

the Communist Party line, however many absurd twists and turns it took. Ultimately, his fidelity led him to his moral nadir when he agreed to become an undercover operative for Stalin's USSR. This is a tactful way to say that Montagu became a spy. Although suspected by British intelligence, his role did not become widely known during his lifetime. His activities need to be put into some perspective. From the evidence Campbell provides, it is not easy to gauge how much damage the military secrets he passed on did to the democracy at war in which he lived. It is quite certain, however, that he had breached a moral boundary. Although one could argue that his clandestine activities bordered on treason, suffice it to say that Montagu's espionage activities in no way put him in the same league as individuals like Donald Maclean, Guy Burgess, Kim Philby, and Anthony Blunt who became the infamous group of spies known as the "Cambridge Four." Montagu remained a rather small fish.

An enigmatic question haunts Campbell's entire enterprise of bringing Montagu back into the public eye. Why did he and so many apparently intelligent communists and fellow travelers blind themselves to what was happening in Stalin's USSR? How could he have ignored the enormous proportions of Stalin's historic crimes: the famine that caused millions of Ukrainians to starve; the show trials and executions of his opponents; the indifference to soldiers in the Red Army; the mass deportation of entire ethnic groups? After all, he knew some of the principled communists who had been executed. This question is not new and has been pondered at least since the appearance of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940) and *The Yogi and the Commissar* (1946). Richard Crossman's edited anthology, *The God That Failed* (1949), further assembled revealing testimonies by André Gide, Louis Fischer, and Paul Robeson, among others. Czesław Miłosz's brilliant *The Captive Mind* (1953) perhaps marked the high point of what became a minor literary genre.

Indeed, *Codename: Intelligentsia* should be considered a belated contribution to such political reflections. Campbell draws on the ideas of the Hungarian-British social theorist Karl Mannheim, as supplemented by the work of American sociologist Edward Shils, among others, to explain why and how Montagu, a man of obvious intellectual gifts and vital energy, could descend to such political obtuseness and morally compromised actions. He was not alone, of course. Their quasi-religious devotion to communist ideals was initially rooted in a humanistic concern for others, but these gradually gave way to a dogmatic adherence to theoretical abstractions imposed from above that constructed a bubble in which to live and work. Objectivity and compassion could gain little foothold in such a state of mind.

And life outside this bubble represented an unbearable fall from grace. (If this sounds remarkably contemporary—see QAnon and other Trump support groups—it is!) Was Montagu aware that he had frittered away his objectivity and with it his intellectual credibility and moral compass? It seems that, like other true believers, he did not.

Campbell's fascinating account of Montagu's life will probably not be sufficient to restore Montagu to wide public attention, let alone approbation. His brick of a book, however, provides a more than ample tombstone for a human, all too human individual.—**Stuart Liebman**

## Unknown Past:

**Layla Murad, The Jewish-Muslim Star of Egypt**

by Hanan Hammad. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022. 286 pp. Hardcover: \$90.00, Paperback: \$28.00, and E-book: \$28.00

In Western discussions of global cinema in recent decades, the Arab world, with some notable exceptions, has taken a conspicuous backseat. Even in the Middle Eastern context specifically, one is more likely to find serious engagement with films from Iran, Turkey, and Israel than any Arabic production. Nowhere is this relative absence more galling than the disappearance of Egyptian cinema from Western eyes. For example, as of this writing, the only Egyptian movie available to stream on The Criterion Channel is *I Am Afraid to Forget Your Face*, a fifteen-minute film by Sameh Alaa that won the Short Film Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2020. A budding cinephile working their way through the major streaming libraries is unlikely to happen upon an Egyptian film. That Cairo was once considered one of the great filmmaking

capitals of the world—and still the most influential in the Arab Middle East—will not occur to them.

There is probably no single reason for this gap in the West's awareness of world cinema, but it is likely in large part due to the heavily commercial bent of most Egyptian films. Egypt's most successful films too often reified local, bourgeois desires that found little resonance among Western consumers of Third World cinema in search of artistic and political radicalism. Even in films that narratively confronted the excesses and moral perversions of modernity, product placement was ubiquitous. The anthropologist Walter Armbrust, in his seminal 1996 book *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*, writes, "The commercial nature of Egyptian popular culture automatically excludes it from the incipient canon of 'Third World' cultural productions which is defined by Western scholars in metropolitan institutions, and tends to include only works that make sense to monolingual audiences in that context." That films by Palestinian directors have managed to break through the Western wall of indifference is thus not surprising. Even when their films do not deal directly with the Israeli Occupation or the continuing Nakba, international critics will still impose the category of resistance onto them.

