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The Second World War, Imperial, and Colonial Nostalgia: The North Africa Campaign and Battlefields of Memory

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Abstract: The article addresses the function of (post)colonial nostalgia in a context of multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009) in contemporary Europe. How can different cultural memories of the Second Word War be put into respectful dialogue with each other? The text is based on a contrapuntal reading (Said 1994) of British and Egyptian popular narratives, mainly British documentary films about the North Africa Campaign, but also feature films and novels, and data from qualitative interviews collected during ethnographic fieldwork in Alexandria and Cairo, Egypt, during visits 2013–2015. The study highlights the considerable differences between the British and Egyptian narratives, but also the significant similarities regarding the use and function of nostalgia. In addition, the Egyptian narrative expresses a profound cosmopolitan nostalgia and a longing for what is regarded as Egypt's lost, modern Golden Age, identified as the decades before the nation's fundamental change from western-oriented monarchy to Nasser's Arab nationalist military state. The common elements between the two national narratives indicate a possibly fruitful way to open up for a shared popular memory culture about the war years, including postcolonial aspects.

Keywords: Second World War; North Africa Campaign; Egypt; cosmopolitanism; imperial nostalgia; colonial nostalgia; collective memory

1. Introduction

The Second World War still provides powerful contributions to national identities through monuments, ritual commemorations, the school curriculum, and postmemory work (Finney 2018a). It also continues to resonate in collective memories around the world and remains a source of inspiration for all kinds of new media products, from popular history to digital games. However, there are still numerous untold stories related to the war and stories that tend to disappear in the plethora of western-produced mainstream narratives about it, as they are told by others, with other perspectives than the usual Good Allies vs. Evil Axis scheme. While there is a growing scholarly interest in intercultural memory studies, there are still considerable research gaps regarding some of the geographic areas formerly under imperial domination, in particular the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region under British rule (cf. den Boer 2010, pp. 23–24; Finney 2018a; Fortunati and Lamberti 2010, p. 133; Nicolaidis et al. 2015). This article examines how popular mediations of the war years, in the context of Egypt during the 1940–1943 North Africa Campaign, provide a backdrop to contemporary nostalgia and dreams about identity and community, with a focus on Egypt. The study is situated in an interdisciplinary field where cultural memory studies, media studies, area studies, and postcolonial theory meet.

Material from two main text corpora was collected, analysed and compared in what literary scholar Edward Said (1994) has called a contrapuntal reading of popular British and Egyptian media

texts. The British corpus mainly consists of documentary films about the North Africa Campaign, as this is currently the most common genre where the theme is to be found. I have also included a selection of well-known feature films and novels, such as *The Desert Fox* (Hathaway, 1951) and *The English Patient* (Minghella, 1996), and Lawrence Durrell's famous tetralogy *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957–1960). On the Egyptian side, the sources are interview data collected during ethnographic fieldwork in Egypt, and the media texts referred to by the informants, of which most are available in English. Said, who also wrote extensively about music, proposed contrapuntal reading as a method for interpreting narratives from a postcolonial position: As when two or more harmonies, or melodies, are entwined to form a more complex musical work, we need more than one perspective in a story in order to understand the whole. It is also important to acknowledge the texts' worldliness, as representations of place/space are affiliated with both geography and culture, including the collective memories and myths related to them (Said 1994).

Said's thinking resonates with current scholarship on transnational memory. For example, as historian Patrick Finney writes, "it is fruitful to conceive of the former imperial space as a field in which multiple memories of the war are at play, and often in contestation, as a consequence of the unfolding of decolonisation" (Finney 2018b, p. 73). This article is written at a time when Europe faces major issues related to immigration and integration, which makes its underlying theme particularly up-to-date: How can different cultural memories of the Second Word War, including those outside Europe, be put into respectful dialogue with each other? One suggestion is that considering the fundamental importance of the Second World War in dominant western memory cultures, an inclusion of presently excluded ethnic groups, especially non-European, into the popular narrative might contribute to a positive sense of historical connectedness between Europeans and non-Europeans, especially around the Mediterranean, where there are already millennia of shared cultural heritage. A way to open up for such an inclusive mode of discourse is through acknowledging not only different forms of *nostalgia*, but also the performative, "world-building" aspects of it, as found in popular narratives on both sides of the Mediterranean.

Nostalgia: A Multifaceted Phenomenon

Although official memory culture is authoritative and often exclusive in character, it also needs to take account of the dynamics of collective memory in order to uphold its legitimacy. Here, *nostalgia* has an important function as, in Svetlana Boym's words, "an intermediary between collective and individual memory" (Boym 2001, p. 54). While nostalgia is commonly found in popular history as a more or less playful form for shaping innocent fantasies about the past and a device to channel unspecified emotions of longing, it also carries potentially ideological functions (Brennan 1990; Boym 2001; Noakes and Pattinson 2014; Lowenthal 2015; Samuel 2012; Winter 2010). In her influential work *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym identifies two main types of nostalgia, *restorative* and *reflective*:

> Restorative nostalgia is at the core of recent national and religious revivals; it knows two main plots—the return to origins and the conspiracy. Reflective nostalgia does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones; it loves details, not symbols. At best, reflective nostalgia can present an ethical and creative challenge, not merely a pretext for midnight melancholias. This typology of nostalgia allows us to distinguish between national memory, that is based on a single plot of national identity, and social memory, which consists of collective frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory. (Boym 2001, p. XVIII)

