

UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED
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PHD THESIS

**The Czechoslovak-Egyptian Arms Deal and its Impact on
International Relations 1955-1961**

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I. Reasons for Choosing the Research Topic and Hypotheses

In Hungarian historical scholarship, the Third-World policies of Czechoslovakia – ranging from Latin America to Sub-Saharan Africa to South-East Asia – have been seen as a veritable *terra incognita* despite the key role that Prague played in several political events of global importance. Among these must be listed the Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deal, signed on 12th September, 1955. Czechoslovakia supplied the Egyptian Army with Czechoslovakian/Soviet weaponry of standard contemporary military technology quality in the value of 921 million Chechoslovak Crowns (roughly £46 million at the exchange rates of the time). This was the first case that the Socialist Bloc delivered heavy weaponry to a Third World country. As soon as Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser publicly announced the transaction, the contemporary international community reacted with nothing short of an explosion: Western states expressed surprise and anger; Israel replied with a sensation of panic and started war preparations; Arab public opinions were full of pride, accord, and joy; Eastern Bloc states showed signs of general satisfaction. The region suddenly became a major frontline in the Cold War, an important area in the clash between superpowers, with its basis in the rivalry among Muslim states of the region as well as the Arab-Israeli opposition. The fact that the arms deal threw into relief was that, despite all attempts by the West, the Soviet Union did not come to be “surrounded and isolated”, and that Moscow was now *de facto* present in Africa and the Middle East. At the same time, this event paved the way of the emerging Israeli and Western foreign policy that would lead to the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the introduction of the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957.

While there is common agreement in international historical scholarship regarding the significance and impact of the Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deal, certain aspects of the pact still evoke serious debate. Exactly when and how Nasser turned to the Eastern Bloc for weapons has not been fully investigated and there are several conflicting opinions, but the most heated dispute is about the exact role of Prague. There are two main views: one states that Czechoslovakia behaved as a rule-abiding perfect satellite state, which means that the examination of its role is unnecessary, or it is erroneous to declare any degree of freedom exercised by the country in the matter. The other group of scholars assert that Prague’s activities to seal the deal of 12th September 1955 were far from insignificant and that furthermore, the Central European country had more foreign policy freedom concerning the Third World than other “friendly states” as early as the mid-50s. In my PhD thesis, I should like to “join in” the exciting polemics on Czechoslovakia’s Third World policies and the arms

deal itself – a debate which has been conducted for more than sixty years among English-speaking, Arab, Israeli, and more recently, Czech and Slovak historians. For some reason this debate has so far escaped the attention of Hungarian scholarship; thus, one of the novelties of the thesis is providing insight into a topic quite unfamiliar to Hungarian professional circles. At the same time, the thesis presents a general overview of Czechoslovak-Egyptian ties as well as Prague's Middle East policies of the 1950s and 1960s. At the beginning, in the course of, and at the end of my research the following hypotheses emerged in my mind, which I seek to prove with the primary and secondary sources I investigated:

- a.) *Until the defeat of the 1968 Prague Spring and the Russian military occupation, Czechoslovakia's field of play was far larger in the developing world than that of other "friendly states".*
- b.) *As a result of their successes, the African and Middle Eastern foreign policies of Prague often provided role models to other socialist states. Czechoslovakia strove to gain a leading role of sorts in this area, in order to lead the coordination of Third World foreign policies of other "friendly states"*
- c.) *In the beginning, even Moscow was forced to rely on Prague's pre-existent Third World ties or diplomatic mediation*
- d.) *The Soviet Union had a much smaller role in the initiation, conduct, and subsequent sealing of the 1955 Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deal than formerly proposed in international historiography.*
- e.) *The Czechoslovakian military industry indeed fulfilled the conditions and requirements contained in the deal; it did not only fulfil a "cover/dummy role" for the Soviets. This was true for the year the contract was signed and later, as well. In addition to Egypt, Czechoslovakia would supply other Arab states with weapons; among these, Czechoslovakia met the demands of countries friendly to the West.*
- f.) *There were higher numbers of Czechoslovak military experts, advisers, and training staff working in the Middle East than those from any other "friendly state". In certain periods, their numbers would far exceed even those of the Soviets. This was also true for military education conducted in the Eastern European country.*
- g.) *Until the end of the 1950 and in the case of Egypt, Czechoslovakia could achieve far more significant results in the military and economic-cultural fields than any other socialist country, including the Soviet Union.*

