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## Introduction

EARLY IN the rollicking satire *Only in London* by Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh (b. 1945), a Moroccan sex worker named Amira returns from a working vacation in Dubai. Contrary to reputation, she says, the place is not paradise. In flamboyant Egyptian Arabic she regales her Egyptian friends:

The Natashas! They're everywhere, like grains of desert sand or a plague of locusts. A reserve army of blonde ants foraging for food, sent by the communists to cream off the Arabs' wealth and give us diseases. And to think my poor nephew spent his youth in one of our prisons because he believed in their red flag! Those Russian floozies have taken over—they're everywhere, the hotels, the shops, pulling up their trolleys with cellphones, irons, hairdryers, anything electrical, and clothes, perfume. I suppose I could just about have accepted all that . . . But for a Russian to stand there singing Farid al-Atrash's "Rose in my Heart," that was too much.<sup>1</sup>

This short paragraph, describing Russian women's behavior in 1990s Dubai during their own country's post-Soviet economic collapse, encodes a complex map of a transnational and fast-changing Middle East. Hovering between two postmodern capitals of pan-Arab culture, Dubai and London, is the shadow of a third cosmopolitan center, Moscow. Once upon a time it radiated the pure creed of the "red flag," for whose sake young Arabs braved persecution by their own governments; now it exports only the twin ills of tacky consumerism and fraud. Domesticated in Oriental-biblical terms ("grains of desert sand," "a plague of locusts"), the Russian women are impostors, neither proper Communists nor convincing Arabs, even if they can sing the Arabic lyrics of a Syrian-Egyptian crooner. Amira is an impostor herself—a Moroccan eager to speak Egyptian colloquial

1. al-Shaykh, *Only in London*, 35.

Arabic, a prostitute who will soon start a racket impersonating a troubled Saudi princess. But these “Natashas” are not comrades; they are competition.

A similar irony frames an autobiographical essay by Egyptian playwright Mahmoud Aboudoma (b. 1953). “Gamlet Is Russian for Hamlet” recounts Aboudoma’s first childhood viewing of a film that marked him deeply, the 1964 *Hamlet* directed by Grigory Kozintsev and scored by Dmitri Shostakovich. He wanders into the Soviet Cultural Center in Heliopolis, Egypt’s government district just north of Cairo, and instead of the announced screening of Vladimir Petrov’s 1949 *Battle of Stalingrad*, sees a film about a confused prophet and a rotten state. The half-understood film makes a haunting impression, but the 2006 essay ends:

When the years went by and the changes came, and the tree itself abandoned its roots, Shafiq Street and Heliopolis filled up with tall buildings, but the Russians’ Building stayed as it was. Except that they put a new banner on it, red like the other one: a picture of some guy smiling for no reason, and the words “Kentucky Fried Chicken.”<sup>2</sup>

Like Hanan al-Shaykh’s protagonist, Aboudoma contrasts the purportedly ideologically pure Arab-Soviet relations of the 1960s with the new order of globalized consumerism. This time, faith in socialist ideals is not mocked, and their antithesis is not vibrant London or Dubai but Colonel Sanders with his dumb American grin. But again the “red flag” has been degraded, the Soviet Union’s political promise for the Arab world left unrealized; Egypt’s ideological “tree [has] abandoned its roots” through President Anwar Sadat’s 1970s *infitāh*, or opening to the West.

Born in Lebanon and Egypt, respectively, al-Shaykh and Aboudoma have never lived in the Soviet Union or the Eastern bloc; al-Shaykh has long lived in Britain. Yet both refer, with nostalgia and irony, to a recognizable moment in the 1960s and 1970s when the red flag stood for something inspiring, whether communist ideology or Thaw-era Soviet films.

### Attraction, Not Penetration

Cold War-era policymakers assumed that Soviet cultural diplomacy was a tool, either effective or not, to increase political power. As *TIME* magazine declared in 1968, “The penetration is largely in the form of military and economic

2. Aboudoma, “Gamlet Is Russian for Hamlet,” 291.

assistance combined with a cultural drive, and the Russians have so far been unable to convert much of it into solid political power.” The (unnamed) writer goes on:

The Soviets now run the biggest development program in an area that desperately needs industrialization. Their engineers have started work on a dam on the Euphrates that will supply electricity to much of Syria, and are prospecting for oil in Egypt. In all, Soviet teams are engaged in 100 or so major projects, including the construction of a steel plant in Algeria, a railroad in Iraq, a machine-tool plant in Iran, and a fish-meal factory in Yemen. Russian culture follows the Red flag. In Alexandria, young girls are quitting belly-dance classes and attending the recently opened Russian ballet school instead. Soviet folk-dance groups and circus troupes tour the major Arab cities. Russian films play at the cinemas and on state-owned television, and Soviet books and periodicals that are skillfully prepared in Arabic now cram Arab bookstores. Arab universities now stress Russian language courses.<sup>3</sup>

Centering the great-power perspective, this litany treats Arabs as passive recipients of Soviet cultural “penetration.” (The thousand-word *TIME* editorial uses that term four times.) It does not ask what if anything about Russian culture attracted the Soviet Union’s Arab interlocutors or how they put it to use.

I started the research for this book from the opposite angle, curious about what resources Russian and Soviet culture have made available to generations of Arab thinkers. As a result, *Red Mecca* is a work of both transnational emotional history and literary criticism. First, exploring archival and literary sources—novels, memoirs, letters, translation paratexts, interviews, official reports, and a film school graduation project—I trace the patterns and paradoxes of the Arab-Soviet romance, analyzing how Arab intellectuals have understood and then narrated their encounters with both Russian-language culture and study abroad experiences in Cold War Russia and Ukraine. By keeping the focus on the Soviet Union’s Arab interlocutors rather than Moscow’s foreign policy goals, I arrive at a doubly counterintuitive argument: that throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, Arab intellectuals have used Soviet educational ties to gain cultural freedom, and that this often worked in spite, not because, of policymakers’ plans. Then, because the Arab-Soviet romance did not really end in 1991, I explore some of the many ways Russia and the USSR have served twenty-first-century Arabic fiction. Again it is a quest for freedom: Soviet or Russian settings and themes offer

3. *TIME*, “Middle East.” The word “Red” is capitalized in the original.

writers the space and distance to confront difficult issues of minoritization, religious violence and dictatorship, rigid gender identities, and war.

