

'Munich is not on the Nile', from France Observateur (2 August 1956)

Caption: On 2 August 1956, the French weekly publication France Observateur deplores the comparison, which has become commonplace in the West, between the Egyptian Colonel, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Adolf Hitler.

Source: France Observateur. 02.08.1956, n° 325; 7e année. Paris: France Observateur. "Munich n'est pas sur le Nil", auteur: Martinet, Gilles, p. 4-5.

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/munich_is_not_on_the_nile_from_france_observateur_2_august_1956-en-dea92bb4-ee48-44db-9da9-ba141d2ec2c4.html



Last updated: 01/03/2017

Munich is not on the Nile

Since the spectre of Munich has been raised, we might as well talk about Munich and Hitler — and, of course, about Nasser.

It is generally accepted now that the French and British Governments were wrong in 1938 when they decided not to face up to a trial of strength which would inevitably recur but in worse circumstances. We also have to remember the threat that Hitler held out over the people with whom he was dealing: the threat of German military might, itself based on Europe's foremost industry. Five and a half years of war showed that the threat was not insignificant.

Those who now say that the situation facing the Western governments is an 'exact parallel' with Munich should tell us what is the threat that is causing those governments to waver. It certainly cannot be Egypt's military might, even more limited than Israel's, a little country with a population of 1 500 000. Still less can it be its industrial potential, which is virtually non-existent. Egypt might certainly make progress in those areas in the next few years, but no one can seriously believe that it will be capable of taking on the powerful Western forces and setting out to conquer part of Africa and Asia in the near future. The bold front that Nasser sometimes puts on in his propaganda speeches can deceive only those who are willing to be deceived.

The French Government is, nonetheless, expressing concern. Its spokesmen say that a failure to respond 'firmly and forcefully' to the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company will soon have alarming consequences. It is critical of British hesitation and American caution which is 'too marked not to be worrying'.

Why the hesitation?

Why are the British hesitating and why are the Americans so cautious? Our popular press, so keen on historical parallels, is curiously silent on that point. The only interesting information comes from Raymond Aron in *Le Figaro*.

'Using force to defend the interests of an international company', he writes, 'will simply lend weight to the campaign against imperialism. It APPEARS to bear out the Marxist claim that capitalist states are subservient to financial interests.'

Le Figaro's intelligent and well-informed readers clearly do not believe that claim. As far as they are concerned, the policies pursued by capitalist states are not in any way tied to financial interests. But Raymond Aron is right in thinking that the simple and uneducated masses in the East do not see things in the same way and are deceived by appearances.

Consequently they are inclined to believe that, in the Abadan incident, the British Government was chiefly concerned with the fate of one particular oil company and that, when the Algerian situation developed, there was a connection between the failure to implement the 1947 Statute and the protection of the interests of Mr Borgeaud, Mr Blachette, Mr Schiaffino and their colleagues.

Raymond Aron asks how may misunderstandings like this be avoided in the future? How may the Suez Canal shares be restored to their lawful owners without accusations of imperialism? How may the general public in the Middle East be persuaded that the Western 'capitalist States' are acting in good faith?

A cruel enigma.

'Le Populaire' is against capitalism, but ...

Some people, however, approach these issues much less hesitantly and more forcefully than Raymond Aron. In that sense, *Le Figaro* has a lesson to learn from *Le Populaire*.

The nationalisation of a company that, for generations of Socialists, has symbolised the might of international capitalism is clearly unlikely to scare the official journal of the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (French Section of the Workers' International, SFIO). The SFIO has no hesitation in writing: 'If Nasser's decision had only one aim, to act in the interests of the Egyptian people, there would be nothing to be said', while Charles Ronsac, in *Le Franc-Tireur*, generously admitted: 'The action is not reprehensible in itself.'

However, the point is that there is more to it than that. 'In fact', according to *Le Populaire*, 'it is an act of petty vengeance by an embittered apprentice dictator.'

That changes the whole picture. What was good in principle becomes deplorable in practice. It is one thing, you understand, to criticise international capitalism for its misdeeds, quite another to attack it in 'an act of petty vengeance'.

In the face of such procedures, *Le Populaire* forgets about the Canal Company and its capital, already paid back several times over; it forgets about the oil companies and their intrigues. All it thinks about now are the great and glorious figures of Justice and Liberty. The current attempt to stifle Egypt's economy, and — since there is no pro-Western Left — to engineer a return to power by the former pashas, is being made in the name of Justice and Liberty!

'Good' and 'bad' dictators

I am not sure whether this 'Socialist' caution will allay Raymond Aron's fears, but, if I were in his shoes, I would not be entirely reassured.

I do not know of one single democrat anywhere in the Arab and Asian world who would be sensitive to such language, however he might feel about Nasser's regime. On the other hand, I do know of many French Socialists who are disgusted by it, because it really is hypocritical in the extreme.

People keep saying that Nasser is a dictator. But, was he not already a dictator when the American Government backed him, when the International Bank for Reconstruction and the Western powers offered him 400 million dollars to build the new Aswan Dam and Christian Pineau shook him warmly by the hand?

Syngman Rhee, Ngo Dinh Diem, Franco and Salazar were dictators, too, but that never stopped the British and the Americans from including them in the 'free world' camp.

No, what persuaded the United States, Britain and, subsequently, France to engage in a real trial of strength with Nasser was not the fact that he is a dictator, *it was that he refused to make the international political concessions demanded of him.*

As long as the State Department thought that Nasser would eventually do what it wanted, it treated him carefully. It decided to change its tactics when it realised that he was following in the footsteps of Nehru and Tito and that he intended to go on keeping the two main power blocs at arm's length.