Before presenting the more specific forms of colonial and imperial nostalgia, it is useful to follow Boym's line of thought and clarify the relations between different types of memory. As said, nostalgia functions in-between collective and individual memory, which calls for some definitions. There is a close relationship between a nation's official memory culture, collective and cultural memory. When defined as the largely shared, but not necessarily homogenous, remembrances

of the past within imagined communities ranging from nation-states to regions, *collective memory* embodies memories on both an individual and cultural level. While living, informal memory among individuals is said to last for 3–4 interacting generations, *cultural memory* can be much more enduring, especially when supported by powerful institutions, such as the media and the state (Assmann 2010, p. 117). With increasing cultural diversity within a nation state, as in contemporary Europe, the roles of official, collective, and cultural memory in an imagined national community need to be reconsidered (Anderson [1990] 2006). Michael Rothberg has suggested a term for contemporary memory culture's productive intercultural dynamic: Considered as *multidirectional*, "as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative", memories of slavery and colonialism do not have be competing with memories of the Holocaust in multicultural societies (Rothberg 2009, p. 3). Instead,

> [a] model of multidirectional memory allows for the perception of the power differentials that tend to cluster a larger spiral of memory discourse in which even hostile invocations of memory can provide vehicles for further, countervailing commemorative acts. The model of multicultural memory posits collective memory as partially disengaged from exclusive versions of cultural identity and acknowledges how remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites. (ibid., p. 11)

Scholarly discussions dealing with sentimental memory and feelings of loss in a postcolonial context can be divided into two main categories, colonial and imperial, or even imperialist, nostalgia. While these terms may at first glance seem related, we need to examine how they are defined and for what purposes they are used. Moreover, it is crucial to distinguish between the perspectives. Who is being nostalgic, for what, and for what reasons? Patricia Lorcin offers a useful distinction between *imperial* and *colonial* nostalgia: "The former . . . is associated with the loss of empire, that is to say the decline of national grandeur and the international power politics connected to economic and political hegemony. The latter, by contrast, is associated with the loss of sociocultural standing or, to be more precise, the colonial lifestyle" (Lorcin 2013, p. 97). While these definitions are compatible with both the restorative and reflective types of nostalgia, Renato Rosaldo's concept *imperialist* nostalgia seems to primarily belong to the former. Defined as "a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed", Rosaldo locates imperialist nostalgia

> alongside a peculiar sense of mission, the white man's burden, where civilized nations duty-bound to uplift so-called savage ones. In this ideologically constructed world of ongoing progressive change, putatively static savage societies become a stable reference for defining (the felicitous progress of) civilized identity. "We" valorize innovation and then yearn for more stable worlds, whether these reside in our own past, in other cultures, or in the conflation of the two. Such forms of longing thus appear closely related to secular notions of progress. When the so-called civilizing process destabilizes forms of life, the agents of change experience transformations of other cultures as if they were personal losses. (Rosaldo 1989, p. 88)

Although the concept is relevant for the present study, particular attention needs to be taken to the power relations in which the "agents of change" are here implicitly identified as the Western empires. However, the alternative perspectives brought forward through a contrapuntal reading also open up for agency on behalf of the Other. There are parallels to anthropologist Johannes Fabian's concept *denial of coevalness* (Fabian [1983] 2014), defined as describing "*a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse*" (Fabian [1983] 2014, p. 31; italics in original). While imperialist nostalgia includes a more or less outspoken cultural essentialism, where imperialism is a supposedly natural result of a priori inequalities between societies regarding civilisation, modernity, and progress, similar ways of thinking

about time and the Other also seem to be applicable *within* these "other cultures", as Rosaldo put it in the citation above. This suggests that although there are good reasons for associating imperial agency with globally dominant geopolitical actors, similar ideological arguments can also be found within power structures on the dominated side.

The methodological idea of the contrapuntal refrains from a one-sided view on the postcolonial and looks for other voices to complete the score. In the present study, expressions of colonial and imperial nostalgia are found both in the British and the Egyptian narratives, and they coexist within a framework of what can perhaps be called *cosmopolitan nostalgia*. *Cosmopolitan*, here, is to be understood as an aspect of an imperial condition, where identification with a place and a collective can, to some degree, be regarded as a voluntary affiliation, rather than governed by legal definitions of nationality, or by commonly held conceptions of national identity (Starr 2009, p. 7). Nevertheless, as an empire's heterogeneity is based on social hierarchies, the options for identification with a cosmopolitan identity are not equally distributed. With some exceptions, such as Artemis Cooper's partly historical, partly anecdotal *Cairo in the War 1939–1945* (Cooper 1989), it is in particular Alexandria that has come to symbolise cosmopolitan Egypt, with a number of mostly European minorities living side by side with the majority population, consisting mainly of indigenous North Africans and Arabs. While in particular Egyptian Copts, Jews, Greeks, and Italians traced their families' roots back to Antiquity or longer, many Europeans settled in Egypt between the middle of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth century, especially in the main cities. This multicultural era ended through the forced expatriation of Egyptians with European and Jewish background during president Nasser's 1950's and 1960's Arab Nationalist project (Goldschmidt et al. 2005).