Before telling this transregional story, however, I want to describe the road that brought me here and point out some pitfalls I have tried to avoid.

### Tilling the Poisoned Field

I began studying Arabic in graduate school in the late 1990s, aiming to acquire a viewpoint on Middle East politics that I would otherwise have missed. This has been interesting. Among other surprises it has entailed a trip through the political looking glass, where Left and Right switch places. As a former-refugee American who fled with family from the USSR in 1979, I took for granted that a decent and independent-minded person born during or after the Stalin period had to be anti-communist. But among the Arab intellectuals I read or met, it was the opposite: A decent freethinker most likely started out communist, or at least socialist, or somewhere on the left.<sup>4</sup> For such people the USSR was the Red Mecca, not the Evil Empire. Moscow was not a prison but a beacon of hope—albeit one that shone more brightly from afar.

Studying in Cairo, I learned that my Egyptian (and eventual Syrian, Palestinian, Lebanese, Iraqi, and Moroccan) interlocutors knew world literature and theater better than I did. They seemed to have read everything. Not only could they quote fluently from Greek tragedy, western European novels, and Anglo-American poetry, but they also had absorbed many genres of writing from the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, as well as the nonaligned world or what is now called the Global South, and they wittily deployed these sources in their work. My first book developed a theory of adaptation based on this fact, called the “global kaleidoscope.”<sup>5</sup> For instance, the most influential text of *Hamlet* for Arab theater makers was not an English play at all but a 1964 Soviet film scored by Dmitri Shostakovich and starring Gulag survivor Innokenty Smoktunovsky—the subject of Aboudoma’s essay quoted above. It turned out that many Arab intellectuals had admired or actually studied in the USSR or other eastern-bloc countries such as Czechoslovakia or Bulgaria. Their reference points were the

4. One could compare this to the status of religious faith in two societies, one with a history of an established church and the other without: Typically, the more secular society is the one that only recently shook off an official state religion, such as Sweden. See Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.

5. Litvin, *Hamlet’s Arab Journey*.

same films, plays, and books that my Soviet-born parents and their friends had talked about, works whose brave and double-edged challenges to authoritarianism resonated on both sides of the looking glass. I started asking why.

Then in June 2013 I was in St. Petersburg for a workshop on Arab-Russian literary ties, my first trip to Russia since emigrating with my family thirty-four years earlier. It was midsummer: At night the sky glowed cerulean and the stream of promenaders never stopped. In a break from the workshop, organizer Kirill Dmitriev took a few participants to visit Anna Arkadievna Dolinina (1923–2017), the ninety-year-old doyenne of St. Petersburg Arabic literary studies. Sitting under a portrait of her mentor, the great Arabist Ignaty Ulyanovich Krachkovsky (1883?–1952), Dolinina was gracious, gave us each a copy of her book *Arabeski*, and asked about our work. Her own dissertation, completed in the year of Stalin's death, had traced the Arab reception of Russian literature.<sup>6</sup> But she greeted my research topic with gentle doubt. "There is so much good Arabic literature," she said. "Why do you want to work on *this*?"

Dolinina's skepticism likely reflected a troubling homology between my future and her own past. For Soviet Arabists of Dolinina's and Krachkovsky's generations, studying "Arab-Russian literary ties" was a political chore. They wrote on such topics as "Maxim Gorky in Arabic" and "Mikhail Naimy's Russian influences," helped translate poems and novels by left-leaning Arab writers, and served as interpreters for (and when required, informants about) visiting literary delegations. Dutifully they marked major Russian writers' birth and death anniversaries by tracing how they radiated to various world traditions, including Arabic. Their state-sponsored research was part of the intellectual hall of mirrors of Soviet internationalism, where moments of Arab-Russian mutual cultural appreciation were endlessly documented, translated back and forth, and transmitted as propaganda to both sides.

Rossen Djalalov has noted that "as heir to the literature-centrism of the revolutionary Russian intelligentsia of the late nineteenth century, the Soviet state, down to its very bureaucracy, believed in the capacity of literature to transform society and invested heavily in literary engagements even with societies very different from its own."<sup>7</sup> Arab intellectuals similarly fetishized literature, treating poets as prophets and novelists as national spokespeople. Soviet and Arab public

6. Tolmacheva, "Anna Dolinina 1923–2017."

7. Rossen Djalalov, "The Afro-Asian Writers Association and Soviet Engagement with Africa," in *Black Perspectives*, African American Intellectual History Society, November 2, 2017, <https://www.aaihs.org/the-afro-asian-writers-association-and-soviet-engagement-with-africa/>.



FIGURE 0.1. The author (center left) with Anna A. Dolinina (seated), Simona Schneider (left), and Masha Kirasirova (right). *Photo: Kirill Dmitriev.*

diplomacy therefore promoted literature, showcasing it alongside space flight and other exemplary technologies of a rising East.

