

Article

# 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 World 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, using a qualitative content analysis of 10 British tv documentary films about the North Africa Campaign, and data from qualitative interviews collected during ethnographic fieldwork in Alexandria and Cairo, Egypt, during visits 2013–2015. The study highlights considerable differences between the British and Egyptian narratives, but also 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

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## 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 several 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 2010:23-24; Finney 2018a; Fortunati & Lamberti 2010:133; Nicolaidis, Sèbe and Maas 2015). This article examines how popular mediations of the war years, in a 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. Material from two text corpus was collected, analysed and compared in what literary scholar Edward Said (1994) has called a *contrapuntal reading*: a qualitative content analysis of British TV documentary films about the North Africa Campaign, all available internationally, and data collected during

ethnographic fieldwork in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> The study is situated in an interdisciplinary field where cultural memory studies, media studies, area studies, and postcolonial theory meet. 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: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 World 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 positively to our self-image, as well as to a less exclusive European identity. 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 multi-faceted phenomenon**

Although official memory culture is authoritative and often exclusive in character, at least in non-authoritarian societies 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 2001:54). 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 (Bhabha 1990; Boym 2001; Noakes & Pattinson 2014; Lowenthal 1985; 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

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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: xviii).

Before presenting the more specific forms 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: 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 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 to be competing with memories of the Holocaust in multicultural societies (Rothberg 2009: 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. 11).

Scholarly discussions dealing with sentimental memory and feelings of loss in a postcolonial context can be divided into two main categories, according to the author's choice of perspective and terms: *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 by the author. Moreover, especially in this context it is crucial to distinguish between perspectives. Who is being nostalgic, for what, and for what reasons? Patricia Lorcin offers a useful basic distinction:

[T]here is a distinction to be made between imperial nostalgia 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 2013:97).

Lorcin's definition has an emphasis on feelings of *loss*, which is very characteristic for many of the narratives in the present study. This perspective can be compared to Renato Rosaldo's, who defines

*imperialist nostalgia* as “a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed. ... [I]mperialist nostalgia uses a pose of 'innocent yearning' both to capture people's imagination and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination” (Rosaldo 1989:88). There are parallels to Orientalism as defined by Said, as well as to anthropologist Johannes Fabian's (2014) concept denial of coevalness, as Rosaldo notices that

[i]mperialist nostalgia occurs 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 1989:88)

Fabian defines denial of coevalness 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 2014:31; italics in original). Accordingly, imperialist nostalgia functions in cooperation with a more or less outspoken cultural essentialism, where imperialism is a “natural” result of *a priori* inequalities between societies regarding civilisation, modernity and progress. A related concept is *imperialist amnesia*, defined by Robert Fletcher as

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 2012:423).

Fletcher also uses the term *partial amnesia*, “in which colonialism is acknowledged but its distasteful aspects effaced”, and adopts Slavoj Žižek's concept ‘fetischtic disavowal’ for the simultaneous admission and denial that “contributes to colonialism's mystification as a ‘public secret’ of sorts” (ibid.: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 later. As the research project is largely explorative in nature, the topic will deserve further scholarly attention.

All these aspects are rightfully important and necessary to acknowledge. Still, the methodological idea of the contrapuntal refrains from a one-sided view on the postcolonial and looks for other voices to complete the score. Importantly, such a position does not imply a valorisation or hierarchy. On the contrary, the new aspects appearing in an otherwise familiar narrative can be most efficient in highlighting problematic aspects of it and inspire to reflection. In the present study expressions of colonial and imperial nostalgia are found both in the dominant and in the subordinate narratives, and they co-exist within a framework of what can perhaps be called cosmopolitan nostalgia. Still, the unequal power relations in global media result in a dominant mainstream memory culture of the Second World War rooted in particular in US, but also UK, 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 (Anderson, 2006: 200-201). 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. Accordingly, 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.

### **Nostalgia as play and game of make-believe**

While the present study includes examples of both restorative and reflective nostalgia, the subtypes colonial and imperial, and imperialist amnesia, there is often also something like an oscillation between what we, simplified, can call innocent, as in unintended, and ideological, as in intended, aspects in all of these. I suggest that the ideological aspect can be part of a seemingly innocent game of make-believe, while the innocent can unwittingly support the ideological. As suggested by philosopher Kendall L. Walton,

[t]he activities in which representational works of art are embedded and which give them their point are best seen as continuous with children's games of make-believe. Indeed, I advocate regarding these activities as games of make-believe themselves, and I shall argue that representational works function as props in such games, as dolls and teddy bears serve as props in children's games (Walton 1990:11).