Much of the scholarly discourse on cosmopolitan Egypt has a western perspective, and the dominant account of especially Alexandria as an exemplary cosmopolitan space is essentially Eurocentric (Fahmy 2006a; Halim 2013). In Khaled Fahmy's words, "the openness and cosmopolitanism of Alexandria, much celebrated by novelists, poets and historians alike, is essentially predicated on ignoring and silencing the city's Arabic-speaking population" (Fahmy 2006b, p. 281). Nevertheless, Deborah Starr also has a point in arguing that although postcolonial theory has been very valuable for understanding the East–West relations, its tools are not sufficient in order to understand the interplay between all the various ethnoreligious and ethnolinguistic groups sharing Egypt as their home. The cosmopolitan perspective has often been subordinate in relation to postcolonial narratives of anticolonial resistance, which in this case leads to a reduction of the narrative to a binary where many, if not most, of the minorities more or less disappear (ibid., pp. 7–9). Thus, in order to speak about nostalgia in this context, especially with a contrapuntal ambition, one will need to acknowledge not only East and West, but a multiplicity of coexisting voices, including and simultaneously problematizing those of a European–Egyptian background (cf. Mabro 2006).

Although there are significant sociocultural links between Europe and Egypt during the time of the Second World War, these are very rarely visible in western mainstream memory cultures. Due to the unequal power relations in global media, these are largely influenced by American, but to some extent also British, nationalist myths. As all such myths, these also build on forgetting certain aspects of the past. Benedict Anderson highlights what he calls the characteristic device of *remembering/forgetting* in the construction of national genealogies, especially when referring to pivotal events in national history, such as battles, massacres, and civil wars that the citizens are simultaneously obliged to remember and to 'already have forgotten' the disturbing parts of (Anderson [1990] 2006, pp. 200–1). Both Rosaldo (1989, p. 88) and Robert Fletcher identify a strategy of what the latter calls *imperialist amnesia*,

> a tendency on the part of 'agents of postcolonialism' to either ignore the history of colonial domination in their accounts or to present a sanitised version of colonial domination from which evidence of exploitation, persecution, subjugation and genocide has been effectively effaced. (Fletcher 2012, p. 423)

He also suggests the term *partial amnesia*, "in which colonialism is acknowledged but its distasteful aspects effaced" (ibid., p. 424). While all of these forms of nostalgia are found in the material analysed in the present study, some of them merge in perhaps surprising ways, a phenomenon that will be discussed in more detail later. For now, it should be noted that similar nostalgic strategies and forms of amnesia seem possible to employ by both sides in a postcolonial context. However, as a result of the dominance of a limited number of influential media actors and the global circulation of media texts, the narratives of the subordinate are often limited to circulation within their own national, or regional, communities. The mnemonic battle suggested in the beginning of this article is not global in scale, nor does it pose any threat to those in power. Still, it does bring important questions to light regarding the nature of collective memory in increasingly heterogeneous societies such as large parts of Europe.

2. Results

2.1. A Hierarchy of Memories?

Representations of the North Africa Campaign during the Second World War look quite different in dominant western media as compared to the texts referred to in the Egyptian data, both regarding the amount and the content. As experiences of war and conflict are generally considered crucial in the formation of collective as well as individual memory, one might expect to find mediated counter-memories of the Second World War in regions usually not visible in Western representations, especially those where this time-period is related to colonial oppression and anticolonial struggle. However, as a six-month field study in Alexandria and Cairo 2013–2015 indicated, this does not seem to be the case in Egypt. Despite the decisive battles at El Alamein in late 1942, bringing the war's first major Allied victory, despite the tragic loss of civilian lives and vast material destruction during the numerous air raids on Egypt's big cities, and despite the country's long tradition as a leading regional producer of popular culture texts, Egyptian media culture does not offer much to challenge their exclusion from a globally shared historical experience. There are basically no regional documentary films on the topic, except for an Al Jazeera production about the current problem with Second World War land mines in the North African desert (*The Curse of the Sands*, 2012). Instead, virtually all of the informants referred to the same limited number of media texts, most notably a handful of novels by Egyptian and Egyptian-Greek authors, and personal recollections published by Egyptian Jews in the diaspora. Those most frequently referred to were Lucette Lagnado's *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* (2007); Naguib Mahfouz's *Sugar Street* (1957); Ibrahim Abdel Meguid's *No One Sleeps in Alexandria* (2007); and Harry Tzalas' *Farewell to Alexandria* (2003). Another frequently mentioned novel was Alaa Al Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building* (2006), although here the narrative focuses on what happened after the Jewish exodus. The non-Arab authors turned out to be very important, as their voices represent the lost modern, cosmopolitan Egypt. Several informants also included the feature film *Alexandria . . . Why?* (*Iskanderija . . . Lih?*, 1979), and the documentary film *Jews of Egypt* (2013) among their most influential sources, while some also mentioned the popular Syrian TV drama series about the last Egyptian king Farouk, *El-malek Farouk* (2007) as an important source of knowledge. The only regional contribution considered to at least imitate the genre World War Two combat film was the Libyan action drama *Lion of the Desert* (1981), in which legendary resistance leader Omar Al-Mukhtar fights the pre-WWII Italian colonial army. However, featuring an international cast of star actors and financed by the dictator Khaddafi, it was merely mentioned as a curiosity.

From a western perspective, this state of affairs may seem surprising. There is a small museum at El Alamein, and nearby are the British Commonwealth, German, and Italian war cemeteries, but these are mainly sites of interest to foreign visitors, especially war veterans' organisations. However, there are no organised tours to El Alamein and there is hardly any marketing of Alexandria as a destination for potential western tourists. By contrast, a common view among Egyptians in the region seems to be that El Alamein "is a nice place to go swimming", and that nobody except westerners cares about the Second World War. However, there are occasional news reports about people and livestock killed or injured

by mines from the war, still hidden in the desert (Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor 2007), which seems to be the only thing connecting contemporary Egyptians to this part of their history. Thus, the preconditions for Egyptian nostalgia seem quite poor, as focus is entirely set on the present. Here, the historical events seem to serve two main functions: As providing nostalgia for westerners, and as the origin of contemporary casualties. For some, the latter also includes negative emotions directed towards the West: Not only did they colonise, exploit, and cause damage to Egypt in the past; today they turn their backs and refuse to clean the desert from their own lethal waste. A conclusion might be that nostalgia related to the war is too much associated with the West in order to be meaningful to most Egyptians, whose World War Two experiences are only those of the Victim. However, from a western perspective, the main role of the Victim in a Second World War narrative undisputedly belongs to the Jews. While this was not questioned by any of my informants, some of them associated a German victory in North Africa with the Holocaust being extended to include not only the Egyptian Jews, but also Arabs, as both are Semitic peoples. Another narrative suggested that the Nazis would have turned the Egyptians into slaves. Both versions were based on the historical context where many wartime Egyptians were looking forward to the Germans as liberators from the British.