For instance, just hours after Soviet cosmonaut Yury Gagarin's historic space flight in the capsule *Vostok* (East) on April 12, 1961, Egyptian poet Abdel Rahman al-Khamissi penned a poem called "Gagarin in My Village." Al-Khamissi (1920–1987) was a longtime Moscow resident and key node of Arab-Soviet literary ties; his poem was quickly translated into Russian.<sup>8</sup> The following year, Gagarin toured Egypt as part of an "Orbit of Friendship" in which he met President Gamal Abdel Nasser and other leaders, spoke to students at Cairo University, and saw engineering marvels both ancient and modern: the Pyramids and Pharaonic temples, the Soviet-assisted Aswan High Dam. On that visit literature took the stage again, as al-Khamissi publicly presented the baby-faced twenty-seven-year-old cosmonaut with a copy of his now-famous poem calligraphed on Egyptian papyrus. Gagarin later wrote:

8. 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Khamīṣī, "Gagarin v moei derevne" [Gagarin in my village], tr. Yu. Parkaev, *Molodaya Gvardia* 1 (1976): 3–9. Cited in Shuiskii, "Annual Bibliography of Works on Arabic Literature," 162. I have been unable to locate the Arabic original.

Comrades had told me that Arab students studying at Moscow State University had declaimed lines from this poem in Red Square when I returned from the *Vostok* landing site to Moscow. So it was a pleasure to meet the Arab litterateur. At this event he read some new verses. . . . It was slightly awkward to hear these beautiful, ringing words said about me. But I understood that they expressed the poet's thoughts born of meeting not only me, a Soviet cosmonaut, but all my comrades who had come to Egypt on this friendly visit, and that they addressed all Soviet citizens, our whole great people, striding at the head of world progress.<sup>9</sup>

Examples could be multiplied. Already in the tsarist period, Russian scholars had worked to track and trumpet their country's cultural influence abroad, including Russian writers' contributions to "world literature."<sup>10</sup> Such efforts expanded and intensified sharply after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and again after 1956, becoming a core part of Soviet foreign policy toward the Third World. Disseminated in both languages, cultural products like al-Khamissi's poem and Gagarin's memoir served both as outreach to the Third World and what we might call "inreach" to Russian and non-Russian Russophone domestic reading publics inside the Soviet Union. Publishing houses, newspapers, magazines, universities, and international cultural centers helped the canonization effort. In Gagarin's case, Arab students at both Moscow State University and Cairo University in Giza were mobilized to form an adoring public for the young Russian man's feat and the Arabic praise poem it inspired. Academics helped translate al-Khamissi's text and even wrote articles situating it in the Arabic tradition of *madh*, poetry in praise of leaders.<sup>11</sup>

In this environment of politicized literary kitsch, some Soviet scholars dodged the obligatory topics as best they could. They headed to the premodern period and into poetry or densely rhymed prose, where the intellectual water was deeper and the long arm of state ideology had less grip. Krachkovsky studied eleventh-century Arabic poet Abu Ala' al-Ma'arri, the blind skeptic who would visit no ruler's court; Krachkovsky would survive the Russian Revolution, Stalin's purges, and the Leningrad Blockade.<sup>12</sup> His student Dolinina worked on medieval trickster

9. Gagarin, *Doroga v kosmos*. All translations in this book, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

10. For a tsarist-era project of searching for Russian writers in "world literature," see Dragunov, *Graf L. N. Tolstoi kak pisatel'*.

11. Frolova, "Arabskie poemy o sovetskikh kosmonavtakh."

12. Kemper, "Introduction."



FIGURE 0.2. Yury Gagarin in Egypt, 1962, speaking at Cairo University between President Nasser and future president Sadat. *Source:* Wikimedia Commons.



FIGURE 0.3. Yury Gagarin visiting the Sphinx. *Source:* RT.com (archived).

travels, translating the *maqamāt* of both Hamadhani and Hariri into Russian verse and rhymed prose (*saj*), then turning to the famous pre-Islamic Arabic poems known as the *muʿallaqāt*.<sup>13</sup> Yet Krachkovsky still wrote on the Arabic reception of Gorky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and the defense of Sevastopol.<sup>14</sup> In gentler times, Dolinina’s 1973 essay on one Tolstoy Arabization took a more playful approach to the influence-tracing task; her method, valorizing the local motives and needs of the influencee, has inspired my own.<sup>15</sup> But no matter how subtle, *simply by existing* such publications served the state agenda of underscoring Russian and Soviet influence in the Arab world.

This book is not about the Soviet field of Oriental studies, whose tensions and tragedies have been well documented elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> I mention Dolinina’s skepticism simply to put my own theoretical cards on the table. Why would a Soviet-born American Arabist like me, one with a deeply ambivalent relationship to

13. Tolmacheva, “Anna Dolinina 1923–2017.”

14. See vol. 3 of Krachkovsky’s complete works.

15. Dolinina, “Arabskiy perevod.”

16. See Kemper and Conermann, *Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*; Dolinina, *Nevol’nik dolga*; and especially Vasilkov and Sorokina, *Lyudi i sud’by*.

Russian culture, want to continue tilling these poisoned fields? Why excavate half-forgotten stories of Arab-Soviet cultural ties? For instance, what can writers and readers learn today from the colorful and brutal world of the Soviet international student dormitory, last seen two generations ago? What can these stories teach us? Whose interests will they serve? And more importantly, today, as Russia strains to reanimate its own former empire and again project military power and cultural influence into the Arab world and beyond, how can these stories best avoid feeding Russia's neo-imperial agenda and prompting the jerking knee of its Cold War-like American counterpart?

### The Scholarly Stakes

The past two decades have changed this project's stakes. When I first floated Arab-Russian literary ties as a postdoctoral topic in 2006, the idea sounded obscure, almost a novelty. My working subtitle was "Forgotten Flows of 20th-Century Culture." I proposed to reconstruct Arabs' literary models beyond western Europe to offer a footnote to literary history, a modest decentering of the oversimplified postcolonial studies and world literature narratives then hegemonic in my field. Links to Russian literature and culture were ubiquitous and reached back a century, yet they had earned hardly a throwaway line in most histories of Arabic literature.<sup>17</sup> The only data on Arab-Russian ties sat in dutiful Russian or Arabic monographs or dusty Cold War studies of the USSR's cultural penetration (the cliché we saw above) of the Arab world.<sup>18</sup> In Anglophone academia the topic had been obscured by the Cold War's end, occluded by the disciplinary boundaries and language gaps between Slavic and Middle Eastern Studies. Here was good clean ground to pursue my abiding research agenda—one shared by friends and allies in my cohort of Arabic studies—of telling the unexpected stories that could help inscribe modern Arabic literature more fully into its rightful place in world literature.

