

From Kafr al-Dawwar to Kharga's 'Desert Hell Camp': the repression of Communist workers in Egypt, 1952-1965

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the multifaceted dynamic that existed between the Egyptian Marxist movement and the Egyptian state under Gamal Abd al-Nasser, focusing heavily on the two periods of repression against the communist movement from 1952-1956 and from 1959-1965. This article contends that the potential in Egypt for a significant communist presence with a working class base, in contrast with other writers who posit the “inescapably middle class” nature of the communist movement, was weakened significantly by a combination of repression and nearly uncritical acquiescence to Nasserist nationalism. The first period of repression was characterized by the imprisonment of a large portion of working-class communists. This was less true of the second period of repression since by 1965, when the communists voluntarily dissolved their organizations, Nasser had effectively neutralized communist control over the trade-union movement. Furthermore, the communists had lost the support they had won in the immediate post-World War II period. This was something they would never regain.

KEYWORDS

Repression, Communist workers, Egypt, 1952-1965, Nasser

Introduction

“On November the 4th, at dawn, policemen and members of the secret police... broke suddenly in the room of my father’s apartment in which I was sleeping. Major Achoub threw me out of bed and started his inquiry... ‘You are a communist, a traitor to the country. Me, an officer of the army will show you what you deserve...’”¹ So begins the letter from an unnamed “young comrade” in Cairo’s Central Prison. It was 1953, and the first wave of post-revolutionary repression against the communist movement was in full swing. All political parties were forcefully dissolved by the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) on January 18, 1953. A month before the RCC passed a law abolishing the right to strike, just months after a large-strike had erupted at Kafr al-Dawwar, which the Free Officers dealt with harshly.² They hoped by repressing independent political elements, especially communist organizers of trade union movements, it would facilitate the fostering of economic and political relations with the United States. Thus, the property of all parties, especially offices and printing presses, were confiscated and leaders of political parties were arrested and put under house arrest pending trial.³

The Egyptian monarchy, installed by the British, was quickly and bloodlessly swept from power in July, 1952 by an ideologically diverse but largely middle-class cadre of military officers. In the years preceding the coup the legitimacy of the monarchy had continually declined as concession after concession was made to the British occupiers. The Free Officers, as they came to be known, ran the gamut ideologically and included a fiery mix of Egyptian nationalists, members of the Muslim Brothers (*Al-Ikhwaan al-Muslimeen*), communists and fellow travelers, quasi-fascists who had admired the Axis powers, and pro-American elements.⁴ The group was organized largely through the secret labor of Gamal Abd Al-Nasser, who had flirted with nearly every conceivable organization and ideology throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. Acting first as the nexus

¹ Letter, “Letter from a young comrade sent from Cairo’s Central Prison,” folder 159, Egyptian Communists in Exile (Rome Group), International Institute of Social History. Unless otherwise noted, all documents with folder numbers come from the same archives. My sincerest gratitude goes to the archivists at IISH, whose help was immensely valuable.

² Newsletter, *Solidarity*, October 1959, 5, folder 182.

³ ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society – The Army Regime, the Left, and Social Change under Nasser*. New York: Random House, 1968, p. 91; MOHI EL-DIN, Khaled. *Memories of a Revolution*. Cairo: American University in Cairo, 1995, pp. 136-7.

⁴ The left was represented by Khaled Mohi-al-Din, a sympathizer of the communist movement, and Youssef Siddique, a member of the communist DMNL. Of those who were most explicitly pro-American and business-oriented in their foreign and economic policy approach was ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Amin. Many of the Free Officers were less ideologically and politically tied to the United States, but were more than willing to work with them to meet desired goals. Thus, Nasser and others were obstinate that any references to “Anglo-American” imperialism, common in the communist lexicon at the time, be removed from Free Officer materials.

through which the officers came together, Nasser eventually assumed the foremost role within the RCC, outmaneuvering the relatively popular Mohammed Naguib, who was a last-minute addition to the Free Officer plot meant to maintain control and discipline over the military in the post-coup era. The RCC guided Egypt during the tumultuous period after the revolution, and proved to be a constant site of struggle between the two major personalities, Nasser and Naguib. This lasted until March 1954, when Nasser took the reins of power. Despite their differences, both Naguib and Nasser largely converged from the outset on the necessity of stomping out independent communist activity. Naguib was adamant that “from the very first we had done everything that was necessary in order to eliminate the chief causes of Communism in Egypt, namely, a corrupt monarchy, an unjust system of landownership, the general contempt for the rights of workers, and the hated foreign occupation”.⁵ Nasser’s formula for dealing with labor accented Naguib’s formulation: “The workers don’t demand; we give”.⁶

Under the RCC, dozens of left-wing militants were rounded up during 1953, most to be tried by the ad hoc revolutionary tribunals established by the ruling officers. On January 18 alone, security forces rounded up 101 political leaders, 48 of them communists.⁷ On August 10, 1953, state security forces arrested twenty-one leaders of the Democratic Movement for National Liberation (DMNL), and in December fifty more members were arrested.⁸ In early November, the leaders of the umbrella National Democratic Front, spearheaded by communists like Ahmed Taha, were also arrested. As Gamal Abd Al-Nasser was maneuvering his way into power at Naguib’s expense in the spring of 1954, some 254 leftists were arrested and sent to prison camps. Sixteen leftist officers were removed from duty.⁹ Both the Free Officers who had been most sympathetic to the communist cause, Khaled Mohi el-Din and Youssef Siddique, faced repression as well. On November 8 of that year, some thirty people were arrested for belonging to the Egyptian Communist Party.¹⁰ In April of 1955 Nasser ordered the arrest of thirty leading leftists who were interned at the Abu Zaabal prison camp.¹¹ By the first half of 1955, the Communist Party of Israel suggested that some 750 communists were imprisoned in Cairo alone.¹² This first wave of repression was aimed at crushing the vociferous labor movement led in large part by communist workers.