It did so just as Nasser, after months of hesitation, *accepted* the economic conditions set by the Westerners for their 400 million dollar loan. They were quick to tell him that the offer that had been made no longer stood, thinking that this crushing refusal would directly undermine the position of Egypt's first President and force him either to comply or to resign.

Foreign aid or nationalisation

Nasser neither complied nor resigned. He decided on precipitate action, the impact and meaning of which need to be properly understood.

If they are to break free from the colonial system and make progress economically, the underdeveloped countries may rely only partially on private foreign investment. This is naturally geared to the exploitation of raw materials, not the creation of new industries, and, equally naturally, it aims to make a higher profit than would be feasible at home.

The underdeveloped countries cannot rely on national capital investment either, because — and this is a decisive factor — they still have very little such capital and because it is virtually impossible for it to act as a stimulus and guide as it does in the West.

So they either have to resort to loans from large countries and international organisations or to nationalise the wealth previously handed over to foreign companies and major landowners (or do both).

Over the past few years, the underdeveloped countries have veered from one of these alternatives to the other, depending on the type of government that they have. The non-Communist countries were most tempted by Western aid, but, since it was invariably coupled with political demands that actually restricted national sovereignty, it has increasingly been debated, challenged and, in some cases, refused.

These reservations about the West became stronger when the Soviets came into the picture, offering a system of trade based on payment in goods, spread over a long period, for immediate supplies of capital goods (or, in the case of Egypt, military equipment). Whatever its practical limitations, the aid that the Soviet Union can provide has an immense political impact. Tactically, it gives the governments of the underdeveloped countries a certain amount of room to manoeuvre. In the longer term, it shows to their people the potential of Socialist international relations (which are not, incidentally, quite the same as the relations that Stalinist Russia established with the people's democracies immediately after the war) compared with their previous colonial links.

What they call Munich

If Nasser had been given the 400 million dollars that he was promised, he would probably have put off nationalising the Canal Company (although this was something that the Egyptians had been urging for a long time, and it was due to happen in 12 years, at all events). Since he did not receive the money, he naturally brought forward his decision.

In so doing, he was following not so much a preconceived plan as a sort of historical trend that is making itself felt in Egypt now and will certainly emerge in other countries in the future, *especially in the Maghreb*.

It is precisely because they are aware of that trend and foresee that development that many Western capitalists think that it is time to call a halt and set an example. As well as serving the interests of the Company's shareholders, forcing Nasser to 'denationalise' the Canal Company also, and above all, wards off the demands that the Iraqis, Tunisians, Moroccans and many others will undoubtedly be making in the future.

This explains the reference to Munich.

The threat that we fear and are unwilling to talk about openly is not a military threat, *it is the spread of nationalisation to the former colonies*. Western capitalists believe that, if we give way on the Canal, we shall be forced to give way elsewhere.

This is a completely different situation from Munich in 1938.

Not forgetting who Nasser is

In saying that, we are well aware that the Egyptian regime is not a parliamentary or Socialist democracy or a Fascist state in the true sense of the term. It is a *military dictatorship*, some aspects of which (such as agrarian reform, anti-corruption measures, independence from foreign influences) are undeniably

progressive and some (for instance, police methods, the ‘peronisation’ of the trade unions, the incitement of jingoism) deeply reactionary.

We have always deplored and shall continue to deplore the regime’s attitude to democratic opposition, and we have never hidden the fact that the positive action that it has taken over the past two years might be jeopardised at any time. Having said that, we are also concerned as to who might take over. Domestically, the return to power of the pashas and old feudal rulers would be a disaster for the Egyptians. It would not guarantee peace, and, in particular, it would not safeguard Israel. A left-wing movement firmly based on Socialist principles is being organised only now. But, if the left is to assert itself, it has to support all the measures taken to safeguard Egypt’s independence, above all the nationalisation of the Canal.

Freedom of navigation

Nor are we forgetting that the freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal is an issue, regardless of who owns the Canal installations and the revenue that they can generate.

The fact that these were owned by a private company did not prevent the ban on Israeli ships using the Canal. We hope that advantage will be taken of the current developments to place the right to freedom of movement on a firmer footing and that Egypt will be urged to make commitments that the USSR and the Indies would guarantee in the same way as the Western powers. No shipping — Israeli shipping included — should be banned this time. It must be possible to achieve that, as long as the nationalisation that is in the interests of the Egyptian people, *whoever rules the country*, is not challenged.

Trying to force Egypt to denationalise the Canal is risky. It revives the threat of war in a particularly sensitive region and unites the Arab countries behind a regime that they claim to detest (despite being ready to include it in a military alliance!). It will also push Israel into taking chances and rule out for many years the possibility of an international settlement of the new Middle Eastern problem, based on definitive recognition of the fledgling Jewish State’s right to exist.

The real aim of the French politicians who are urging military intervention in the Canal Zone, when they know perfectly well that the British and Americans have in mind only a political and economic battle (similar to their battle with Mossadeq), is *to hinder any peaceful solution to the Algerian problem*. They point out that the idea of negotiations has been gaining acceptance in the country and that people are beginning to realise that their future and their future prestige call for a reassessment of their role in Europe and the establishment of totally new relationships with all the countries in the old colonial empire as quickly as possible.

That development is something they want to avoid at all costs.

And that is why those responsible for the catastrophe in Indo-China and the saboteurs of the friendship between France and the Maghreb are trying to create a political climate that, to some brave souls, seems to be reminiscent of the Marne and Verdun, although, in fact, it bears an unhappy resemblance to the ridiculous and unhealthy atmosphere in Mussolini’s Rome just before the ‘grandiose’ Abyssinian adventure!

Gilles Martinet