Those cultural flows are forgotten no longer. On the plus side, the past two decades have seen academia grow ever more welcoming to border-crossing studies like mine. Worldwide, literary history has largely eclipsed literary theory, reopening academia to writers' lived experiences and unexpected transcultural

17. A shining exception is Hafez, *Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*.

18. Abul-Wayy, *Tūlstūy wa-Dūstuyafskī fī al-adab al-Arabī*; al-Ghamrī, *Mu'aththirāt 'Arabīyya wa-Islāmīyya fī al-adab al-Rūsī*; Laqueur, *Soviet Union and the Middle East*; Dawisha, "Soviet Cultural Relations with Iraq, Syria and Egypt."

links.<sup>19</sup> The newly confident field of world literature, finally outgrowing the binarism of the postcolonial, has turned to researching South-South and East-South connections. In Middle East studies, literary historians tracing Arabic literature's global entanglements have enriched and profoundly reshaped the field. These scholars have jettisoned the national literature paradigm, helped by the fact that Arabic literature, written not in nationalized Arabic vernaculars but in a transnational lingua franca that no one speaks at home, has never been a national literature anyway. Scholars have noticed that Arab writers read widely and voraciously in translation and in other languages. They have paid new attention to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernization and standardization of Arabic language and literature, undertaken in conscious resistance to both the Ottoman Empire and the West. Seeking counterpoints to this self-modernizing unification project, they have attended to cultural flows through the Arab diaspora, the lure of "stranger fictions," the contingencies of translation, and the context of global popular culture.<sup>20</sup>

This work has located Arabic hybridity well before the postcolonial: The exciting current view of the *nahḍa* (known as the "Arab Enlightenment" or "Arab Renaissance") recognizes the late-Ottoman moment as one of astonishing intellectual globality, when ideas zipped back and forth between Cairo, Beirut, Paris, São Paulo, and New York.<sup>21</sup> Looking at the twentieth century, work by Elizabeth Holt, Rebecca Carol Johnson, and others has helped reposition Arab writers as "cross-revolutionary readers" and active surfers of Cultural Cold War currents.<sup>22</sup> Some new research on Arabic literature is transregional all the way down.<sup>23</sup> Cinema and media history, too, has gone transnational, with work such as Kay Dickinson's chapter on Syrian cinema's Soviet

19. Two articulate contributors to this trend have been Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, and Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*

20. See, e.g., the "Diasporas" section in Hassan, *Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions*; Johnson, *Stranger Fictions*. For a contextualization of this desire to read Arabic literature within/as world literature, see Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature*.

21. See Khuri-Makdisi, *Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism*; El-Ariss, *Arab Renaissance*. El-Ariss even translates the correspondence between Egyptian Islamic reformer Muhammad 'Abduh and Tolstoy.

22. Holt, "Bread or Freedom"; idem, "Resistance Literature and Occupied Palestine"; idem, "Resistance Literature, Occupied Palestine and Mao"; Johnson, "Cross-Revolutionary Reading."

23. Stanton, *Worlding of Arabic Literature*; Lienau, *Sacred Language, Vernacular Difference*.

connections.<sup>24</sup> This scholarship overlaps with new studies of cinematic internationalism, Soviet literary internationalism, Soviet world literature, and the cultural Cold War.<sup>25</sup>

In history, meanwhile, the rise of “global history” methods has helped scholars break out of national history frameworks and opened the door to transregional research.<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth McGuire, in a study whose focus on emotional ties helped inspire my own, explored “how Chinese communists fell in love with the Russian Revolution.”<sup>27</sup> Masha Kirasirova’s truly multi-perspectival study of “the Eastern International” showed how intrepid minoritized individuals could surf the slippages between the Soviet Union’s domestic and foreign “Easts.”<sup>28</sup> Cold War studies have broadened to include “the global Cold War” and more recently plural “Cold Wars” that center Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.<sup>29</sup> A little over a decade after David Engerman pointed out the special dynamics of “the Second World’s Third World,” a fascinating volume edited by Kristin Roth-Ey revealed “the gritty politics of the particular” in Second-Third World contact zones such as schools, orphanages, the Aswan High Dam work site, and even Libyan hospitals where Romanian women sought abortions banned at home.<sup>30</sup> The recent anthology *Russian-Arab Worlds: A Documentary History*, with more than two dozen contributors, has brought a new trove of translated sources and experts on transregional history into undergraduate classrooms.<sup>31</sup>

Research into Soviet educational internationalism, in particular, is proceeding at great speed. My work on Arab students in the USSR draws on the painstaking archival research and interpretive insights of Maxim Matusevich, Julie Hessler, and Constantin Katsakioris, among others.<sup>32</sup> Olga Nefedova, Suheyla

24. See Dickinson, *Arab Cinema Travels*.

25. Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*; Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism*; Clark, *Eurasia Without Borders*; Hodgkin, *Persianate Verse*; Salazkina, *World Socialist Cinema*; Glaser, *Songs in Dark Times*; Glaser and Lee, *Comintern Aesthetics*; Tihanov et al., *World Literature in the Soviet Union*.