The scarcity in both official Egyptian memory culture and collective memory regarding the war makes it somewhat misleading to use the term *collective* for what is in effect a very limited section of mainly urban, educated, middle-class Egyptians for whom the past at all matters. As several of my informants made clear, "we are not representative for most Egyptians, as we are actually *interested* in the past". However, there is an interesting phenomenon almost entirely overlooked by most scholars: The nostalgic narrative about modern Egypt's lost Golden Age. To grasp this, it is first important to acknowledge the special features of Egyptian historiography. While university and state have been cooperating (despite occasionally strained relations) regarding what national perspectives and concerns should be officially acknowledged and addressed, there is also a third influential party: The non-academic historian. As Anthony Gorman writes,

> Often stigmatized as amateur and second-rate scholars, or simply branded as partisan, they have played a seminal role in pioneering new historical frameworks that have later become influential in academic circles. Less restrained by both the scholarly and political limitations of the academy, non-academic historians have been the source of a vigorous contested and more representative national historiography. (Gorman 2003, p. 79)

The writers in question include journalists, political commentators, and other intellectuals who, from their position outside the academic and political constraints, can express their ideas more freely. This, however, does not imply that they are free to publish anything, as "non-academics have suffered noticeably more from censorship and political harassment than have their academic counterparts" (ibid., p. 80). Still, this form of "history in the street" is very influential, which can (at least partly) explain my informants' choice of references (ibid.)

The nostalgic representations of pre-Nasser Egypt as "a lost paradise" are most explicit in the Egyptian-Jewish diaspora literature, but can also be found in the other texts. Together, they express a multifaceted Egyptian cultural identity where different ethnicities and religious affiliations are simultaneously distinct and mixed into a porous cosmopolitan collective, especially in the big cities of Alexandria and Cairo, where most narratives take place.[1] This imagery of an essentially modern Egyptian Golden Age, full of hopes for the future that were sadly scattered after the war's end, was constantly evoked by the informants, indicating not only the impact of the meta narrative to which the different texts contribute, but also its success as a utopian counter-image to an actual Egypt associated with totalitarianism, intolerance, and general decline. That this Golden Age was also characterised by colonial domination and racist oppression is indeed an important part of the

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[1] See also Hanna (1994) for a nonfiction presentation of Egyptian identity.

narrative, both in the texts and in the informants' accounts. However, the British presence is not simply regarded as negative, as for several of the informants it also serves as a nostalgic signifier of hope and utopia, as in the hypothetical, but lost, possibility of Egypt becoming an independent part of the British Commonwealth, thereby belonging to the same political and societal type of nations as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. This suggests an almost "self-Orientalist" view of postcolonial Egypt as going backwards, rejecting cosmopolitan modernity and democracy in favour of Arab nationalistic ethnic cleansing and counter-Enlightenment totalitarianism.

This stands in stark contrast to the dominant western narrative, which almost exclusively focuses on military history in a strikingly mythical form: The heroic Duel in the Desert between the legendary commanders Rommel and Montgomery, their armies clad in heavy armour and performing like modern knights, with a mutual agreement of chivalry and fair play (Edwards 2012; Francis 2014; Kingsepp 2018, under publication). Most documentary films about the North Africa Campaign, especially those focusing on the battles of El Alamein, are British productions. As this was *the* great Allied victory where the British, and not the Americans, were the ones in charge, El Alamein in British cultural memory and national identity signifies one of the nation's last, globally significant moments. For others, the rather old-fashioned aura associated with the mainstream narrative opens up for an extraordinary adventure (Kingsepp 2008). Significantly, in mainstream western memory, the North African Campaign also differs from the rest of the Second World War in that it, supposedly, was not morally tainted by the Holocaust. Thus, here it is actually possible to venerate the German Afrika Korps under Rommel, and in some respects, the Naziness otherwise intrinsically connected to the German troops during the war is here diminished and reduced to symbols and insignia (ibid.).

The British version of the narrative shows several dimensions of restorative nostalgia, including elements of especially colonial, but also implicitly imperial nostalgia, as well as imperialist amnesia. A prominent component in the documentaries is the attractiveness of *ethical behaviour* as something intrinsically European, as here the Germans are often represented as an equally civilised enemy. The mythical idea about European ethical behaviour in warfare is here not only present through the tropes of *chivalry* and *fair play*, but especially in the overtly expressed characterisation of the North African Campaign as a "clean" war (Porter 2013, pp. 76–78). Indeed, in several cases, the narrator in the documentary films explicitly says that "this land is made for war" (Finney 2018b; Kingsepp 2018, under publication). With no indigenous population to be considered, and no infrastructure to be potentially harmed, the fantasies about North Africa as the perfect battleground are both nostalgic and utopian, appealing and absurd, especially considering the obvious presence of towns and villages on maps where the armies' movements are indicated by arrows and symbols. Accordingly, the regional population and their traumatic experiences of the Second World War are basically absent from dominant accounts of western popular history. This is also the case regarding nonwhite Allied soldiers, not the least the large number drafted from the colonies to serve in the British (and French) imperial forces (Byfield et al. 2015; Finney 2018b). Notably, this has changed over time, as older documentary films, such as the famous 1970's series *The World At War*, show considerably more archival footage of, for example, street life in cosmopolitan Cairo, where dark-skinned people in traditional garb mingle with more European-looking inhabitants. However, if there are any imagery at all from Egypt in the documentary films, regardless if present-day or wartime, it is almost exclusively reduced to Orientalist stereotypes, with Egyptians as exotic props, together with camels and palm trees (Kingsepp 2018, under publication).