⁵ ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, p. 96.

⁶ POSUSNEY, Marsha Pripstein. *Labor and the State in Egypt: Workers, Unions, and Economic Restructuring*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 73-4.

⁷ BEININ, Joel and LOCKMAN, Zachary. *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882-1954*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1987, p. 433; EL-DIN. *Memories*. Op.Cit., p. 146.

⁸ ISMAEL, TAREQ Y. and EL-SA’ID, Rifa’at. *The Communist Movement in Egypt, 1920-1988*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1990, p. 75. At the time the DMNL was the largest communist organization in Egypt.

⁹ ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, p. 96.

¹⁰ Report, “Conditions De Vie Dans Les Prisons D’Egypte,” Folder 167.

¹¹ ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, p. 105.

¹² BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *The Middle East Journal*. vol. 41, no. 4, Autumn 1987, p.575.

The following article attempts to articulate a detailed account of the two periods of repression targeting the communist movement under Nasser. After a brief glimpse at working-class communist militancy prior to the July revolution, the first major section explores the limited demographic data available on communist prisoners in Egypt during the first period of repression from 1952 to 1956. The importance of the demographic data lies in the social and economic base of the prisoners; a significant portion can be identified as working class. Following a brief period of cooptation (July 1956 to December 1958), the next major section returns again to the demographic evidence available during the second period of repression. This period extends from January 1959 to April 1965, when the communists dissolved their organizations. This data suggests a decrease in the percentage of communist prisoners who are identifiable as working class.

Although this episode in Egyptian communist history is important in its own historical right, it also is increasingly pertinent to reflect upon in the aftermath of Abdel Fatah al-Sisi's ascension to power in July 2013. While the Egyptian left continues to struggle with the appropriate relationship between nationalism and communism, a resurgence of nationalism has taken place under Sisi's reign over the last two years which has been once again resulted in both repression of the independent left and the cooptation of the traditional communists. This is especially true within a framework of anti-*Ikhwaan* sentiment amongst significant elements of the Egyptian left. However, it is likely that dissolution into Sisi's nationalist-military political project would prove even more disastrous for the left than it was under Nasser. Not all segments of the left have followed this path, however. After a brief period of flirting with the idea of a "third way" between the military and *Ikhwaan*, the Revolutionary Socialists have recently advanced an invitation to the Muslim Brothers to form a united front against the military government.¹³ Given the political nature of both the Muslim Brothers and the brief presidency of Mohammed Morsi, this is a strategy ripe with risk as well. Whatever happens next, the lessons of the Egyptian communist movement from the Nasser years are more relevant than ever.

Labor Militancy before July 1952

Prior to the 1952 revolution, Egyptian society had been partially destabilized in the post-World War II era by a series of strikes and nationalist demonstrations. In the immediate post-war period the National Committee of Workers and Students (NCWS, *al-Lagna al-Wataniyya li'l-'Ummal wa'l-Talaba*) was formed on February 18 and 19, 1946

¹³ See both "Egyptian socialists say 'third way' has crumbled amid uptick in attacks," *Middle East Eye*, July 28, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egyptian-socialists-say-third-way-has-crumbled-amid-uptick-violent-attacks-1085613474> as well as "Brotherhood agrees to form a revolutionary front with socialists," *Middle East Monitor*, July 31, 2015, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/africa/20151-brotherhood-agrees-to-form-a-revolutionary-front-with-socialists>.

to channel both class-based and nationalist demands.¹⁴ Representatives from the General Nationalist Committee of Shubra el-Kheima workers, Cairo tram workers, printers, the Congress of Private Sector Trade Unions, the Preparatory Committee for an Egyptian Trade Union Congress, and the Association of Egyptian Working Women, among others, were present. Within days they had called for a general strike labeled “Evacuation Day.” Up to 100,000 workers and students demonstrated, of which 23 were killed by security forces and hundreds more were wounded.¹⁵ The formation of the NCWS challenged both the Wafd and the Muslim Brotherhood for nationalist leadership, and augmented leftist presence within the nationalist leadership.

A series of attempts to establish trade union unity were also present during this period, most notably the Preparatory Committee for a General Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions (PCGFETU, *al-Lajna al-Tahdiriyya li'l-Ittihad al-'Amm li-Niqabat 'Ummal Misr*). The DMNL initiated the formation of the committee in 1951 with Ahmad Taha acting as its general secretary. As Joel Beinin notes, the PCGFETU assumed “the dual character of a trade union federation and an expression of working class nationalism”.¹⁶ Tareq Ismael and Rifa‘at El Sa‘id contend that the PCGFETU represented some 65,000 workers in over a hundred unions, roughly half of all unionized workers during that period.¹⁷ Due to its gravitas in the formation of the federation, the DMNL and its cadre were “unquestionably the leading force in the trade union movement in 1951”.¹⁸ Furthermore, by this period workers were prominent in the communist leadership: Ahmed Taha, Anwar Makkaar, Muhammed Shatta, and Muhammed Ali Amer. Through both the NCWS and the PCGFETU, communist influence and leadership represented one of the primary sources of independent political leadership during this period.