26. Conrad, *What Is Global History?*

27. McGuire, *Red at Heart*.

28. Kirasirova, *Eastern International*.

29. Westad, *Global Cold War*; Lüthi, *Cold Wars*.

30. Engerman, “Second World’s Third World”; Roth-Ey, *Socialist Internationalism and the Gritty Politics*.

31. Kane et al., *Russian-Arab Worlds*.

32. See, for instance, Matusevich, “Black in the U.S.S.R.”; idem, “Probing the Limits of Internationalism”; McClellan, “Black Hajj to ‘Red Mecca’”; Hessler, “Death of an African Student in Moscow”; idem, “Third World Students at Soviet Universities in the Brezhnev Period”;

Takesh, Gabrielle Chomentowski, Rasha Salti, and others have explored the Soviet educations of Arab visual artists and filmmakers.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, Rachel Applebaum is investigating how the USSR built a network of Russian-language educators stationed all over the world.<sup>34</sup> These studies help flesh out the lives of Arabic-speaking writers and filmmakers who studied in the USSR and the legacies inherited by their twenty-first-century Arabic literary successors.

So there is plenty of good company; bright journalists, literary scholars, and historians are exploring Arab-Russian histories, and a new academic field is starting to take shape. Yet this exciting new research has proceeded in an atmosphere of political dismay: Our work is relevant in a way most of us never wanted. Even before Russia began recruiting Syrian mercenaries to support its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, even before President Vladimir Putin sent Russian troops and barrel bombs to prop up Syria's Assad regime in 2015, Putin's Russia had moved to reactivate its old influence networks in the Middle East, reviving institutions and friendships developed during both the Soviet and tsarist periods.<sup>35</sup> The materials I was trying to research burgeoned faster than I could track them. Russian cultural centers in the region relaunched brisk programs of film screenings, art shows, literary readings, and courses in language, computer science, and ballet.<sup>36</sup> A 2004 documentary film celebrated Egyptian-Soviet collaborations from the High Dam to arts and botany.<sup>37</sup> As the guest of honor at the 2010 Cairo Book Fair, Russia showcased Russian Muslim culture in the same types of roles for which the USSR decades earlier had cast multinational Soviet literature, Muslim Central Asian intellectuals, and the Eastern-yet-modern city of Tashkent.<sup>38</sup> Alumni clubs of Soviet graduates, dormant in the 1990s, suddenly

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Katsakioris, "Burden or Allies?"; Vitzthum, "Cooperation and Control at the Micro Level of Soviet Internationalism."

33. Nefedova, "Arab Artists of the Mediterranean World"; Takesh, "Communist Mourning Icon"; Chomentowski, "Filmmakers from Africa and the Middle East at VGIK"; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, "Saving Bruce Lee."

34. Applebaum, "Rise of Russian in the Cold War"; idem, "Educators for Export."

35. For some studies of this revival, albeit Moscow-centric and culturally thin ones, see Trenin, *What Is Russia Up To?*; Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy*; and Bechev et al., *Russia Rising*.

36. Ezzat, "Russian Cultural Center."

37. Soboleva, *Nash Egipet*.

38. Rospechat' [Russian Federal Agency for Press and Mass Media, dissolved in 2020], "Russia a Guest of Honor at 42nd Cairo International Book Fair," pamphlet, 2009, author's archive. For example: "On January 31, a reception will be held dedicated to the Russian display at the 42nd Cairo International Book Fair. During the reception, the State Song and Dance Company of Tatarstan will perform at the Cairo Opera House, presenting a selection of the

organized reunions in Arab capitals and in Moscow. Their new Facebook groups showcased Russian feasts, May 9 Victory Day celebrations, and support for Russia's renewed involvement in the Middle East.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile the Russian Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, shuttered in 1917 (though its website gives no hint of a hiatus), reopened a school on Putin Street in Bethlehem in 2014, somehow retaining the "Imperial" designation.<sup>40</sup> At a September 2015 meeting in Moscow, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, a Soviet PhD holder himself, declared that studying Russian was "a promising route" (*perspektivno*) for Palestinian children.<sup>41</sup> Redeploying the old cultural ties, the Russian Cultural Center in Cairo posted photos and footage of cosmonaut Gagarin's Egypt visit on its website in April 2017: an archival nostalgia trip, but also a soft-power complement to Moscow's energetic embrace of Egypt's post-2013 dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.<sup>42</sup> Amid the further neo-Cold War polarization following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia's diplomats have stepped up their charm offensive to the Middle East and Africa. All

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brightest pieces from their repertoire which reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of Tatarstan and Russia as a whole. . . . Documentaries on Russia and Russian-Egyptian relations will be shown on large plasma panels." On the exemplary role of Soviet Tashkent, see Kirasirova, "Building Anti-Colonial Utopia."

39. There are now active Arab clubs of Soviet alumni at least in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Israel. Their efforts are supported by a central organization in Moscow, which hosted worldwide alumni gatherings in 2003, 2007, and 2012. See Vsemirnaya Assotsiatsia vypusknikov vysshnykh uchebnykh zavedeniy, "Istoriya," accessed February 16, 2026, <http://alumnirussia.org/history/>. They celebrate May 9 because the USSR, whose generals arrived after midnight to Karlshorst, Berlin, to accept Nazi Germany's capitulation in World War II, celebrated Victory Day a day later than the other Allies' May 8 V-E Day.

40. For the Imperial label used in the present tense, see <https://www.ippo-jerusalem.info/>. For more on the society's activities from the Russian Orthodox Church's Department of External Church Relations, see, e.g., "Conference of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society Takes Place in Moscow," *Mospat.ru*, June 5, 2012, <https://mospat.ru/en/2012/06/05/news65174/>.

41. Abbas earned his PhD in Middle Eastern politics from Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University in 1982. For a polemical analysis, see Tabarovskiy, "Mahmoud Abbas' Dissertation." For the suggestion that he worked for the KGB, see Peter Baker, "Soviet Document Suggests Mahmoud Abbas Was a K.G.B. Spy in the 1980s." *New York Times*, September 8, 2016. The quoted article, titled "Abbas: Izuchenie russkogo iazyka arabskimi detmi perspektivno," could formerly be found at ARAF News, at <http://arafnews.ru/news/abbas-izuchenie-russkogo-jazyka-arabskimi-detmi-perspektivno.html>.