- h.) *The starting date of the Suez Crisis is not Nasser's speech of 26th July 1956 on the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, but the Egyptian leader's open acknowledgement of the Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deal on 27th September 1955.*
- i.) *The Suez Crisis was also an important event for the Czechoslovak communist leadership, as the second Arab-Israeli war severely endangered Czechoslovakia's Third World policies.*

II. Sources

The core of the PhD thesis is composed of the study of primary sources found and processed in Czechoslovakia. One research venue was the National Archives (*Národní Archiv/NA*) in Prague. At the NA, I mainly relied on minutes taken between 1954 and 1962 at meetings of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Politické byro Ústředního výboru Komunistické strany Československa/PB ÚV KSČ*), as this fond (*f. 1261/0/11*) was a perfect match for the period investigated in my thesis. Thus I gained a general overview of the most important party decisions, the guidelines, the political-ideological-military or economic interests behind certain events, as well as the most important elements of bilateral ties. The other important group of sources was the second part of documents assigned to the chancellery of Antonín Novotný, Secretary General of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Kancelář 1. tajemníka ÚV KSČ Antonína Novotného – II. část*). Fond No. 1261/0/44 contains abbreviated or at times full-length reports sent to the ministry mostly by ambassadors, Czechoslovak secret agents, commercial delegations, or military experts. Finally, in the cases of specific topics, I came to use materials from other departments, such as reports by the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Mezinárodní oddělení ÚV KSČ*). My other important research venue was the Foreign Office Archives of the Czech Republic (*Archív Ministerstva zahraničních věcí České republiky/AMZV*). Here I investigated (general and classified) documents of political reports, diplomatic protocol, and the territorial department, mostly connected to Egypt, and in a smaller number of cases, with respect to Syria. I deemed it necessary to include other primary sources in my thesis, as certain topics were impossible to reconstruct exclusively based on Czech archives materials. These were mainly memoranda: Arab or Russian originals translated into English by the *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, and freely accessible on the Internet. I also used classified information management (TÜK) administrative documents of the *Hungarian National*

Archives (MNL OL) – their sources of origin were the Embassies of Cairo, Prague, and in a few cases, a third country Embassy (Damascus, Tehran).

I sorted the secondary sources into three main groups according to their “origin”: Hungarian, international (including American, British, and English-language Israeli), and Czech-Slovakian (sources written in English by Czech and Slovak historians were also placed here). In the past few years, there has not been a single scholarly publication written exclusively on Czechoslovakia’s arms exports, Czechoslovak_Egyptian ties, or Prague’s Third World policies. I relied on Hungarian sources mainly in the thesis chapters intended to provide a general overview of Middle Eastern events, processes, ideas, politicians, or conflicts. There is a higher number of secondary sources in international scholarship, but special care needed to be exercised in the use of last-century English language sources. Before the archives of former socialist states and those of Israel were opened for research, scholars often based far-reaching conclusions on - often faulty – information acquired from the press. While there is a fair number of English-language sources (disregarding their quality) on the 1955 Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deal, material is again rather thin and scanty on Czechoslovakia’s Egyptian, Middle Eastern and Third World policies. For decades, not a single internationally renowned researcher of the Cold War era and no international relations analyst would emphasise, or even devote more than a few lines to, discussing Prague’s African-Asian policies; in the vast majority of cases, indeed, these would be completely blended with the discussion of Soviet roles.

My situation was much easier with respect to Czech and Slovakian publications, as the research of Czechoslovakia’s Third World policies is of renewed interest in current Czech historiography. There are scholarly sources on ties between Czechoslovakia and the Sub-Saharan Region, and also on links with Cuba or Latin America, but in the present thesis I focus on publications which concern Egypt and the other Arab states.