Of course, the Egyptian movie is more than history. There are Egyptian filmmakers today who produce aesthetically complex and thematically rich work that is worthy of being shown alongside productions by their counterparts from Iran, Turkey, and Israel, and indeed Europe and the United States. The antiquated and orientalist historical framing of "rise" and "decline" has no place in a serious discussion of a country's cultural output. Nevertheless, most Egyptians would probably agree that a thirty-year period starting around 1930 was a time of extraordinary achievement in the country's cinema, when films were almost entirely aimed at popular audiences (as they were throughout much of the world). That this era intersected with some of the nation's formative moments was probably no accident. In several respects, the "making" of the modern Arab Republic of Egypt could be told through its early cinema and the stories of those who participated in it.

*Unknown Past: Layla Murad, The Jewish-Muslim Star of Egypt*, a new book by historian Hanan Hammad, is such an ambitious cultural history of Egypt by way of a biography of one of its most famous mid-century actresses. This is the kind of book any aspiring scholar should want to write at least once during their career: Hammad both lucidly engages relevant academic literature and tells a fascinating story for nonspecialist readers new to one of the dizzying number of disciplines into which she intervenes, including History, Film Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Gender Studies, and Jewish Studies.



Layla Murad was born in 1918 to Jewish parents in a comfortable middle-class neighborhood of Cairo. Her father, Zaki Murad Mordechai, was a popular singer in Egypt and the Arab world whose commercial success propelled the socioeconomic fortunes of his family. His penchant for drinking and partying, however, as well as a disastrously timed three-year American tour that coincided with the onset of the Great Depression, forced the family to downsize. When Zaki returned without the riches his family expected, he also found that he was forgotten in the Cairo music and theater scene he once commanded. Egypt, amid its own economic doldrums, had moved on. Muhammad Abdel Wahab, one of the most famous singers in twentieth-century Egypt, had started performing and the public began directing their reduced spending power accordingly.

Fortunately for the Murads, musical talent ran in the family. Zaki's paternal grandfather was a Moroccan cantor, and his siblings Nasim and Mayer were able vocalists. Layla proved to be the family's next big juggernaut. Overcoming fading mores that frowned upon young middle-class women becoming entertainers, Layla was soon enrapturing audiences and became the sole breadwinner for the family. Layla's early performances were compared to those of the iconic Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, although Hammad rightly asserts that she quickly developed her own style (clips of virtually all the artists mentioned in this review, including some full-length feature films, can be found on YouTube). Layla's rise also corresponded with that of public radio in Egypt, which amplified the reach of her "angelic" voice and activated new audiences for popular music and musical theater.

It was in cinema, however, where Layla truly made her name. As with her nascent singing career, the timing was almost too perfect. Talkies were introduced in Egypt in 1932, the very same year Layla began public musical performances. Layla's first big break came in 1937, when the eminent Egyptian director Mohammed Karim selected her to star alongside Abdel Wahab in *Yahya El-Hob* ("Long Live Love"). Released one year later, the film was a sensation and it catapulted Layla to stardom. Posters with her images became instantly recognizable and recordings of her songs from the film frequently sold out. The success of *Yahya El-Hob* led to Layla's career-defining performances in five films by Togo Mizrahi—a prolific Egyptian Jewish director who made over thirty films between 1930 and 1946, when his career in the country ended abruptly after he was wrongly accused of being a Zionist—and seven features by Anwar Wagdi, who would become her first husband. Hammad does a fine job narrating the complicated relationships Layla had with these often-oversized male egos, which also pitted her emergence as an independent woman against the conservative social values of the films in which she starred.