The first wave of repression: Kafr al-Dawwar to the Suez Crisis, 1952-6

By late July 1952, the Free Officers were desperately grasping anywhere they could for both legitimacy and foreign capital. One week after the coup Law No. 138 from 1947 was adjusted, reducing a requirement stipulating that corporations be composed of 51 percent Egyptian capital to only 49 percent, allowing foreign capital a majority share.¹⁹ Securing American aid was one of the primary goals in the immediate post-revolutionary period. During his stay in prison, the unnamed young comrade mentioned earlier recalls

¹⁴ The NCWS was formed after the Egyptian army opened fire on the students as they attempted to cross ‘Abbas Bridge and demand King Farouk stop negotiating with the British. See Beinin and Lockman, pp. 340-1.

¹⁵ BEININ, Joel and LOCKMAN, Zachary. *Workers on the Nile...Op.Cit.*, pp. 341-2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 408-9.

¹⁷ ISMAEL, TAREQ Y. and EL-SA‘ID, Rifa‘at. *The Communist Movement in Egypt. Op.Cit.*, p. 70.

¹⁸ Conversely, the “influence of the communists in the nationalist movement was not as broad as it was in 1946” at the time of the NCWS, in large part because of the 1948 Palestine partition decision, discussed below. See BEININ, Joel and LOCKMAN, Zachary. *Workers on the Nile...Op.Cit.*, pp. 406-7.

¹⁹ ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, pp. 88-9.

how the Military Police explained to him that the communists “had been arrested to pay the price for american [sic] aid”.²⁰ The last thing the governing officers desired was independent, uncontrolled labor agitation, even if it contained within it nationalist aspirations or support for the revolution. The captain in charge of the inquiry threatened to send the prisoner to the Revolutionary Tribunal, which had been established in February 1953, if he did not “confess everything”. To the questioner the young comrade was accused of being a “dirty sionist, homosexual, son of a dog, etc”.²¹ The captain extolled the prisoner to “be thankful to god... that you are under 20 years of age, otherwise we would have hanged you”. The threat was not entirely empty, as the two strike leaders from Kafr al-Dawwar, Mustafa Khamis and Mohammad Hasan al-Baqari, were hung for their involvement.

On August 12, just weeks after the Free Officers had assumed power, a strike at Kafr al-Dawwar became the first test for the new rulers. The small industrial city located some thirty kilometers from Alexandria was composed of two large textile factories, with some ten thousand workers at the Misr Fine Spinning and Weaving Company, the site of the strike. Immediately clashes occurred between the workers and the police, and finally the army was called in to quell the strike, ending in the death of a number of workers and two soldiers. Hundreds were injured.²² Ironically, the workers had declared their strike “in the name of Muhammed Naguib and the revolution,” yet it was Naguib himself who was adamant that the workers be dealt with harshly.²³ Both Khamis and el-Baqari were accused of being communists and a kangaroo court sentenced both leaders to death. Khamis and al-Baqari were executed by the military government on September 7, 1952. Khamis’ dying words were, “I am wronged, I want a retrial”.²⁴

Naguib was adamant that “from the very first we had done everything that was necessary in order to eliminate the chief causes of Communism in Egypt, namely, a corrupt monarchy, an unjust system of landownership, the general contempt for the rights of workers, and the hated foreign occupation”.²⁵ What Naguib fails to mention is that despite the hand-outs from above, it took an immense amount of state repression to smash the influence of the communists. In September of 1954, twenty four high profile communists, including Ahmad Taha, were sent to a Revolutionary Tribunal and all but three were charged with propagating communism. All together the twenty one defendants were sentenced to 101 years of forced labor and fined 1800 Egyptian pounds. One month later, in November, 30 members of the Egyptian Communist Party were arrested. In July 1955 the government brought 21 DMNL leaders to trial for the crime of desiring to

²⁰ Letter, “Letter from a young comrade,” p. 3.

²¹ Ibid., p. 1. Despite having opposed Zionism ideologically throughout much of the first half of the 20th century, the Egyptian communist movement, following the Soviet line in 1948, overwhelmingly accepted the 1947 partition plan for Palestine-Israel.

²² Newsletter, *Solidarity*, October 1959, folder 182.

²³ BOTMAN, Selma. *The Rise of Egyptian Communism, 1939-1970*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988, p. 126.

²⁴ BEININ, Joel and LOCKMAN, Zachary. *Workers on the Nile...Op.Cit.*, p. 423.