In writing the thesis, I have relied on contemporary press sources to a far more limited extent. In addition to Czechoslovak press sources (*Rudé právo*, *Új Szó*), I have researched contemporary international media (*BBC*, *Le Monde*, *Times* etc.) articles to demonstrate the nature of international and domestic reactions to the events of the region.

III. Research Methodology and Thesis Structure

The present thesis discusses the period between 1955 and 1961, although a few pages have been devoted both to preceeding and succeeding years. The choice of the starting date is beyond dispute, as the Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deal was signed in that year, and this meant a turning point in the links and ties of Czechoslovakia and the developing countries. Parallel to this, several events happened in 1955 which came to fundamentally define the Cold War history of the Middle East – and, indeed, the whole world: the sealing of the Baghdad Pact; clashes between the Egyptian and Israeli armies in Gaza; the Africa-Asia Conference held in Bandung; and the birth of the new Soviet foreign policy (“global commitment strategy”). These events all contributed to the emergence of the Middle East as one of the most important frontlines of the Cold War, and resulted in Cairo’s approaching the Eastern Bloc for weapons.

In my thesis I primarily examine Czechoslovakian-Egyptian links and ties from the foundation of the two states to the outbreak of the Six-Day War. There is evidence that Prague maintained a complex set of relations with Cairo from the very beginning, and that for a long time the Arab state played a central role in the Third World policies of the Eastern Central European country. In the thematic respect, I place the main emphasis on the military spheres, arms deals, military trainings, and the activities of experts, as these counted to be the most important dimensions of Czechoslovak-Egyptian relations. At the same time, I could not omit from the thesis the discussion of political meetings, economic cooperation, and the most important achievements of cultural cooperation; to these, I often devote individual sub-chapters. In addition, I draw attention to oppositions and difficulties next to successes, as Czechoslovakia’s connections with Egypt were indeed not entirely free of low points.

It also seemed necessary to place my research topic in a larger context; this helps to fully understand the spacial nature of Czechoslovak-Egyptian relations and the significance of the arms deal. In my PhD thesis I exclusively focus on Arab countries in the examination of Prague’s Middle Eastern foreign policy ties: neither Israel, nor the non-Arab countries of the region (Turkey and Iran) are discussed in detail. Naturally, this does not mean that these countries are neglected in the analysis of various events of the region, may they be the 1955 arms deal, the Suez Crisis or the formation of UAR. Unquestionably, there is literature to fill an entire library on the major events of the period, but there is no scholarship largely devoted to the discussion of the outbreak of the second Arab-Israeli war as seen from the angle of the Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deal; there is also no source explaining contemporary reactions

of the United States, the Soviet Union, Israel, and the Arab world from this angle. For this reason, I have devoted entire chapters in my thesis to post-1952 Egyptian history; the development and expansion of Arab nationalism; the rather complex and multi-faceted set of relations between the Arab states and Western powers; the reasons and results of the Suez Crisis; as well as the formation and fall of the UAR.

1961 is chosen as the endpoint of the main research line: the coup of Damascus, when Syria abandoned the United Arab Republic (UAR) created together with Egypt in 1958. This event resulted in the restructuring of Prague's system of Third World links and ties: although Czechoslovak-Egyptian (and Syrian) relations were in fact restarted, the Czechoslovak leaders would turn their attention focus to Sub-Saharan countries, as well as Latin America, primarily Cuba.

IV. Research Results and Possible Further Developments

In the present PhD thesis, I give an insight into the period of Czechoslovak-Egyptian relations between 1955 and 1961, and in a wider context, between the end of World War I and the Six-Day War. Up to the beginning of the 1960s, Cairo was Prague's top Third World partner. Their links were unquestionably centred on weapons and war material, but the parties managed to reach fine results in many other areas. I also hope to have provided my readers with novel information on a topic so much "chewed at" as the second Arab-Israeli War. Placing the Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deal in a different light may – albeit ever so slightly – modify Hungarian historians' opinions regarding the Suez Crisis. At the same time, my thesis "gives a little taste" of Czechoslovakia's foreign policies with other Arab countries and the Third World. I am quite confident that the information and facts discussed in my PhD thesis represent only the surface of this topic, which is completely unfamiliar to Hungarian scholars. For this reason, I definitely intend to continue my research in the field. My long-term aim is to launch a highly ambitious "series" which would track Czechoslovakia's Third World policies over the whole Cold War period (1945-1989), with Prague's relations with the various regions discussed in individual monographs.