This fits well with the spoken narrative, where Britain's position as a global imperial power is almost never problematised: The British are simply *present* in the region, as a benevolent defender of it against the megalomaniac dictators Hitler and Mussolini. In fact, when the word *empire* is used in the documentary films, it is almost never related to Britain, France, Belgium, or any other "good" nation. On the contrary, it is Mussolini who dreams about "a new Roman Empire", and Hitler who wants "world domination", while the rest of the (supposedly free) world join their forces to stop them. Accordingly, it seems easy to label this as an example of both imperial nostalgia

and imperialist amnesia, cooperating in the creation of a nostalgic dream world where everything seems much easier and more enjoyable, and all people "know their places" in a "natural" world order. Although the experiences of battle are represented as horrific, war is still, in a way, a manly adventure for westerners, and a game. The ludic parallels are especially visible in the documentaries' numerous maps, indicating strategic plans and showing the actual movements of the different military entities. This suggests yet another perspective where the imperial and/or colonial aspects are less important than war as a phenomenon in itself. Is it possible to speak of a war nostalgia? There are several indications of the North African Campaign having become more explicitly mythical in character than many other parts of the Second World War, which affects the way(s) it is remembered. The geographical location is here of major importance, as the settings bring forward a number of specific connotations related to the Orient in general and to the desert in particular. For most westerners, North Africa and Egypt are exotic places full of adventures and the desert backdrop also brings forward religious connotations to the Old Testament, saints, hermits, and other expressions of the otherworldly (Kingsepp 2018, under publication).

Representing war as a game, an adventure, and a profoundly life-changing experience (for those who survive) is certainly not unique, and it is perhaps especially attractive in fiction. While there is a number of mostly British (but also some US) feature films based on events, real or imagined, during the North Africa Campaign, for example *The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel* (1951), *The Desert Rats* (1953), and *Ice Cold in Alex* (1958), almost all were made during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. This part of the Second World War seems to have become less interesting to filmmakers over the decades, except when providing an exotic framework for a drama, or an adventure story such as *The English Patient* (1996) (Escher and Zimmermann 2005; Francis 2014). The adventure formula, which is also characteristic for much traditional war fiction, reduces colonialism and imperialism to a nostalgic framework where the cosmopolitan character of Egypt's big cities can be acknowledged, as it supports the narrative. This is where we find the closest overlappings with the Egyptian corpus of narratives, sharing not only time and space, but also significant elements related to factual past events. In the Egyptian novels and films, we meet British and other European adventurers, Egyptian scandal beauties with various ethnic backgrounds, rumours about spies, an ambivalent regard on the approaching Germans, Egyptian nationalists, and not the least street-smart ordinary people of different ethnic backgrounds and religious affiliations, who somehow manage to survive during these days of turmoil, or perish in the destruction brought to their lands.

While it is usually clear which implicit reader the story is directed to, and of what discourse it is a part, with whom we are to identify, and who are considered to be the Others, this is also where the contrapuntal strategy becomes most rewarding. Putting the two perspectives in dialogue, the result shows what is left out from the dominant western narrative, which provides a starting point for further inquiry. It also illustrates that in contrary to the immense importance assigned to the Second World War, especially in the West and in the former Soviet Union, there are other historical conflicts that official Egyptian memory culture values more, especially the wars with Israel. All my informants agreed that official history briefly and superficially dismisses the years before Nasser's revolution as only negative, with a weak, corrupt monarchy and colonial subordination. Accordingly, the handful of novels, read mainly by a middle-class segment of today's Egyptians, present a counternarrative to the dominant Western, as well as to the official Egyptian version. In that respect, it can be argued that for some Egyptian readers, it has filled an important function of both nostalgia for a lost past and (utopian) hope for political and societal change.

2.2. The British Empire and the Dewesternisation of Alexandria

As mentioned, the concept *empire* is obviously to be shunned and condemned as something negative in the documentary films, as the word is most frequently reserved for Mussolini's imperial ambitions. The British Empire is most often not mentioned as such; instead, there is "the British presence" in the Middle East, Egypt, or Cairo. Although avoided verbally, it is sometimes

communicated visually through the Union Jack placed on, or even covering, Egypt on the frequently shown maps of North Africa. That the British are in Egypt at all is considered a quite normal state of affairs, as this is very rarely being reflected upon, even less questioned. As most of the films are mainly concerned with the military aspects of the war, there are only rarely sequences showing civilian life in Egypt, and then mostly in connection with British soldiers off duty. It is not only the narrative accounts of Cairo that express colonial nostalgia, but also the visual imagery in archival, as well as contemporary footage. We see glimpses of (white) Britons enjoying belly dance, camel rides, restaurants, and other tourist activities, mixed with present-day images of minarets, street vendors, and remaining colonial heritage sites, such as the Gezira Sporting Club. The city's liminoid features as both East and West, both near the theatre of war and at a safe distance from it, are familiar from other western popular culture representations of Cairo (Escher and Zimmermann 2005). This function is also present in the documentary films, although there it is extended to the desert as a kind of primordial, sacred space, where the closeness to death adds an aura of the numinous and sublime to the experience (Kingsepp 2018, under publication).