²⁵ ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, p. 96.

establish in Egypt a “social plan” similar to the Soviet model. Another eight military officers were accused of having relations with the organization.²⁶ One detailed report from the period suggests around 550 communists were being held in various prisons and concentration camps. This number did not include those who had been deported to the Kharga desert camp.²⁷

Although 550 is a nominally smaller figure in relation to other organizations targeted during this period, such as the Muslim Brothers, it represents a much higher ratio of imprisoned communists relative to their strength. Nasser himself estimated that in 1956 there were “almost five thousand Communists in Egypt”.²⁸ Joel Beinin, citing figures provided by “several former communists,” suggests that in July of 1952 the DMNL had around 2,000 members, Workers’ Vanguard another 300, and al-Raya (associated with Fouad Morsi) had yet another 100, totaling half the figure Nasser presumed.²⁹ Walter Laqueur is more generous, citing a total of 7,000 communists in 1954.³⁰ As the largest organization of communists in Egypt, the DMNL bore the brunt of repression during this period.

According to one report documenting the biographical data of some 42 arrestees, a third of the communists were workers, including five textile workers, three mechanics, a carpenter, and a shoemaker, among others. Although students and traditional middle class elements formed most of the remaining communists, it is clear that by 1953 communists had made significant inroads in many working class communities and trades. The *Daily Worker* reports that in September of 1953 some 800 workers were arrested at Shurbagi’s mills in Shubra el-Kheima.³¹ These statistics, though not conclusive, suggest first that during this period the communist movement had a large working-class cadre and general working-class support.

Walter Laqueur could be considered half correct in 1956 when he proclaimed that “The Communist movement in Egypt never was (nor is it not at the time of writing) a working-class movement...”³² Prior to World War II, the communist movement had never established a mass working class base, but by 1952 at the time of the coup and immediately after, the communists had transcended their insular status, recruited vital working class cadre into positions of leadership, and secured a relatively large working-class membership and sphere of influence. Joel Beinin’s analysis of the class composition is more nuanced. He maintains that while the communists “did have significant working class support in the period 1952-4, by the mid-1950s the university-educated intelligentsia

²⁶ Newspaper Clipping, “Une Nouvelle Grande Affaire Communiste,” July 1955, folder 284.

²⁷ Report, “Bref Exposé Sur les Methodes de Tortures et les Conditions Actuelles Dans les Camps de Concentration, les Prisons et les Bagnes Egyptiens,” folder 150.

²⁸ Quoted in ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, p. 307.

²⁹ BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *Op.Cit.*, pp. 573-4.

³⁰ LAQUER, Walter Z. *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East*. New York: Praeger, 1957, p. 50.

³¹ Newspaper, “Nightmare for Neguib,” *Daily Worker*, October 1953, folder 284.

³² LAQUER, Walter Z. *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East*. *Op.Cit.*, p. 35.

was the most important component of the movement, especially at the leadership level”.³³ This “significant working class support” for the communists amongst the most politically active working-class elements meant that the communists were to receive the most vitriolic attacks during the first wave of repression.

Some examples of those repressed include Sa‘id Khalil Turk, secretary-general of the transportation workers’ syndicate in 1952. Forty-three year old Mohammed ‘Ali Amer, earlier the secretary of a branch of the Wafdist Youth and then president of the Textile Workers’ Union in 1947, was also arrested.³⁴ Perhaps one of the most notable trade union leaders other than Ahmed Taha imprisoned during this period was Mohammed Shatta, a textile worker and member of the mechanical weaving syndicate of Shubra el-Kheima. Shatta was notably active in textile work at Mahalla el Kubra (1932-40) and Kafr al-Dawwar (1940-3) before arriving in Shubra el-Kheima, all three historic sites of militant trade union struggle. He was a member of the NCWS as well as founder and secretary general of the General Committee of Shubra el-Kheima Workers where he helped lead a 45-day strike in early January of 1946, one of the longest strikes in Egyptian history up to that time.³⁵

In September of 1954, Ahmed Taha was one of the 21 communists sentenced to five years hard labor.³⁶ Taha was a member of the Progressive Liberation Front (*Al-Gabhat al-Tahrir al-Taqadomiyeh*, or GAT), the relatively small splinter organization that broke off from the DMNL in 1948 and rejoined the organization in 1950. He held a leading position on the DMNL’s Central Committee³⁷ prior to his arrest in February of 1953 and he had previously been Chairman of the Committee of the Preparatory Congress of Unions of Middle Eastern Countries, a leader in the National Committee of Workers and Students, and the Egyptian delegate to the World Trade Union Federation. At the time of his imprisonment, one report listed Taha as 27 years old and in normal health.³⁸ Before the military tribunal in 1954 Ahmad Taha made a courageous speech denouncing the “agents of Anglo-American imperialism”:

The agents of Anglo-American imperialism want to keep me in prison because I defend the workers who have elected me and whose sacrifices and history struggles for the national cause fill me with pride... We remember with pride the work done by the National Committee of Workers and Students which led the demonstrations of February 21, 1945, as a result of which the imperialists had to pull out of the towns and remain in the Canal Zone... I

³³ BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *Op.Cit.*, pp. 569-60.

³⁴ Report, “Pour la Liberation Des Patriote Democratés Egyptiens,” July 1957, folder 168.

³⁵ Report, Untitled report documenting 42 political prisoners, folder 158. For information regarding the strike, in which some six hundred workers were arrested, see BEININ, Joel and LOCKMAN, Zachary. *Workers on the Nile...Op.Cit.*, pp. 338-40.

³⁶ Newsletter, *Solidarity*, July 1955, folder 163. Although 21 were sentenced, 24 had stood trial. Three were acquitted.