In summary: the present thesis is a good fit to research conducted at Szeged University's Doctoral School of History, a School with strong traditions of the study of links and ties between socialist countries and Middle Eastern states.

V. Publications and Papers on the Topic

Publications:

1. *Confidential Israel - Czechoslovakia's Role in the First Arab-Israeli War*. In: György Sándor – Hajnáczy Tamás – Kanyó Ferenc (eds.): *Historical Mazes*. Gondolat Kiadó, Budapest, 2018.
2. *Documents of the 1955 Czechoslovakian-Egyptian Arms Deal*. In: *Documenta Historica*. No. 98, JATE Press – SZTE BTK History Students' Circle, Szeged, 2017.
3. *Operation „105”*. In: *Napi Történelmi Forrás* (portal), Vol. 3 (2017)
4. *Evacuation Passed: Czechoslovakia and the Suez Crisis*. In: *Napi Történelmi Forrás* (portal), Vol. 3, (2017)
5. *Czechoslovakia's Main Objectives in the Middle East*. In: *The V4 and the Arab Middle East* (edt. Erzsébet N.Rózsa and Maté Szalai). Institute of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Budapest, 2015, pp. 55–73.
6. *The 1955 Czechoslovak-Egyptian Arms Deal and its Consequences: Nasser's "Oriental Opening"*. In: *Belvedere Meridionale*. Vol. 27. No.3., (2015), pp. 23–33.
7. *Czechoslovakia arms supplies and weapons in Arab-israeli conflicts*. In: *Mediterráneum Tanulmányok XXII*. Szeged, 2013, pp. 113–121.
8. *Building Scientific Socialism in Yemen – with Czechoslovak assistance*. In: *Mediterrán Világ*. No. 27–28., (2013), pp. 39–59.
9. *Arab-Israeli Conflicts in the Light of Czechoslovak Home Office Documents*. In: *Mediterrán Világ*. No. 25–26. (2013) pp. 94–105.

The full list of publications is accessible in the Hungarian Scholarly Bibliography Database (mtmt.hu).

Presentations, conferences:

1. *The 1955 Czechoslovakian-Egyptian Arms Deal Effects on Hungarian Foreign Policy.* In: *Foreign Relations, Possibilities, Diplomats of Hungary after 1945.* Budapest, 19th September 2018.
2. *Story of a Troubled Evacuation – Czechoslovakia and the Suez Crisis.* In: *Borders and Nation States in the Modern-Age Mediterranean. Mediterranean World Symposium XVI* Veszprém, 8th December 2017.
3. *The 1956 Revolution and the Arab World.* In: *1956 and its International Environment.* Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade. Budapest, 8th December 2016.
4. *From Fighter Planes to Beers – Czechoslovakia’s Middle East Policy in Cold War Times.* In: *Academy of Humanist Studies of Pest.* Budapest, 9th March 2016
5. *Czechoslovakia’s Priorities in Middle Eastern and African Countries in the 1950s and 1960s* . In: *PhD Students’ Symposium at the University of Szeged.* Szeged, 4th December 2015
6. *The Czechoslovak-Egyptian Arms Deal.* In: *Science Day Conference.* Szeged, 21th November 2014
7. *Operation Manual - From Prague with Love.* In: *Cold War Engagements: Czechoslovakia and Latin America.* Prága - Metropolitan University Prague, 8th November 2013
8. *Gaddafi’s Role in the Chechoslovak Arms Trade.* In: *Mediterrán Világ Symposium X: National Policy and Identity in the Mediterranean and the Balkans.* Pécs, 22nd-23rd November 2013
9. *Building Scientific Socialism in Yemen – with Czechoslovak Assistance.* In: *University of Szeged Faculty of Arts Programme Closing Conference.* Szeged, 24th May 2013