In contrast to the Oriental haven Cairo, Alexandria, Egypt's second largest city, which, during the war, hosted the Allied military headquarters, is almost entirely overlooked in the documentary films. Despite the city's ancient past intimately connecting it to the cultural and scientific history of western Europe, virtually all films reduce it to a British Navy port and a dot on the map, used for measuring the distance to El Alamein and the threatening German forces. This is peculiar, considering the influence of two famous British 20th century authors, E. M. Forster and Lawrence Durrell, who both lived in Alexandria for several years and used the city in their literary works. The iconic status of especially Durrell's four novels in his *Alexandria Quartet* (1960) suggests that it would be careless to neglect the influence of these men on the British—and western—structure of feeling evoked when turning the mind towards the years of the Second World War in Egypt. In fact, Durrell himself appears in the episode of *The World At War* examined in this study, interviewed due to his role as a former British press attaché. However, already a contrapuntal awareness when reading Durrell's celebrated *Alexandria Quartet* suggests that it does not say anything about the "real" Alexandria. The *Quartet* depicts the city as characterised by a decadent European lifestyle, while the glimpses of local Egyptians are rare and highly stereotypical—in fact, much like in the documentaries. Here, as with Cairo, Alexandria serves the role of a liminoid place where western man can seek refuge from the constraints of secular modernity and ultimately find himself (Escher and Zimmermann 2005). Importantly, in Durrell's story, we do meet some of the numerous Copts and Jews who have been minorities within Egyptian society from antiquity, as well as those who used to be a part of it: Italians, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, and other people from all around Europe. Accordingly, there are good historical reasons for acknowledging especially wartime Alexandria as a Mediterranean city, and a link back to our common European heritage and culture (Hirst and Silk 2004).

2.3. Cosmopolitan Egypt and Colonial Amnesia

As said, cosmopolitanism, openness, multiculturalism, and close connections to the Mediterranean and Europe are prominent tropes in parts of contemporary Egyptian memory culture about the war years. Still, it would not be correct to regard Egyptian cultural memory of WWII as a regional alternative, or response, to corresponding western narratives. Here, there is no 'memory boom' like in the West, as in a widespread interest in the past expressed on multiple levels of society (Winter 2006). On the contrary, many of my informants complained about most people being not only ignorant of, but also profoundly uninterested in their heritage. This is also reflected quantitatively, as the number of popular media texts explicitly dealing with WWII is, as I said, limited. Still, the few that were repeatedly mentioned have obviously been highly influential, as in several cases the informants' accounts of what happened during the war turned out to be more or less literally corresponding to narratives in the books. However, the concept of a Golden Age as such is not present in any of the media texts. Although there are, especially in the Egyptian-Jewish diaspora writings, common references

to a "lost paradise", a "lost world", etc., this is a predominantly melancholic nostalgia of loss and mourning. The Golden Age seems to be something like a dream projected onto the past, based on material from the media texts, but also from physical remnants in Cairo and especially in Alexandria, where there are still old shop signs in Greek and Italian, and old colonial cafés with an abundance of props for a nostalgic game of make-believe.

Thus, despite being under British dominance, the era up until the early 1950s fills a largely positive nostalgic function. Following the concepts imperial nostalgia vs. amnesia, this could perhaps be a case of *colonial amnesia*, highlighting the positive aspects while reducing the negative. As this is not a process in official memory culture, but rather a grassroots movement within a limited segment of the educated, urban middle-class, Anderson's concept remembering/forgetting is not really applicable. In this case, nostalgia can be interpreted as a reaction to 60 years of military rule, during which official historiography propagandistically represented the pre-Nasser time as corrupt and despicable, with a weak king that leaned towards foreign powers and did not care about his people. Notably, this negative image is also reflected in parts of the Egyptian media texts, especially in Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy*, of which the third part, *Sugar Street* (1957), takes place during the war years. However, today the era of the Egyptian kings Fouad (1868–1936) and his son Farouk (1920–1965), who was forced to abdicate and leave Egypt in 1952, seems to be re-evaluated, at least in parts of the "history in the street" discourse. The emergence of this new perspective seems related to the highly popular 2007 TV drama series *El-malek Farouk* (*King Farouk*), a Syrian production broadcasted as a family program during the month of Ramadan. Especially the younger informants (between 20 and 30 years old) mentioned *El-malek Farouk* as influential regarding their knowledge as well as their own thoughts about this part of Egyptian history. The king, they say, was not an evil man. On the contrary: He loved Egypt and the Egyptians, as he did never desert his people. The king was forced to leave, and importantly, he never tried to harm Egypt from his exile. It is not unlikely that in many cases, this can be interpreted primarily as an oppositional reaction to the official, negative narrative, rather than as an objective re-evaluation of the historical events. Another commonly expressed view was that although Britain was a foreign imperial power that in practice ruled Egypt, and most Egyptians wanted to get rid of their hated oppressors, the nation did prosper, and it was wealthy. Accounts about the Egyptian pound having been a hard currency, and the quality and export of Egyptian cotton as a source of national pride, were also frequent, again especially among the younger. All informants, however, referred to a nation where there was also severe poverty and very poor social conditions, especially in the rural regions. Still, it could be proud of the wealth, elegance, and highly cosmopolitan character of its largest cities. The image of the latter, albeit selective and often mythical to its character, nevertheless seems to offer an almost irresistible source for nostalgic projections and, in some cases, a utopian dream of an ideal past that is nowhere to be seen in the future.