His model can equally be applied to factual representations, as whether an object is real, fictive or imaginary is not important from this perspective: rather, it is its *function*. As it is often impossible to make distinctions between fact and fiction, this problematic binary is simply bypassed when focus is set on what texts actually *do* (ibid. 52-54; cf Iser 1991). Applied onto a context of popular history and of nostalgia, certain textual elements tend to stand out as signifiers of certain values and proposed, or prescribed, uses. As Walton explains, "[i]nsofar as it is the object's recognized function to be a prop in certain kinds of games, the principles are likely to seem natural, to be accepted automatically, to be internalized, and the prescribed imaginings are likely to occur spontaneously" (ibid.). Transferred onto, for example, the ritual affirmation of national identity, the props are likely to include the national flag, certain symbols and well-known heroic figures, but also other elements found in media's representations (Billig 1995). Taken as games of make-believe, such rituals do not necessarily have to *mean* something to all participants, or even have the same meanings to them, although the basic rules do require to be followed in order for participants to remain within the game.

Similarly, when nostalgic narratives are regarded as games as make-believe, the presence of certain props signals that a certain game has begun, building on the participants' collective imagination, which in its turn is to a large extent influenced by shared cultural experiences almost exclusively familiar from popular media. To take an example from mainstream popular history about the North Africa Campaign: I suggest that the props *desert* and *World War Two types of tanks* are, taken together, sufficient to, in semiotic terms, *signify* the battle between Axis and Allies in North Africa. Doing that

they also *signal* the beginning of a certain game in which they are props: the familiar “Duel in the Desert” between Rommel and Montgomery. Regarded as a game of make-believe, the player/reader/viewer etcetera does not need to actually follow the rest of the narrative unfolding in its media form, as it can also be continued in his/her imagination. In order for this to function the game and its props need to be familiar, as well as attractive enough to invite to play. This is where I suggest nostalgia as a potent driving force.

## 2. Results

### 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 alternative narratives found in Egypt and in the Egyptian-Jewish diaspora, both regarding the amount of media texts and their contents.<sup>2</sup> 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 anti-colonial 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.

From a western perspective this may seem surprising. There is a small museum at El Alamein, as well as the British, German and Italian war cemeteries, but these are mainly sites of interest to foreign visitors, especially war veterans' organisations. 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 foreigners care about El Alamein and the Second World War. However, there are occasional news reports about people and livestock killed or injured by World War Two mines 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. “They came and fought their war on our land, and when they left Egypt, they left their mines behind.” 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” colonize, 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. This costs a lot of money, and while Egypt has neither the resources nor the moral obligation to do it, the West has both. A conclusion might be that nostalgia

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<sup>2</sup> Here should also be included other ethnic minority groups with roots in Egypt, such as Greeks, Italians and Armenians. Due to the language barrier I have unfortunately not been able to include this literature other than in a very limited way.



related to the war is too much associated with the West in order to be meaningful to most Egyptians, whose 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 Arabs, as they are also Semites. Still, this remains hypothetical and was referred to in the context of many wartime Egyptians 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.” This could lead to the conclusion that the material found in Egypt is too marginal to be subject to research. However, that would be a serious misjudgement, as the really interesting phenomenon –almost entirely overlooked by most western scholars - is the nostalgic grand narrative about modern Egypt’s lost Golden Age. To grasp this phenomenon, 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 2003:79).

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. 80). Still, this form of “history in the street” is very influential, which can (at least partly) explain my informants’ choice of references (ibid.)

In this article I use interview data instead of close readings of the media texts referred to by the informants, as what is interesting in this context is not my interpretation of the texts themselves, but of what people do with them. The main media texts referred to by virtually all informants as particularly important in this regard are a handful of novels by Egyptian and Egyptian-Greek authors, and personal recollections published by Egyptian Jews, who during the Nasser era were forced to leave the country where they had lived for generations: Lagnado (2007); Mahfouz (1957); Meguid (2007) and Tzalas (2003). Another frequently mentioned novel is Al Aswany (2006), although this extends the narrative to what happened after the Jewish exodus. Several informants also mentioned the film *Alexandria... Why? (Iskanderija... Lih?, Youssef Chahine, 1979)*, and the documentary *Jews of Egypt (Ramses, 2013)* as important. 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*

(Moustapha Akkad, 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.