42. "Unikal'nye fotografii vizita Iu. Gagarina v Egipet," *Russki Dom v Kaire*, accessed February 16, 2026, archived at [https://web.archive.org/web/20210605151608/http://egy.rs.gov.ru/%20/news/10777?category\\_id=13](https://web.archive.org/web/20210605151608/http://egy.rs.gov.ru/%20/news/10777?category_id=13).

this effort has ricocheted through social media and the many Russian-run online “news” channels proliferating in Arabic, Russian, and English, ranging from upstart blogs and websites to professional outfits like Sputnik News and Rusiya al-Yawm (Russia Today, later RT).<sup>43</sup>

The recent renewal of Arab-Russian military and political ties makes it both easier and harder to write about related cultural connections. *Red Mecca* seeks to walk this tightrope: to point out real continuities between tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet policies and structures of feeling without overly centering the USSR or providing any cultural fodder for Russia’s cynical reassertions of superpower influence today. Not to exaggerate the potential impact of my work (this is a humanities monograph after all, and the real heyday of literature-based empire-building is behind us), but as a matter of ethics and scholarly integrity, I have tried to tell a story that both explains these pitfalls and avoids them.

Therefore, as you will have guessed, *Red Mecca* does not aim to survey 150 years of Russian-Arab literary friendship.<sup>44</sup> It does not build an argument for the Soviet Union’s or Russia’s centrality as a source of cultural models for Arab political thought or literature.<sup>45</sup> Instead, *Red Mecca* traces the unexpected trajectories of some traveling people, traveling literary genres, and traveling fantasies that have circulated between Arab and Soviet/post-Soviet societies. Some writers I analyze are famous, others largely unknown. I have chosen my examples in noncanonical fashion, based on the vividness of their prose and their ability to illuminate key themes of the Arab-Soviet experience, including the role of gender and the blurring or juxtaposition of Russia and Ukraine. Most write in Arabic; a few, coming from Algeria, in French. As we will see, they display a great variety of concerns.

## Artists and Agency

To serve the larger project of better understanding Arabic intellectual life in its true (global) context and its true (multi-local) significance, it helps to remember that Russia is not the center of the story. It simply offers some pieces of the puzzle, some unexpected vantage points—at most, one magnet in a putatively bipolar global system. Nor has that magnet always worked as expected.

43. On semiofficial Russian bloggers in Syria, see Daniaud-Oudeh, “Russian Media Correspondents in Syria.”

44. For one attempt at a comprehensive history, see Ali-zade, *Russkaia literatura i arabskii mir*, vols. 1 and 2.

45. In contrast, see Marks, *How Russia Shaped the Modern World*.

For instance, it is widely repeated that Soviet cultural influence brought socialist realism into Arabic, while the US government, under the name of “cultural freedom,” funded programs to push formalism in literature and abstract expressionism in art.<sup>46</sup> This, the story goes, created a realism-formalism conflict that tracked the larger Cultural Cold War; in Arabic it fanned a long-burning argument over “committed” literature, or *iltizām*.<sup>47</sup>

Certainly some writers experienced this truism as fact. As Egyptian colloquial poet Abdel Rahman El-Abnudi (1938–2015), a titan of Egyptian literature’s “Sixties Generation,” reminisced in 2002:

In 1956, a new literary realism began to take shape, a school of writing that devoted itself largely to the poor—the disinherited majority that had been more or less excluded from literature. Already the example of the Soviet Union—as revolution, state and system of thought—had exercised an influence on young writers, or, as they are called, intellectuals. Translations of Soviet books had begun to flood Egyptian bookshops, and the great Russian classics at last became available, to many of us for the first time. The great novelists and poets—Dostoevsky, Sholokhov, Gorki, Pushkin, Mayakovsky—were, as it were, knocking on our doors. . . . A great wave, you could say, was breaking over the old, established literature, breaking it apart. [It coincided with] yet another incarnation of the clash between “art for art’s sake” and “art for life’s sake.”<sup>48</sup>

But others experienced the US-USSR dichotomy differently. For the slightly younger Egyptian psychiatrist and short story writer Mohamed Makhzangi (b. 1950), for instance, Russian and Soviet literature offered no new formal clues or thematic resources. Instead, its contribution was psychological and perhaps spiritual. His preface to *Moments from the Sinking of Whale Island*, the literary reportage analyzed in chapter 3, opens with epigraphs from American journalists Wallace Martin and David Lurch and a Gabriel García Márquez remark about Truman Capote and Norman Mailer; these, not Soviet models, offer the key to his method. Makhzangi uses the English word “pan” to describe his vignette collection “Moscow Queues,” in the same volume, explaining the panning motion

46. Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?*; Coleman, *Liberal Conspiracy*; Holt, “Bread or Freedom.”

47. On “committed” literature, see Pannewick and Khalil, *Commitment and Beyond*; DiMeo, *Committed to Disillusion*; Di-Capua, “Homeward Bound.”

48. Rakha, “Our Revolution.”

of a film camera.<sup>49</sup> Thus, although he draws on Russian values, Makhzangi told me in a 2018 interview, his techniques are not Russian at all:

- M LITVIN: I've noticed a paradox, not just with you but with other Arabic-language writers who had some experience of the USSR. The lack of Russian literary influence on your expression, your style . . .
- M MAKHZANGI: The spirit?
- ML: No, the style. It isn't Russian. I mean, you lived there, you immersed yourself in Russian culture, but most of your literary influences . . .
- MM: It's true. They're not Russian. Because Russian writers wrote in a traditional style. Inside that traditionalism they did tremendous work investigating the human imagination, the spirit. But their writing was traditional. Like, Dostoevsky? His forms were traditional. Naguib Mahfouz basically took and used the same forms. The greatness of Dostoevsky is in the stories he tells. Russian writers were concerned with the living substance of the book, not the form. As for us [i.e., Egyptian writers who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s], we were influenced by Western literary forms. I read Faulkner and also [Russian-born French Jewish experimental novelist] Nathalie Sarraute and Virginia Woolf. I also read criticism, for instance, critical studies about the stream of consciousness. So we were influenced, and we took some of the forms from the West. . . . The techniques of writing are very advanced in Western literature—the stream of consciousness, Faulkner and Virginia Woolf and so on—but in Dostoevsky, for instance, what you feel is that he has his hand in the meat of life.<sup>50</sup>

