

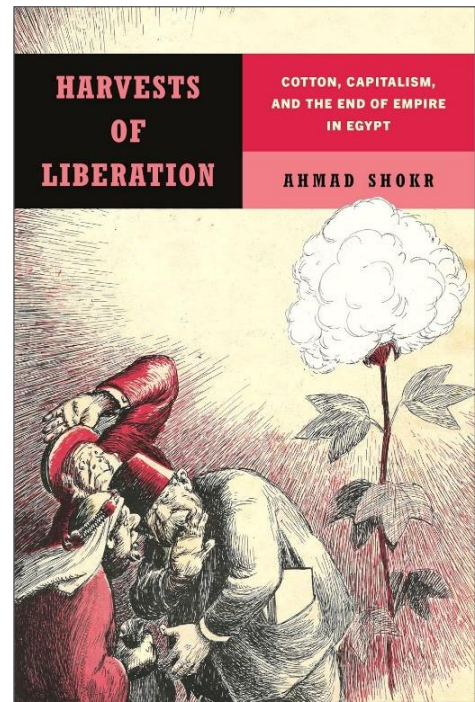
## Egyptian nationalism in the age of cotton

Book review by

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Review of *Harvests of Liberation: Cotton, Capitalism, and the End of Empire*, by Ahmad Shokr. (2025). Published by Stanford University Press. Available as hardcover, paperback, and ebook; 330 pages. Publisher's website: <https://www.sup.org/books/middle-east-studies/harvests-liberation>



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Our current era of ascending right-wing nationalism is a fitting time for a history of left-wing nationalism. What can an earlier era of left-wing nationalism help us understand about the predicament we face?

Ahmad Shokr's book, *Harvests of Liberation: Cotton, Capitalism, and the End of Empire in Egypt*, is the latest in a long, rich historiography of the role

of cotton in modern Egypt. Through a lens of cotton, Shokr offers an account of Nasserism, the ruling form of nationalism in post-independence Egypt, in the 1950s and 1960s.

Shokr accomplishes this account of Nasserism by detailing intellectual thought during the decades leading up to independence, from the 1920s through World War II. All chapters of the book's body, except for the last chapter, are devoted to the interwar depression and WWII periods as a way of explaining the 1952 Free Officers coup and the form that the nationalist project took under the administration of Gamal Abdel Nasser. The last chapter is devoted to the Nasser era.

Shokr weaves together a history of nationalist thought with a social history of cotton—theories of political economy with material realities of pro-

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duction and exchange, public policy, world economic trends, and other circumstances of the time in which this thought emerged. By effectively outlining the political, cultural, and social fabric of interwar Egypt that gave rise to this thought, Shokr provides a nuanced intellectual history.

Familiar nationalist thinkers of Egypt are foregrounded in *Harvests of Liberation*, including Ibrahim Rashad, Yusuf Nahhas, Ahmad Sadiq Sa'ad, and Mirit Butrus Ghali. Thinkers of the quasi-independence period, of the 1920s and 1930s, were responding to Egypt's integration into a volatile capitalist world order. The country's wealth—its production capacity, revenue, and employment—rested in the export of cotton to the capitalist core. After WWI, Egypt's economy faced a crippling cotton crop and declining cotton prices.

These thinkers had varied backgrounds and positions, some within government and not, but most were writing from the political left, reflecting intellectual currents globally at that time. Ahmad Shokr argues that the quite diverse nationalist thought of this period should best be understood in the context of depression and war. Intellectuals, civil servants, and others were responding more to the economic crisis that began during WWI and less to ideals.

A more compelling argument in *Harvests of Liberation* is that a decisive shift in nationalist thought occurred after World War II. In the 1920s and 1930s, nationalist thought was exclusively focused on reforms that did little to threaten the landed oligarchy. After the war, "Egyptian reformers, activists, and intellectuals started to devise a political project that was unprecedented in previous decades: the redistribution of landed property" (p. 156). This shift, in turn, set the stage for the land reforms and nationalization of the Nasserist project.

Ahmad Shokr's task in *Harvests of Liberation* was undoubtedly difficult. Offering a unique perspective of the history of cotton and nationalism in Egypt is not easy given the well-established, English-language historiography on these topics. And much of this book covers what is already well covered, especially the chapters on the "global plantation" and the "new peasant."

In addition, although it was not easy to conduct research in Egypt as a scholar based outside of the country in previous decades, it has arguably become even more difficult since the 2011 uprising and the beginning of the administration of Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in 2014. And it was during the past decade that Shokr conducted research for this book.

Yet, by focusing on cotton—the plantation, landed oligarchy, peasants, workers, and so on—nationalist thought and the nationalist project that followed can only be understood partially. The other problem of that "global plantation" for the nationalists was what the cotton was turned into and how manufactured cotton products (i.e., textiles) were imported into the country. *Harvests of Liberation* provides rich descriptions, in line with the discipline of history, of peasants, shipyard workers, railways, and so on that enabled cotton to be exported to the manufacturing centers of Europe. But there is little in this book about where the clothes came from that peasants and workers, or the army or civil service, wore.

This second part of the production, trade, and consumption of cotton—that the concept of the international division of labor captures—also animated the Nasserist project. In the effort to fuel modernization via industrialization, the newly independent government fed domestic cotton to state-owned textile manufacturing. How did the manufacturing of products (including textiles) for the home market happen? That longer, nuanced story is the other part of nationalism that is much less covered in the historiography and would arguably help us better understand right-wing nationalism in Egypt and elsewhere today.

*Harvests of Liberation* would be of interest to graduate students and scholars of intellectual history, more generally, and the history of intellectual thought on agricultural development in former colonies, more specifically. Those studying economic nationalism, more generally, and the history of Egyptian anti-colonial struggles, more specifically, would also gain from reading this book.