The nostalgic representations of a lost world in these media texts express a multifaceted Egyptian cultural identity where different ethnicities and religious affiliations are simultaneously distinct and mixed into a porous cosmopolitan collective. 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 narrative, but interestingly enough the British presence was not simply regarded as negative. On the contrary, for several of my informants it was also a signifier of hope, as in the hypothetical, now utopian 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 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, under publication). It deserves to be noted that most tv documentary films in general about the North Africa Campaign, especially those focusing on the battles of El Alamein, are British productions. This is not surprising, as this was *the* great Allied victory where the British, and not the US, were the ones in charge. Thus, in British cultural memory and national identity El Alamein signifies one of the nation's last, globally significant moments (ibid.). 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 western version of the narrative has several dimensions of nostalgia, of which the perhaps most attractive is that of "clean" war. In fact, in several cases the narrator in the documentary films claim that "this land is made for war" (Finney 2018b; Kingsepp, 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 more or less absent from dominant accounts of western popular history (ibid.). This is also the case regarding non-white Allied soldiers, not the least the large number drafted from the colonies to serve in the British imperial forces (Finney 2018b). Notably, this has changed over time, as older documentary films such as the famous 1970's series *The*



*World At War* shows 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 films, regardless if present-day or during the war, it is almost exclusively reduced to Orientalist stereotypes with Egyptians as exotic props, together with camels and palm trees (Kingsepp, under publication).

This seems to fit well with the spoken narrative, where Britain's position as a global imperial power is almost never problematized: 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 examples 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. While often simulating real military maps, the imagery is also familiar to those playing strategy war games. Thus, to continue with the game metaphor, this is perhaps the most striking example of how the representations symbolically merge with the audience's imaginations in games of make-believe where nostalgia is only one of several attractive dimensions.

While the 1950's saw a number of mostly British feature films on the topic, this part of the war seems to have become less interesting over the decades, except when providing an exotic framework for an adventure story with whites in the leading roles (Escher & Zimmermann 2005; Francis 2014). Here 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 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. 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 is a fascinating multidimensional palimpsest of historical consciousness, to use a concept from film scholar Vivian Sobchack (1997). Importantly, it 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 value 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 novels, read mainly by a middle-class segment of today's Egyptians, present a counter-narrative 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 hope for political and societal change.

### Colonial nostalgia and the issue of Empire

While many of the representations of wartime Egypt in the documentary films express a mixture of colonial and imperial nostalgia, there are also some that concentrate on military history and entirely exclude a cultural perspective. Although the concept of empire is hard to avoid even in this narrow view, some films simply prefer to limit their interest solely to the armies, their strategies, movements, achievements, and weapons. As mentioned, *empire* is obviously to be shunned and condemned as something negative, 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 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. Not only the narrative accounts of Cairo 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 & 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, forthcoming). However, as we will see, the same props signifying colonial nostalgia in a game of make-believe for westerners are also found in the Egyptian narratives. Their function is essentially the same, but here the nostalgic reconstruction of a cosmopolitan Egypt serves as inspiration in contemporary longing for societal change.

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 as a liminoid place where Western man can seek refuge from the constraints of secular modernity and ultimately find himself (Escher & 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).

### **Cosmopolitan Egypt: a lost modern Golden Age**

Cosmopolitanism, openness, multiculturalism and close connections to the Mediterranean and Europe: these tropes are prominent in today's Egyptian memory culture about the war years, as expressed in media texts as well as personal communication. 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 said, limited.<sup>3</sup> 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 Golden Age as such is not present in any of the media texts. Although there is 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 1950's 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 neglecting 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.

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<sup>3</sup> Here a note deserves to be added about the common idea that Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in Arabic, as well as other infamous anti-semitic books, are commonly for sale in the streets of Egyptian cities. Although I cannot speak for tourist towns, and regarding Cairo only through the accounts of my informants, after several months in Alexandria I can still say with some credibility that this is not in accordance with reality.

Notably, this negative image is also reflected in the literature, especially in Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* (1957), of which the third part, *Sugar Street*, takes place during the war years. However, things have changed, and 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, is at least partly regarded in the opposite way. The emergence of this new perspective is often 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. Among the informants several, especially among the young, mention *El-malek Farouk* as influential regarding their knowledge as well as their own thoughts about this part of Egyptian history. The king, these informants 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. Today there is a commercial market for nostalgic paraphernalia such as portraits of King Farouk and his first Queen Farida, which adds to the material experience of an innocent, but still in its core ideological, game of make-believe.