In a contrapuntal reading, the juxtaposition of imperial(ist) and colonial nostalgia with what can be called a cosmopolitan nostalgia becomes intriguing. As all these aspects belong to the same whole, and also share several of their main signifiers, or props, this opens up for possible new ways of telling stories about the Second World War. It might also offer insights that are useful in other postcolonial contexts. Is it, indeed, in some contexts more relevant to talk about a *postcolonial* nostalgia (Walder 2011)? Such an interpretation seems more rewarding, as it reduces the usual binaries between dominated and subordinate and offers a higher degree of independent agency to the formerly colonial subjects.

3. Discussion

The study on which this article was based compares two different discourses about the North Africa Campaign of the Second World War. A contrapuntal reading of British and Egyptian narratives indicates that the first tend to maintain a strict "us and them" perspective, where "they" are either entirely absent, or reduced to Oriental props. Almost as an exemplary illustration of imperial and colonial nostalgia, including elements of imperialist amnesia, empire and colonialism carry

positive and pleasurable connotations in the vast majority of the texts, while the negative sides are most often overlooked. Taken as a whole, the British corpus is surprisingly conservative and traditional in character, and quite far from reflecting the current, largely critical discourse (Noakes and Pattinson 2014). Regarded as expressions of cultural memory, this points towards a significant discrepancy between official memory culture, as represented by scholars and other intellectuals, and popular history. Thus, on a collective memory level, the interplay between official memory culture, popular history, and the audience's individual interpretations symbolically becomes a battle between what narrative is most appealing. What is to be remembered, and what is to be forgotten? However, this is not an isolated phenomenon regarding cultural memories of the Second World War, where simplistic, mythically founded narratives, expressing restorative nostalgia, seem to be more commercially—but sometimes also politically—attractive than those that are complex and problematising (Kingsepp 2008).

In the British documentary films, the issue of *empire* is obviously sensitive, as here the preferred use of the word is when relating to Mussolini's imperial dreams. British imperialism is simply not mentioned, or symbolically transferred to a "presence", a benevolent position from which Britannia sets out to "defend" those depending on her for their well-being. While there are indications of *amnesia* in the general remembering/forgetting function connected to narratives of national identity—notably, on both sides—there are also important aspects of colonial nostalgia. The British corpus represents the life of the British in Egypt as both exotic and familiar, and on the whole quite pleasurable. When other (most often undefined) ethnic groups are at all present, it is not in a role as actors, but as props signifying the Orient. Interestingly enough, this also includes those of European descent. Their absence, or very modest presence, suggests that neither the majority population nor the minorities are significant to the British, except for as part of the latter's colonial lifestyle. It should be said that the overall British narrative does show some internal variation, although regarded as a whole it expresses restorative nostalgia and a Golden Age where the British Empire still provides the firm, undisputed foundation of national identity.

The Egyptian voice is, in comparison, much more complex. It can partly be regarded as expressions of restorative nostalgia, as in the remembrance of a nationalistic struggle against the colonial oppressors, and as Egypt's modern Golden Age before the 1952 officers' coup that began 60 years of military rule. However, this Golden Age narrative also includes significant elements of reflective and colonial nostalgia. There are even elements related to imperial nostalgia, albeit from the perspective of the dominated, which indicates the need for a more in-depth exploration. William Cunningham Bissell (2005) highlights this question in an article on nostalgia as a social phenomenon:

> Colonial nostalgia is clearly connected to its imperial counterpart, but it also points to rather more disturbing and difficult forms of the contemporary global landscape. We can certainly comprehend why conservatives or social elites in former metropoles might long for a return to empire. Likewise, we can understand the logic behind the marketing of colonial chic, recycling imperialism as the stuff of customer desire. / . . . / But what does it mean when Africans voice similar views, seemingly harkening back to colonialism as a better age? How exactly do we come to terms with expressions of colonial nostalgia by the descendants of those who struggled long and hard to overcome the effects of the European domination and exploitation? (Bissell 2005, p. 217)

While cosmopolitanism in Africa was by no means restricted to Egypt (Bissell 2005; Lundahl 2014), the phenomenon definitely needs to be taken into consideration when trying to understand the intricate fabrics of nostalgia in this context. Importantly, although the respondents in the present study all expressed very similar views regarding Egypt's modern Golden Age, their social backgrounds were very different, from street vendors without formal education to university students and academics. Further, in this case, the expressions of cosmopolitan nostalgia are open and ethnically inclusive, as an important part of the narrative is that of the lost multicultural community. Also of importance is the fact that some of the ethnic groups constituting this community were of European origin, although several

of them had lived in Egypt for generations. Thus, the lost cosmopolitan part of Egyptian cultural identity, as perceived by these informants, also has important geopolitical significations: Nasser's Pan-Arab nationalist project tore the nation's thousand-year-old cultural ties to Europe and to the western world, to which at least some of them feel emotionally connected (Hirst and Silk 2004).

