis and Revolution: The Soviet Encounter with the War in Dhofar," *Contemporary European History* 30, no. 4 (2021): 562–80.

during the Arab spring, suggesting that this connection outlived Egypt's economic liberalization during Anwar al-Sadat's *infitah* (economic liberalization or "opening") in the mid-1970s and the collapse of the USSR. Troyanovsky's shots of TV sets for sale in Cairo storefronts, Egyptian billboards advertising Soviet films, and swarms of cameramen accompanying politicians, place film at the center of the linkages between the politicians and the people, even though, in keeping with ideological demands of this "friendship," the Egyptian people came before Soviet ones.

### The Unraveling of a Revolutionary Alliance

Troyanovsky completed *Vosmoe Chudo Sveta* in record time. It premiered in Moscow on July 10, 1964 and was praised by the press for its "cinematographic discoveries." Yet because the film was ultimately embedded in a Soviet history of images and politics, the fact that it celebrated one of Khrushchev's last acts as general secretary had sealed its fate. Khrushchev was deposed in October 1964 by a group of comrades who had grown increasingly frustrated with his domestic policy failures and his increasingly authoritarian management of the Kremlin. His international policy snafus around the Cuban missile crisis, the USSR's increasing hostile relationship with China, and his efforts to be liked by anticommunist Third World leaders further hurt his standing within party circles.<sup>30</sup> After he was deposed, Troyanovsky's 1964 film was shelved and did not receive a wide release.<sup>31</sup> Today, it can be accessed at the Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive, but it has been ignored by cultural historians interested in Soviet and Afro-Asian encounters around the medium of film.<sup>32</sup>

This censorship coincided with what Khrushchev's son Sergei recalled as Soviet society's fatigue with the old leader's "incessant, heavy-handed experimentation in search of a 'Communist paradise.'"<sup>33</sup> His removal released long-held resentments about the channeling of Soviet resources to the Global South fueled, in part, by limited exposures to Western consumer goods and fashions.<sup>34</sup> Many of these resentments were directed specifically at Nasser. The renowned Soviet singer-songwriter and poet Vladimir Vysotsky, known for his significant impact on Soviet culture and music, recorded a song "Poteriaiu Istinnuiu Veru" (I Will Lose True Faith) about the loss of faith in the Soviet Union that referenced the offense felt by Soviet war veterans at Khrushchev's decision to award Nasser the Order of Lenin and Hero of the Soviet Union, decorations usually reserved for heroic feats in battle or other

<sup>30</sup> As Khrushchev cautioned his colleagues in the Presidium, if Moscow did not do more in the Middle East, "the Chinese might interfere." Cited in Fursenko and Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, 531–33.

<sup>31</sup> Troyanovsky, *S Vekom naravne*, 292.

<sup>32</sup> Troyanovsky is referenced only in relation to one of his World War II films in Rossen Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press), 190; he does not make it into studies of Cold War and socialist film, such as Salazkina, *World Socialist Cinema*, and Tony Shaw and Denise Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Khrushchev was removed by a group within the party, citing his domestic agricultural mismanagement and restructuring of the party apparatus, although his foreign policy blunders undoubtedly played a role in the decision; Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War*, 272.

<sup>34</sup> On official exchange agreements with the United States and Western powers that were designed to force Russian leaders to keep people happy by diverting some of their manufacturing facilities to consumer goods, see Susan Reid, "Who Will Beat Whom? Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959," *Kritika* 9, no. 4 (2008): 855–904. On Soviet popular resentment about aid, see Constantin Katsakioris, "Burden or Allies? Third World Students and Internationalist Duty through Soviet Eyes," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, no. 3 (2017): 539–67; and Thom Loyd, "Congo on the Dnipro: Third Worldism and the Nationalization of Soviet Internationalism in Ukraine," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 22, no. 4 (2021) 787–811.



achievements in the service of the Soviet state and society.<sup>35</sup> “I am hurting for our USSR. Take away the order from Nasser. Nasser is not suitable for the order,” sings Vysotsky, placing the emphasis on the second syllable of Nasser’s name, which makes its sound like a vulgarity (*nassrat*). Another contemporaneous popular poem makes a similar pun: “Lives in the sands and eats to the fullest is the half-fascist half-SR<sup>36</sup> Hero of the Soviet Union, Gamal Abdel shits-on-everyone-Nasser” (*Zhivet v peskakh i zhret ot puza, polufashist polueser, Geroi Sovetskogo Soiuz, Gamal Abdel na vsekh Naser*). The insertion of “na vsekh” turns Nasser’s name into the verb “to shit.”