Another common view is that although the British were a foreign imperial power that in practice ruled Egypt, and most people hated and wanted to get rid of them, the nation still prospered and was wealthy. Accounts about the Egyptian pound having been a hard currency and the quality and export of Egyptian cotton a source of national pride, are also frequent, again especially among the younger. All informants, however, refer to a nation where there certainly was also severe poverty and very poor social conditions, especially in the rural regions, but that also could be proud of the wealth, elegance and highly cosmopolitan character of its two largest cities. The image of the latter, albeit highly selective and often rather 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 shares 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 British tend to maintain a strict “us and them”-perspective, where “they” are either entirely absent, or reduced to Oriental props in a nostalgic game of make-believe where colonialism carries positive and pleasurable connotations. The issue of *empire* is obviously sensitive, as the documentaries’ 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. However, the addition of an Egyptian perspective, as communicated through the accounts of respondents who are extensively relating to a limited number of media texts, shows that there seems to be no competition between the two national voices in the resulting extended, multilinear narrative. On the contrary, they appear quite indifferent to each other. Still, there are several common elements that function as props in what I, using Walton’s philosophical concept, calls nostalgic games of make-believe.

I have suggested that the North Africa Campaign is used especially in British popular history, as represented by the documentaries, as a vehicle for *imperial nostalgia*. Its main function is to create a framework for representations of this part of the war as a game of make-believe where the British Empire is still intact and generally considered beneficial for all its subjects (as well as for the civilised world). In this game, the British (and their German counterparts) are – despite some occasional shortcomings – valiant, courageous, and heroic. There are indications of *imperial amnesia* in the general remembering/forgetting function connected to narratives of national identity, but there are also important aspects of *colonial nostalgia*: the life of the British in Egypt is represented 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, as well as the game in question. Their absence, or very modest presence, suggests that they are not significant to the British except as part of the latter’s colonial lifestyle. The overall British narrative does show some internal variation, although regarded as a whole it is close to *restorative nostalgia*, with the return to the nation’s imperial origins as the utopian goal. As political incorrectness prohibits an overt veneration as well as political action, the concept of an imaginary game may fill the function of a more innocent substitute.

The Egyptian voice is in comparison more complex. It can partly be regarded as expressions of *restorative nostalgia*, as in the remembrance of nationalistic struggle against the colonial oppressors, and as a modern Golden Age before the 1952 officers’ coup that began 60 years of military rule in Egypt. However, the Golden Age narrative also includes elements of *colonial nostalgia*, which demands further reflection. 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 metropolises

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 2005:217)

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 of which at least some of them feel emotionally connected (Hirst and Silk 2004).

To a large extent the nostalgic Golden Age narrative shares its signifying props with the corresponding British. The difference lies especially in detail and agency: here, the people have names, faces, families, and they are actors in their own narratives. A fez is not just a fez, 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*. 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 games of make-believe 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, transferred into different forms of nostalgia: imperial, colonial, cosmopolitan, and postcolonial. It has also included performative aspects of nostalgia, using the metaphor game of make-believe. 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 and ethnographic fieldwork in Alexandria and Cairo, Egypt, during a number of visits 2013-2015, including qualitative interviews with anonymous informants.

The 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, Kingsepp 2015a; Kingsepp 2015b; Kingsepp 2016a; Kingsepp 2016b; Kingsepp, 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?" 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 varies, from none to an academic degree, as does their state of employment. Considering the politically sensitive situation in Egypt, I have chosen to refrain from offering any more precise data about them. 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.

The documentary films are listed below, as are the media texts 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.

*Desert Victory*. 1943. UK.

*El Alamein: The Soldier's Story*. 2011. UK.

*Gladiators of World War II: The SAS*. 2002. UK.

*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.

*Wavell's 30.000*. 1942. UK.

##### Motion pictures

*Alexandria... Why? (Iskanderija... Lih?)*. 1979. Youssef Chahine.

*Jews of Egypt*. 2013. Amir Ramses.

*Lion of the Desert*. 1981. Moustapha Akkad.

##### 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. [1960] 1991. *The Alexandria Quartet*. London: Penguin. ISBN 978-0140153170.

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. [1957] 2001. *Sugar Street*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press. ISBN 978 977 424 683 8.

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

Tzalas, Harry. 2003. *Farewell to Alexandria. Eleven short stories*. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press. ISBN 978 977 424 810 8.

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