³⁷ ISMAEL, TAREQ Y. and EL-SA’ID, Rifa‘at. *The Communist Movement in Egypt. Op.Cit.*, p. 65.

³⁸ Report, Untitled report documenting 42 political prisoners.

represented the Egyptian workers at the meeting of the General Council of the World Federation of Trade Unions in 1951. I shall never forget the message of solidarity which came to us from the peoples of Korea, Vietnam, and Iran... The improvement of the living conditions of the workers, protection against unemployment, sickness, and old-age require a national and popular economic policy, peaceful relations with all countries on the basis of equality, and the repudiation of the designs of U.S. imperialism.³⁹

In early June, 1955 Ahmed Taha and some 500 other prisoners⁴⁰ were deported to the prison camp “in the middle of the desert,” roughly twenty kilometers outside of Kharga Oasis.⁴¹ At least 60 of these were communists.⁴² Without too much hyperbole, the *Daily Worker* referred to it as “Desert Hell Camp,”⁴³ giving an indication of the analysis by the international communist movement of the Nasser government during this period.

The Kharga prison camp was administered directly by the army. Most of the prisoners had been condemned by military tribunals and sentenced to hard labor. One report suggested that “the terrible conditions under which they have to live put also their lives in danger”. These conditions included: twenty prisoners to a tent which did “not protect them either from the burning sun or from the sand storms,”⁴⁴ one bucket of water per day for every twenty prisoners, low quality and insufficient food, a camp area infested with snakes and scorpions, and little to no medical care.⁴⁵ Indeed, another communist prisoner who went by the initials “A. A.” explains that “mosquitos buzz and sting in daytime; scorpions and rats make a nightmarish ballet at night... food is scarce and disgusting enough to keep the prisoners alive until the next day. No visitors are allowed and no parcels may be sent by families”.⁴⁶ The result of such horrendous living conditions was “chronic dysentery, violent headaches, widespread Asiatic flu, severe undernourishment”.⁴⁷ A letter dated September of 1955 notes that Taha’s weight had dropped from 65 to 50 kilos, and that his “health has become so bad that he has been transported to the Tourah convicts hospital towards the end of June,” but that he had been “re-transferred, towards the middle of August, to Kharga’s camp, without having undergone any medical treatment”.⁴⁸ A letter from Taha himself dated June 21, 1955 confirms this: “I am alright, but my health is deteriorating... You know well that the medical treatment is insufficient and even bad, but what to do?”⁴⁹ Taha remained resilient,

³⁹ Report, World Trade Union Movement, “The Courage and Dignity of Our Brothers,” January 1955, folder 285.

⁴⁰ Report, “The Deportation Camp of Kharga,” folder 155.

⁴¹ Letter about Ahmed Taha dated “Paris, 2nd September, 1955,” folder 76.

⁴² Report, “Conditions de Vie Dans Les Prisons D’Egypte,” folder 167,

⁴³ Newspaper, “Egypt opens Desert Hell Camp,” *Daily Worker*, folder 284-5.

⁴⁴ Report, “The Deportation Camp of Kharga,” folder 155.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Newspaper, “My Five Years in Nasser’s Desert Prison Camp,” *Reynold News*, April 26, 1959, folder 176.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Letter about Ahmed Taha dated “Paris, 2nd September, 1955.”

⁴⁹ Letter from Ahmed Taha dated “Cairo, 21st June, 1955,” folder 76.

however, declaring: “Don’t worry about me, you know me well my friend, I will pass this crisis physically and morally successfully, because I love so many things, wider than our narrow world”.⁵⁰

The period of cooptation, 1956-8

Although Taha himself did not have the opportunity to experience the brief respite from repression that other communists enjoyed, the period from mid-1956 until the end of 1958, known in much of the literature as the “Bandung Period,” was a time of relative relaxation for the communist movement as Nasser’s *realpolitik* gravitated towards the USSR. Yet, as Anouar Abdel-Malek maintains, it is impossible to stamp the Bandung conference (April 1955) as the end of repression for communists in Egypt. Economic talks with the United States over the Aswan High Dam continued until 1956. It was not until Egypt received the Czech arms deal, guarantee of Soviet funding for the Aswan High Dam, and the Suez Crisis that a period of cooptation and an easing of repression against the communist movement could occur.⁵¹ During this period many communists were released from prison.

Not all were freed, however. A letter dated August 25, 1957 explained that “all the internees held in concentration camps have been released, but... most of the convicted prisoners are still at Kharga Oasis Camp... and their material conditions are getting worse with the worsening of the general economic conditions in Egypt”.⁵² Another report from a month earlier cited many well-known communists in Kharga, including Ahmed Taha, Fouad Habashi, Mohammed Shatta, Zaki Mourad, and Sa’id Khalil Turk, among others.⁵³ A May 1957 letter written on behalf of 150 communist prisoners addressed all voters, citizens, and candidates on the occasion of the upcoming electoral campaign: “some of us are in the Central Prison in Cairo, others in Tourah Prison, the vast majority has Kharga Oasis Prison”.⁵⁴ Of the 73 communist prisoners known to be at Kharga, a sizeable number, almost a quarter (18), were listed as “workers”.⁵⁵ Likewise, a well-known labor lawyer and communist Youssef Darwish⁵⁶ was arrested in 1957 after the government shut down his law office.⁵⁷ As Joel Beinin explains, even during the period 1956-8 “there was never any chance that [Nasser] would legalize the communist organizations or permit them to establish an independent base of political power which might challenge his own

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, p. 105.