Unfortunately, Layla's career would suffer a fate similar to that of Mizrahi. Despite converting to Islam after marrying Wagdi and loudly supporting the anticolonial Free Officers Movement in 1952, Layla was the subject of a Syrian-sponsored smear campaign that falsely accused her of visiting and donating money to Israel. She was eventually exonerated by the Free Officers government, but significant damage had been done to her reputation. That some of Layla's fervent defenders chose to emphasize her conversion to Islam as evidence of her loyalty, rather than the obviously fabricated nature of the allegations and her demonstrated commitment to Egypt, did not augur well for the country's remaining Jews. Though Layla would continue recording songs, she would not star in another film after the infamous "Tripartite Aggression" of 1956 in which Britain, France, and Israel sought to forcibly seize control of the Suez Canal, when conditions for the country's Jews deteriorated generally with indiscriminate roundups and deportations. Several of Layla's unconverted family members, including some of her siblings, fled the country. Hammad shows, however, that Layla was not merely a victim of political developments, including President Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the film industry. The psychological toll of an affair with one of the Free Officers, Wagih Abaza, which produced a child he denied having for years, led to a shotgun marriage with her second husband, the director Fatin Abdel Wahab, and her emergence as a tabloid interest. Layla was felled almost as much by her gender as her Jewish background. Hammad makes an instructive comparison to Layla's brother Munir, who was able to continue working as a composer as his sister's career receded.

With this valuable study, Hammad reinserts Jews into the cultural history of the Arab world. Given its topic, *Unknown Past* is unlikely to find itself at the center of controversy, but its argument vexes Arab nationalist and Zionist historiographies by narrowing the highly politicized chasm between Arab and Jew. As the premature ending of Layla's career shows, the nationalist feelings unleashed by Nasser, however liberatory from the perspective of global and regional politics, proved devastating for Egypt's Jews. Although the work of Layla Murad, Togo Mizrahi, and other prominent Egyptian Jewish artists never quite disappeared, they were largely written out of the national storyline. A summary history of Egypt's cinema written by the scholar and critic Qussai Samak in 1977 for *Middle East Report*, for example, made no mention of either of them. Two years later, in a contribution to a *Cineaste* symposium dedicated to Middle Eastern cinema, Samak once again overlooked Egyptian Jews in recounting the story of Egyptian national cinema. One doubts this omission was even conscious. By this time, to be Egyptian was to be

Arab, and the space to be Arab and Jewish in Egypt had long since diminished.

Similarly, by presenting Layla's early successful career and the enduring presence of her songs and films in Egypt, Hammad implicitly questions the narrative in which Jewish existence in the Arab and Muslim lands was a long period of persecution only broken by the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Subjugation and discrimination were indeed facts of life for Jews in Arab and Islamic polities, as they surely were for Layla, yet members of this "protected" minority were also in many ways integrated and vital elements of these societies. This is the second major academic text in recent years dealing with the Jews of the early Egyptian film industry, following Deborah Starr's monograph on Mizrahi (*Togo Mizrahi and the Making of Egyptian Cinema*, University of California Press, 2020), and we can probably expect several more in the coming years.

The historical record of Jews in the region calls for neither romanticism nor a version of the "lachrymose conception of history" that once served the study of European Jewry so poorly. Instead, we should look forward to more rigorous, well-sourced, and sensitive studies exemplified by Hammad and other critical scholars re-examining the history of Jews in the modern Middle East. The book's final chapter, which deals with the contending narratives within Egypt about Layla and the contributions of the country's departed Jewish community, suggests this re-evaluation is also happening in the region itself. One can only hope that conversation will be influenced by high-quality research and not propaganda geared toward political objectives, several examples of which Hammad carefully documents.

It is true, in the words of one Egyptian magazine's 1995 obituary for Layla, that, "She lived as a Muslim, died as a Muslim, and was buried in the Muslim cemetery." But her story's broader significance is impossible to comprehend without considering that she was not *born* a Muslim and grappling with how her Jewish background—at least in part—led to the untimely end of her promising cinematic career in Egypt. Hammad's choice to refer to Layla Murad as the "Jewish-Muslim Star of Egypt" in the subtitle of her book is deliberate and serves as the first indication to readers that they are reading a groundbreaking work.

—Abe Silberstein

#### Errata for *Cineaste*, Vol. XLVII, No. 4

In the Letters column on page 3, after the letter criticizing Louis Menashe's review of Sergei Loznitsa's *Donbass* in our summer issue, we mistakenly headlined Graham Fuller as the respondent to the letter, when it should have read "Louis Menashe replies." We'd like to think our readers are smart enough to know that was merely a typo, and fully knew that the acerbic reply to the critical letter was vintage Menashe.

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