To a large extent, the Egyptian narrative shares its signifiers with the corresponding British in its expressions of a colonial nostalgia. Thus, both sides share the same trope of a Golden Age in their representations of Egypt during the Second World War. The difference lies especially in detail and agency: On the Egyptian side, the people living there have names, faces, families, and they are actors in their own narratives. A fez is not just a fez, a *tarboosh*, simply signifying the Orient. It is worn by someone, and this wearing of a fez has a meaning both to him, his fictional context, and to the contemporary reader. The fez is also a temporal signifier, as virtually no one today (except for occasional tourists and very old men) wears one. The Golden Age narrative is based on a binary temporality, where the *now* and the *then* are put against each other, *then* largely getting its meaning from being very different from *now*. In the Egyptian context, values such as openness, pluralism, tolerance, cosmopolitanism, hope, and belonging to an essentially Mediterranean regional community are put in contrast to all kinds of negative feelings associated with living in a closed, nationalist, totalitarian military state. Here is where the relative absence and/or suspiciously propagandistic character of official Egyptian memory culture regarding the last years of monarchy becomes important, as its place in (at least parts of) collective memory is overtaken by the artistic narratives of literature and film. Thus, the nostalgic representations are already from the beginning rooted in a palimpsest of fact, fiction, and imagination, which gives them an open and fluid character. Accordingly, the Golden Age narrative also contains elements of *reflective nostalgia*, as its open character invites, even demands, individual reflection on what is a good society.

In conclusion: This study suggests that universal experiences of loss, longing, and desire can be transferred into different forms of nostalgia: Imperial, colonial, and cosmopolitan, and that these forms can fill similar functions on both sides in a postcolonial setting. It also highlights the importance of popular history for collective memory, and indicates how discrepancies between official memory culture and popular history can result in alternative narratives, where nostalgia provides the dynamic. The contrapuntal reading of the British and Egyptian materials suggests fruitful opportunities for a respectful and open dialogue between western/European and non-European popular memory cultures. While this would demand a thorough reconsideration of the current dominant, increasingly ethnocentric, western cultural memory of the Second World War, such an expansion also has considerable potential, especially considering the media industry's continuous search for new, emotionally captivating stories about the war. It would also reconnect parts of North Africa and the Middle East to our shared ancient Mediterranean heritage, thereby opening up yet another possible path to intercultural understanding.

4. Materials and Methods

The article is primarily based on a qualitative content analysis of ten British documentary films, which has been compared to mostly British, but also some American, feature films and novels, and ethnographic fieldwork in Alexandria and Cairo, Egypt, during a number of visits in 2013–2015, including qualitative interviews with anonymous informants.

The documentary film sample is part of a more extended study of documentary films on the topic, which has resulted in a number of conference papers and a book chapter (Kingsepp 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2018, under publication).

Using a common strategy in ethnographic fieldwork, I took every opportunity to talk to people I met in different contexts. The conversations and interviews were based on the questions "What do you know about Egypt during the Second World War?", and "From where have you got your information?" I was also offered the opportunity to hold a public lecture about my research at the Swedish Institute in Alexandria, inviting the audience to contribute with their own memories and stories. This also

brought valuable contacts for further interviews. The majority of informants were between their early twenties and forties, while a handful were up to around 80 years of age. Men and women were equally represented. Their level of education varied, from none to an academic degree, as did their state of employment. Although I did not ask about ethnic or religious affiliation, some of the informants did themselves mention their own background as wholly or partly Copt, Armenian, Greek, or Italian, always together with the prefix "Egyptian-". Considering the politically sensitive situation in Egypt, I have chosen to refrain from offering any more precise data about the informants. However, the topic and result of the study clearly indicate that anyone posing the same questions to a random sample of English-speaking Egyptians in the big cities will get similar results.

All media texts used in the study are listed below, including those referred to by the informants.

Documentary films

Battlefield, Season 5, Episode 2, *El Alamein.* [1995] 2001. USA/UK.
Battlefields, Season 1, Episode 1, *El Alamein.* 2001. UK.
Churchill's Desert War: The Road to El Alamein. 2012. UK.
The Curse of the Sands. 2010. Qatar.
Desert Victory. 1943. UK.
El Alamein: The Soldier's Story. 2011. UK.
Gladiators of World War II: The SAS. 2002. UK.
Jews of Egypt. 2013. Egypt.
Tank battles: El Alamein to the Volga: The story of tank warfare during World War II. 1991. UK.
The Desert War. Year unknown. UK.
The World at War, Episode 8, *The Desert: North Africa—1940–1943.* 1973. UK.
Wawell's 30.000. 1942. UK.

Motion pictures

Alexandria . . . Why? (*Iskanderija . . . Lih?*). 1979. Youssef Chahine.
Foxhole in Cairo. 1960. John Llewelly Moxey.
Ice Cold in Alex. 1958. J. Lee Thompson.
Lion of the Desert. 1981. Moustapha Akkad.
Raid on Rommel. 1971. Henry Hathaway.
Sahara. 1943. Zoltan Korda.
The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel. 1951. Henry Hathaway.
The Desert Rats. 1953. Robert Wise.
The English Patient. 1996. Anthony Minghella.
The Silent Enemy. 1958. William Fairchild.
Tobruk. 1967. Arthur Hiller.

TV series

El-malek Farouk (*King Farouk*). 2007. Syria.

Novels, biographies

Al Aswany, Alaa. 2006. *The Yacoubian Building*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press. ISBN 977 416 027 4.
Durrell, Lawrence. 1991. *The Alexandria Quartet*. London: Penguin. ISBN 978-0140153170. First published 1960.
Lagnado, Lucette. 2007. *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit: A Jewish Family's Exodus from Old Cairo to the New World*. New York: Ecco. ISBN 978-0-06-082218-7.

Mahfouz, Naguib. 2001. *Sugar Street*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press. ISBN 978-977-424-683-8. First published 1957.

Meguid, Ibrahim Abdel. 2007. *No One Sleeps in Alexandria*. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press. ISBN 978-9774249617.

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