⁵² Letter from Joyce Blau to Roger Baldwin, International League for the Rights of Man, August 25, 1957, folder 167.

⁵³ Report, “Pour la Liberation Des Patriote Democratres Egyptiens,” July 1957, 3, folder 168.

⁵⁴ Appeal, “Appel Des Prisonniers Communistes Exiles A L’Oasis De Kharga A L’Occasion De La Campagne Electorale,” May 1957. Found in solidarity Bulletin “Pour la Liberation Des Patriote Democratres Egyptiens,” July 1957, folder 168.

⁵⁵ Report, “Kharga,” folder 167.

⁵⁶ A leader in the New Dawn-Workers’ Vanguard current.

⁵⁷ Faiza Rady, “Yousef Darwish: the Courage to Go On,” *Al-Ahram*, December 2, 2004. Retrieved at: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/719/profile.htm>

rule”.⁵⁸ Abdel-Malek confirms that as “early as the autumn of 1958, the machinery of repression and propaganda went into action, progressively increasing its pressure on the left... Trade union leaders were rearrested barely a year after they had been released from Abu Zaabal. The military tribunals resumed jurisdiction over Communist defendants”.⁵⁹ Thus, the “Bandung Period” can only be understood as a period of openness in relation to the periods immediately preceding and following it.

The independent trade-union movement had been largely subdued during this period. In its place the official, state-sanctioned Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was established in 1957. The ETUF was a highly centralized structure whereby the higher the position in the bureaucracy the more state-screening the individual was exposed to. By 1961 the ETUF had nearly 346,000 members, and by 1964 it had nearly 1.3 million.⁶⁰ Nasser likewise initiated top-down social reform for workers, increasing wages and benefits in exchange for relative obedience. As Marsha Pripstein Posusney has argued, the “etatism” of the Nasser government “cemented, among workers, belief in a moral economy⁶¹ in which their wages and benefits came to be viewed as entitlements in exchange for their contribution to the cause of national economic development”.⁶² The establishment of ETUF was coupled with “repressive controls” on the hierarchically structured federation. However, as Posusney points out, “this structure was not one imposed from above on reluctant unionists. Rather, significant segments of the labor movement, including the communist forces who played a key role in establishing many of the unions, advocated the singular, centralized structure as the best way for unions to advance workers’ interests”.⁶³ Therefore, Nasser’s state capitalist reforms initiated a new social contract, from which a “moral economy” blossomed that allowed workers to ameliorate many of their material conditions in exchange for a level of acquiescence. The subjective capacity of working class struggle was not entirely eliminated, but it did not present the same level of threat to the government’s legitimacy in the immediate post-coup days.

The situation prevailing during the “Bandung Period” changed dramatically by the end of 1958 vis-à-vis three developments. On January 8, 1958, three weeks before the proclamation of the United Arab Republic,⁶⁴ all the main currents of the Egyptian communist movement merged to form the Communist Party of Egypt, a significant

⁵⁸ BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *Op.Cit.*, p. 579.

⁵⁹ ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.*, p. 127.

⁶⁰ POSUSNEY, Marsha Pripstein. *Labor and the State in Egypt...Op.Cit.*, p. 93.

⁶¹ E.P. Thompson asserted that “collective actions are a response to anger generated by violations of norms and standards that the subaltern class has become accustomed to and expects the dominant elites to maintain.” Posusney posits that this framework adequately captures the patron-client relationship established between Egypt’s working class and Nasser. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-6.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁶⁴ The merger of Egypt and Syria that lasted until 1961.

accomplishment for a movement marred by internal schism.⁶⁵ Second, a week prior to this merger marked the end of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference, held in Cairo from December 26, 1957, to January 1, 1958. The communist left was at the forefront of this initiative, and their enormous influence threatened the regime's legitimacy vis-à-vis the third world nonaligned movement.⁶⁶ The final, and most important event, was the Iraqi revolution of July, 1958, which brought General Abd al-Kareem Qassem to power with the backing of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). During this period the ICP was one of the most influential and best organized parties in Iraq, and far larger than its Egyptian counterpart. Qassem represented an alternative to Nasser, and the ICP as well as Qassem rejected Nasser's leadership, instead calling for a federal structure that united the Arab nationalists along pluralist lines. Most importantly, the ICP refused to liquidate itself as per Nasser's strict hardline requirements to avoid the fate of the Syrian Communist Party under Khaled Bakdash.⁶⁷

The second wave of repression: from the New Years' attack to dissolution, 1959-65

"In this letter we will try to give you a brief idea of the situation that followed the unexpected attack of the 1st of January. Many of our best cadres were taken."⁶⁸ Thus begins a letter dated May 12, 1959 from Kamal Abd al Halim and Muhammad al-Guindi to the group of exiled communists in Paris, detailing the renewed attack on the communists in the beginning of 1959. New Year's 1959 represented the "surprise attack" by the Nasser government in which many of the "best cadres were taken".⁶⁹ Nasser had utilized his speech at Port Said on December 23, 1958, the anniversary of the victory against the tripartite aggressors, to presage this second wave of repression a week before it began. According to Nasser a host of "new enemies" who purportedly rejected "Arab nationalism and Arab unity" were putting forward what "amounts to a call to Zionism to infiltrate itself into Arab nationalism, a call to the reactionary elements to return and exploit our country".⁷⁰

⁶⁵ For detailed information regarding communist mergers, see ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.* p. 126 and BEININ, Joel. "The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt". *Op.Cit.*, pp. 579-80.