For Makhzangi, as we will see in chapters 3 and 4, these modernist techniques channel a sentimental preoccupation with marginals and victims: art for art's sake, for life's sake. Russian culture serves him mainly as a deep and properly spiritual alternative to the West. He is thus more interested in its Eastern-ish wisdom than in any Soviet ideologies or technologies, which he sees as a flimsy overlay:

- MM: Anyway, when you live with the Russians, you see that behind this skin of Communism, the people are, the human being is: Russian. Even in Ukraine. The character of Russian culture belonged to Dostoevsky and

49. This part does not appear in the English translation. See Makhzanjī, *Lahzāt gharaq jazīrat al-ḥūt*, 107.

50. Interview with Mohamed Makhzangi, Cairo, June 2018.

Tolstoy and Bulgakov, to the point that sometimes you feel that this Sasha or that Natasha was just drawn from a novel. And maybe that's the reason that Russian culture attracted me. I felt that in [the Russians] was some kind of East. I always said they were "the West in the East and the East in the West." Something between Eastern warmth and Western rationality.

ML: It's funny, I'm actually writing a book about that. It might be called *Another East*.

MM: Another . . . ?

ML: Another East.

MM: Yes, precisely! Yes.

Like the "great wave . . . breaking over the old, established literature" that El-Abnudi identifies, Makhzangi's reading life was marked by a formative relationship with Russian realism. However, he gravitated to Dostoevskian depth and Tolstoyan social criticism, hardly to the socialist realism that the USSR was believed to export. Makhzangi makes a very Russian gesture here—present in both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky—of tearing off masks, and of contrasting surface appearances to essential depths.<sup>51</sup> As we will see when we get to the perception of Russian and Ukrainian women, there is also a bit of orientalism, in the sense of overlooking the "Eastern" society's contemporary culture and slightly fetishizing its idealized past. By locating Russia's national character in Dostoevsky, Makhzangi fixes its historical and geographical essence in the nineteenth-century tsarist empire. It turns out that many politically progressive Arab writers share this essentializing view.

## The Shape of This Book

When and how Russia represented "another West" or "another East" for its Arab interlocutors is a complex question. Chapter 1 traces this trajectory through a few key Arab figures who encountered Russian culture or traveled to the USSR. The

51. Ulf Peter Møller names the mask-tearing gesture as Tolstoy's signature claim to rhetorical authority: "What is presented in the text as reality appears, as a rule, in a form of the comparative, that is, it is presented as *more real* or *truer* than something else that is also given in the text." Møller, *Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata*, 2, italics in original. Lenin's essay "Leo Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution," again on Kreutzer, famously credits Tolstoy with "the tearing off of all and sundry masks" of social hypocrisy. In Dostoevsky the mask-tearing reveals spiritual essence, not social truth: "Nearly every character in *The Brothers Karamazov*, at one point or another, is in this state [of rapturously heightened emotion, *vostorg*], a state in which 'superficial layers' and 'masks' fall away, exposing the real 'depths.'" Quoted in Pesmen, *Russia and Soul*, 268.

West (embodied by France, then the United States) was always in the picture in a triangulated way, as an implied point of comparison. Against that example, Russia could function as a potent exemplar: a civilization that had managed to overtake and even join Europe, while resisting crass Western materialism and maintaining its own cultural integrity and depth. Paradoxically, I show, Russian culture acquired these soulful connotations primarily in the Soviet/postcolonial period, not during the tsarist/Ottoman period when the Russian novel was at its height. One contributing factor was the Soviet-funded translation campaign of the 1960s, which helped spark an Arab vogue for Dostoevsky and other nineteenth-century Russian writers.

Drawn by the special glow of sentimentally infused communism—or simply by the chance to study abroad for free—thousands, then tens of thousands of Arab students made the journey to the USSR. Several chapters explore their expectations, experiences, and self-narrations. Chapter 2 provides a composite sketch of Arab students' daily lives in the Soviet Union, using archival documents and personal accounts to illuminate the dormitories they inhabited, the attitudes they encountered, and the unexpected solidarities they found. Chapter 3 examines three very different narratives by technical education alumni who lived in both Soviet Russia and Ukraine, comparing what they saw of Soviet life and how they chose to represent it: Egyptian refrigeration engineer Zakaria Turki's *An Upper Egyptian Among the Russians*, Algerian TV producer Abdellah Ouahhabi's *A Beur in Moscow*, and Egyptian psychiatrist-writer Mohamed Makhzangi's Chernobyl diary *Memories of a Meltdown*. All three men noticed ideological cracks and intra-Soviet tensions, but only Makhzangi transmuted his experience into art, a self-conscious Sindbad salvaging beauty from the shipwreck of an empire.

As Russia came to represent “another East” in the Soviet period, a similar connotation of spiritual depth and capacity for sacrifice attached to Russian and hence Russian-speaking Soviet women, producing an archetype I have termed the Russian Girlfriend Fantasy. It is the clearest sign of appropriation from Russian sources that I have been able to find in modern Arabic fiction: again, not a literary form or technique, but a borrowing of the special aura around female characters and the way these characters are used. Chapter 4 analyzes the Russian Girlfriend Fantasy, juxtaposing six Arab examples and exploring some literary and ethnographic scholarship to suggest that it might be a generational phenomenon, one that responds to the Arabic travel writing (*riḥla*) tradition but also draws on Russian literature and the Soviet Union's literature-soaked real-life social norms.