In Egypt, popular ambivalence about the dam also was amplified by disappointments in the country’s economic performance in the mid 1960s. Despite extensions of additional Soviet aid in 1965, and in keeping with the Soviet model, Nasser prioritized political concerns over economic ones. Egypt’s involvement in the war in Yemen (1962–67) came at the expense of Egyptian consumers, and these disappointments were further amplified by the 1967 Arab–Israeli war. During this period, writers’ and artists’ ambivalence about the dam gave way to explicit critique. The writer Sonallah Ibrahim revisited his celebratory memoir about its construction in a more critical novel, *Najmat Aghustus* (The Star of August, 1974), in which he chronicled and foregrounded the harsh working conditions faced by thousands of Upper Egyptian laborers.<sup>37</sup> The filmmaker Youssef Chahine kept a scene in the remake of his first film about the dam in which a dispossessed Nubian mocks one of Nasser’s main diplomatic successes of moving the Abu Simbel Temple.<sup>38</sup> The artist ‘Abd al-Hadi al-Gazzar, who painted the iconic and celebratory *The High Dam* (1964), also produced ink drawings such as *The Dynamics of the High Dam* (1964) that showed workers encased in tombs underneath a concrete platform and a gargantuan monolithic figure of steel and concrete symbolizing the dam.<sup>39</sup>

As the economic and political linkages between Nasser’s and Khrushchev’s revolutions unraveled, the scientific, technological, and cultural legacies of this collaboration were co-opted by subsequent leaders. Yet looking at it historically has the potential for illuminating new transregional dimensions of Middle Eastern state-building and their Cold War context, which extended to Soviet state building and imperial dynamics in Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Baltic regions, Siberia, and Ukraine, and also offering new insights into these dynamics of ostensibly “domestic” Soviet history.<sup>40</sup> Finally, these connections contribute to a more “global” history of the Anthropocene that accounts for noncapitalist forms of development as well as capitalist ones.

<sup>35</sup> At this time such songs were recorded and transmitted outside official channels. These early songs were recorded on magnetic tape and distributed informally. For song, see Vladimir Vysotsky, “Potieraiu Istinnuiu Veru,” YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyV3Ew4-PUM>.

<sup>36</sup> The ideologically suspicious Socialist Revolutionary Party considered to have betrayed the Bolshevik revolution.

<sup>37</sup> The original account, *Insan al-Sadd al-‘Ali* (Man of the High Dam, 1967) was rewritten as *Najmat Aghustus* (1974). See Céza Kassem-Draz, “Opaque and Transparent Discourse: A Contrastive Analysis of the ‘Star of August’ and ‘The Man of the High Dam’ by Son’ Allah Ibrahim,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 2 (1982): 32–50.

<sup>38</sup> He asks the president “to move our houses for us block by block, like you did for Abu Simbel,” because “that is [my history that] I want to keep.” Cited in Younis, “No Soviet Engineer,” 287.

<sup>39</sup> On al Gazzar’s *The Dynamics of the High Dam* (1964), in which workers were encased in tombs, see Patrick Kane, “The Prosaic and the Political in the Art of Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar,” in *al Gazzar: Paintings* (Paris: Norma edition, 2023), 61–67. On his drawings generally reflecting how science and technology accelerated dehumanization, see Alain Roussillon, “Identity and Revolution,” in *al Gazzar: Drawings* (Paris: Norma edition, 2023), 66.

<sup>40</sup> David Engerman, “The Second World’s Third World,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 1 (2011): 185.