⁶⁶ See ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.* p. 126.

⁶⁷ Bakdash and the SCP were also hesitant throughout the 1950s to join with Nasser. Under popular pressure, however, they reluctantly agreed. However, Syrian communists were arrested with their Egyptian counterparts in 1959, and continued to face repression until the dissipation of the UAR in 1961.

⁶⁸ Letter, Kamal Abd al Halim and Muhammad al-Guindi to Henri Curiel, May 12, 1959, folder 67.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Quoted in ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.* p. 128.

The second wave of repression began in the early morning hours of January 1, 1959. Some 280 shocked communists were arrested, rolling back the political advances they had made vis-à-vis unification.⁷¹ Between January and April 1959, some 700 communists were imprisoned, with more rounded up throughout the year.⁷² Posusney maintains that throughout 1959 around 1,000 communists were arrested.⁷³ Abd al Halim and al-Guindi explain that the “second blow that took place at the end of March was a severe blow”.⁷⁴ One report maintains that as a result of the second wave of repression there were “more than 2,000 new prisoners in Egyptian concentration camps; plus 1,000 in the Syrian camps”.⁷⁵

The communists bore the brunt of this second wave of repression. From 1959 to 1960, at least nine communists died in prison,⁷⁶ including prominent communist leader and editor of the communist paper *al-Gamahir* (The Masses), Shuhdi Atiyya al-Shaffi, who was beaten to death in Abu Zaabal prison camp, and two prominent textile union leaders, Ali Metwalli el-Dib and Sayed Amine.⁷⁷ On March 21, 1959, 153 political prisoners were sent from the Citadel to Kharga.⁷⁸ One of them, Dr. Farid Haddad, “the doctor to the poor” who served communist patients at his free clinic in a working class district, was tortured to death at Kharga after refusing to give up patient names and political affiliations.⁷⁹ In October and November of 1959, two large trials were held against communists: one group of 64 leaders of the Egyptian Communist Party and another group of 48 leaders who had broken away and demanded that communists work inside the National Union.⁸⁰ In December of 1960, the repression continued when three prominent leftist figures, Abu Seif Yussef, Ismail el-Mahdawi, and Ahmed Salem were arrested along with 200 other militants.⁸¹

One report maintained that at the end of April there were 1,185 political prisoners: 400 in the Citadel, 80 in Cairo Women’s Prison, 87 in Cairo Central Prison, 168 at Kharga, 350 at Fayoum and Keneh prisons, and around 100 at various local police stations.⁸² By July this number had been adjusted to 1,230 total prisoners.⁸³ Demographic reports of the communists under trial during this period appear to confirm Beinín’s

⁷¹ BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *Op.Cit.*, p. 581 and ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.* p. 128.

⁷² BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *Op.Cit.*, p. 582.

⁷³ POSUSNEY, Marsha Pripstein. *Labor and the State in Egypt...Op.Cit.*, p. 67.

⁷⁴ Letter, “Dear Comrades.”

⁷⁵ Letter, “Lettre du Caire,” folder 176.

⁷⁶ BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *Op.Cit.*, Beinín, p. 582.

⁷⁷ ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.* p. 134.

⁷⁸ Newsletter, “Les Sevcices et les Tortures des Detenus Politiques,” Document No. 7., folder 176.

⁷⁹ Newsletter, *Afro-Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1960, folder 182.

⁸⁰ Report, *Solidarity*, October 1959, folder 182.

⁸¹ ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society...Op.Cit.* p. 134.

⁸² Newsletter, *Colonial Freedom News*, November 1959, “Solidarity incorporating Egyptian T.U. News,” folder 182.

⁸³ Newsletter, *Solidarity*, July 1959, folder 176.

argument that whereas the communist movement had “significant working class support in the period 1952-4,” by the mid-1950s, especially during the period of “reconciliation” between 1956-8, “the university-educated intelligentsia was the most important component of the movement, especially at the leadership level”.⁸⁴ Of the “trial of 64” defendants only nine (14%) were workers. Similarly, in the “trial of 48” less than a dozen were workers.⁸⁵ Furthermore, the trade unions had been reconstructed and reoriented during this time. Trade union leaders loyal to Nasser meant that independent working-class activity posed less of a threat during this period than after the tumultuous period following the 1952 coup.

By 1957, the Nasser government was already in the process of subduing and coopting the labor movement vis-à-vis the formation of ETUF and the beginning of an improvement in their material conditions. Law 91 of April 1959 paved the way for the reorganization of the labor movement into 65 federations along industrial lines and united into a single confederation, a number that would later be reduced to 21. Although some right-wing elements within the government opposed the confederation model on the grounds that centralization would augment labor’s strength, as Posusney explains, “the incarceration of the communists weakened the arguments of the security forces against consolidation of the confederation”.⁸⁶ As a result, “Egypt’s leftist labor activists, who had first proposed the idea of a confederation in the period before the coup... were virtually completely excluded from the labor movement when the organization was finally formed”.⁸⁷ Indeed, the 1959 re-imprisonment of the communist working-class leadership allowed the state to take full control of the labor movement via the Egyptian Trade Union Federation.