At the center of the book, chapters 5 and 6 follow an illustrious pair of roommates, Syrian filmmaker Mohamad Malas and Egyptian novelist Sonallah Ibrahim, through the All-Soviet Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in early 1970s Moscow. Chapter 5 focuses more on film education, chapter 6 on its literary fruits. Brought to Moscow by personal curiosity and Soviet cinematic internationalism, VGIK's Arab and African students experienced both the school's bold intellectual environment and its hidden curriculum of elitist social stratification. The graduation film Malas and Ibrahim cowrote and shot together, merging their separate memories of Egyptian political incarceration and Syria's 1967 loss of the Golan Heights, seized the opportunities of those heady times to tell an Arab story that Damascus or Cairo could not have produced.

Ibrahim was meanwhile working on several novels, including *Ice*, set at VGIK in 1973 and finally published in 2011. Chapter 6 analyzes *Ice* through the lens of a transnational subgenre I have termed the Soviet dormitory novel. Set inside the *obshchiaga* (a Russian slang word for *obshchezhitie*, or dormitory), the Soviet dorm novel is a subset of the study abroad novel, itself an unstudied form. Reading *Ice* as an *obshchiaga* novel helps explain the features that have puzzled critics: its ugliness and earnest quest for beauty, skepticism of interethnic solidarity, and stark portrayal of sexual violence. To highlight the subgenre's breadth and *Ice*'s literary power, I juxtapose it with a female-authored dorm novel in a more comic vein, *In the Time of the Red Flute* (2012) by Moscow-trained Kuwaiti painter Thuraya al-Baq sami.

It would have been tidier to end my exploration of Arab-Soviet literary and intellectual ties with the disappointment of 1991: the silencing of Lenin's "red flute," the dimming of the red beacon, or as novelist Alexandra Chreiteh has put it, the moment "when the hammer hit the sickle."<sup>52</sup> But those images of sudden silence and darkness disregard how cultural exchange actually works. Writers including Chreiteh herself (a novelist and comparative literature scholar with one Russian and one Lebanese parent, fluent in Russian and Arabic among other languages) offer living evidence that transcultural connections don't just stop. So rather than ventriloquize leftist Arab intellectuals' despair at the Soviet Union's collapse, the last few chapters of this book treat 1991 as not an end but a beginning. Wandering even further from a Soviet-centric account, I examine how twenty-first-century Arabic writers have subverted the clichés and repurposed the resources of Arab-Russian and Arab-Soviet pasts to claim new zones of hybridity, religious authenticity, and beauty.

52. Chreiteh, *Ali and His Russian Mother*, 102–3.

Chapter 7 revisits the gender question, exploring twenty-first-century works that confront the Soviet-era Russian Girlfriend Fantasy with new stories about Russian-speaking wives and the possibility of Arab-Soviet mixed children. Reading essays and fiction including the melodramatic novel *Laila, the Snow, and Ludmila* (2007) by Jordanian writer Kafa al-Zou'bi, Chreiteh's own comic novel *Ali and His Russian Mother* (2010), and a satirical short story by Russian writer Lyudmila Ulitskaya, I argue that while the Russian Girlfriend Fantasy has been thoroughly subverted, the Russian wife and mother has yet to find a voice in Arabic literature.

Chapter 8 juxtaposes two lush historical novels that use Russian or Soviet borderland settings for license to humanize, of all things, jihad: *Moon over Samargand* (2004, trans. 2009), written in Arabic by Canada-based Egyptian writer Mohamed Mansi Qandil; and *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), written in English by Scotland-based Sudanese-British writer Leila Aboulela. Both have bi-local concerns. Qandil uses tales of medieval Bukhara and twentieth-century Uzbekistan as a crooked mirror for Egypt's struggles with dictatorship and political Islam, while Aboulela juxtaposes contemporary British Islamophobia with the fifteen-year anti-tsarist resistance of Imam Shamil, a nineteenth-century spiritual leader of Chechnya and Dagestan. Both works, whether penned under Mubarak's censorship or during the West's "war on terror," turn to exotic Russian or Soviet stories for the cultural freedom to show sympathy even to Islamists at home.

Finally, chapter 9 analyzes the estrangement effects that animate Khalil Alrez's *The Russian Quarter* (2019), a sweet, hyper-literary, and moving novel of the Syrian civil war. Written in transit by a Soviet-educated Syrian author fleeing Damascus, *The Russian Quarter* is unique (to my knowledge) in Arab war fiction—not only because its setting is a Russo-Arab human-animal menagerie and its moral center a giraffe, but also because of its leisurely sentences, temporal arabesques, and magical realist flights. *The Russian Quarter* does not obscure Russia's role in destroying Syria. But, using Russian references for whimsy and depth, it flaunts the artistic autonomy that war, like dictatorship, works so hard to take away.

As these summaries already suggest, many of the contemporary authors analyzed in my later chapters are in some sense my literary kin. Raised or educated between cultures, they have grappled with the same ethical dilemma that powers this book: Why should one linger over the traces of Arab-Soviet ties today, and how can one do it with integrity and without contributing to any nationalist or imperial cause? Each has found some kind of answer, but my own is these books' sheer variety. The diversity of genres, themes, styles, political outlooks,

and linguistic choices in the works studied here demonstrates that Arab writers and artists have never been passive recipients of cultural influence. In each generation they have actively chosen (from the available menu) both what to read and how to use it. Therefore, “How did Russian sources and models influence Arabic cultural production?” will always be the wrong question. This book asks, rather, what hungers Soviet life and culture have fed for different Arab thinkers, what rhetorical interventions they have facilitated, what fantasies they have provoked—and what surprises have resulted.

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Note: The prefixes al- and el-, which mean “the” in Arabic, have been ignored for purposes of alphabetization. The character ‘ (for the Arabic *‘ayn*) appears when a word or name containing it appears in an Arabic context (e.g., Muhammad ‘Abuh, but Mahmoud Abbas). Italicized page numbers indicate illustrations.

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