Intractable trade union militants were still desirable targets for the Nasser government. One report cites the names of 30 trade union activists in prison, including veterans like Ahmed Taha and 51-year old Mohamed Ali Amer. Mohammed El Sayed Younes, a textile worker involved in NCWS, had been arrested and condemned to prison under Farouk in 1949, was released in 1952 and rearrested in August 1953, sentenced to 5 years yet again, released in June 1958 and arrested for third time in the January 1959 round-up.⁸⁸ Some new names appeared on the list, including Mohamed Youssef el Medarak, secretary of the hotel and restaurant workers’ syndicate, Mohamed Abdel Wahid, secretary of the National Spinners’ Syndicate in Alexandria, and Anwar Mahmoud, vice president of the Federation of Construction Workers. Textile workers formed the majority of those listed: Ahmed Kheidr, Azzab Shatta (Vice President of the Shubra union), Abdel Mohsen Hamaoui (Kafr al-Dawwar), and many others. Transport

⁸⁴ BEININ, Joel. “The Communist Movement and Nationalist Political Discourse in Nasirist Egypt”. *Op.Cit.*, pp. 569-60.

⁸⁵ Report, “Qualques verities sur les process d’Alexandrie,” folder 176.

⁸⁶ POSUSNEY, Marsha Pripstein. *Labor and the State in Egypt...Op.Cit.*, p. 67.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁸⁸ Report, “Liste et quelques Biographies des inculpes du process des 48,” folder 176.

workers, mechanics, hotel and restaurant workers, oil workers, and a variety of other trades were listed.⁸⁹

During this period, the ticket collectors of the Egyptian railways in Lower Egypt attempted to strike for better living conditions and higher pay and were met with harsh repression. Some two hundred were arrested and the leadership was given prison sentences. The union's president and vice president were each given two years in prison, while other executive committee members were given anywhere from one- to two-year sentences.⁹⁰ Officials from the Union of Arab Workers, such as the non-communist Fathi Kamil,⁹¹ were removed from their positions if they did not follow directives and openly declare their hostility to communism and the communist movement. Similarly, even lawyers who themselves were non-communist, such as Ahmed Al Badini, a non-leftist nationalist, were arrested simply for appearing on the communists' defense council.⁹²

This wave of repression lasted until 1964. Throughout March and April 1964 all of the communist political prisoners were released from the various concentration camps in anticipation of Khrushchev's visit to Egypt.⁹³ One year later, in 1965, both the United Egyptian Communist Party and the DMNL, which had once again split from the UECP, decided to voluntarily dissolve themselves and join Nasser's Arab Socialist Union (ASU) as individuals. Thus, by 1965 the communists had been neutralized and their influence over the labor movement had been largely eradicated.

Conclusion

The military government of the Free Officers launched their attack against the communists in January of 1953, only months after the strike at Kafr al-Dawwar. Within months the government had rounded up hundreds of communists. Prior to this wave of repression communist elements, particularly the DMNL, had been relatively successful at organizing the working class and establishing a working class base, with many workers becoming important cadre, through joint nationalist-class initiatives such as the NCWS and the PCGFETU. The somewhat limited demographic evidence available on communist prisoners suggests that a significant portion, anywhere from one quarter to one third, were working class. Most were young, in their twenties, and had some limited organizational experience, either in the NCWS, the PCGFETU, the NDF, or simply as local trade union militants in Kafr al-Dawwar, Shubra el-Kheima, or elsewhere. Likewise, the numbers suggest that the level of repression directed at the communists was amplified

⁸⁹ Report, "Nouvelles des Syndicats Egyptiens," folder 176. Also see Folder 182, *Colonial Freedom News*, November 1959, "Solidarity incorporating Egyptian T.U. News."

⁹⁰ Newsletter, *Colonial Freedom News*, November 1959, "Solidarity incorporating Egyptian T.U. News," folder 182.

⁹¹ For more on Kamil's story, see POSUSNEY, Marsha Pripstein. *Labor and the State in Egypt... Op.Cit.*, pp. 64-9.

⁹² Newsletter, *Afro-Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1960, folder 182.

⁹³ ABDEL-MALEK, Anour. *Egypt: Military Society... Op.Cit.* p. 350.

far beyond what their numbers would dictate. Although repression never subsided entirely from July 1956 to December 1958, this period did mark a relative easing of repressive controls over the communist movement. At the same time, Nasser and the Egyptian state instituted various reforms, including improved labor conditions the institutionalization of the trade union movement with the establishment of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation in 1957. A new social contract had been established in which workers envisioned themselves in a moral economy where they exchanged their loyalty to the Nasserist project for improved material conditions. Beginning in January 1959, in the wake of communist unification, the growing influence of the left, and the Iraqi revolution of 1958, a new wave of repression was launched that focused more on communist intellectuals than working class cadre. By this period, Nasser had effectively neutralized the communist control over the trade union movement and the communists had lost the support they had won for themselves in the post-World War II period.