

Angelos Dalachanis
*The Greek Exodus from Egypt:
Diaspora Politics and Emigration, 1937–1962*
New York: Berghahn, 2017. 288 pp.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Egypt hosted a Greek population that in the 1960s counted about 50,000 people, having reached a peak of almost 80,000 in the late 1920s. Mainly living in Alexandria, Cairo, and smaller cities like Suez, Ismailiyyah, or Port Said, only a few thousand of these men and women still live in the country: all the others left Egypt for Greece or places like Australia and South Africa. Whereas some scholars have already discussed the history of the Greeks of Egypt in the early monarchic period, and others focused on the Egyptian Greek Left—think of Alexander Kitroeff’s *The Greeks of Egypt, 1919-1937: Ethnicity and Class* (1989) or the studies by Anthony Gorman—*The Greek Exodus from Egypt* by Angelos Dalachanis gives a nuanced reading of the last decades of Greek presence in Egypt, mainly through a sociopolitical and economic historical approach. Following the destiny of the Greeks of Egypt, also called Egyptians or Egyptian Greeks, the author has written a well-researched study that adds much to our knowledge of modern Egypt and the challenges that its minority groups faced during the period from the mid-1930s up to the years of Nasserism and pan-Arabism of the 1960s.

The book is divided into four parts covering different issues and timespans. In Part One, “The Politics of Remaining in Egypt (1937–60),” the author looks at the consequences for the Greeks that the Treaty of Montreux (1937) and the abolition of the Capitulations had. Basing his study on diplomatic and community documents and correspondence, Dalachanis explains that in the immediate aftermath of these events, many Egyptians thought it possible to remain in Egypt even without the privileges and rights that the Capitulations had given them until then. The two chapters of Part One underline that neither the Greek state nor Egypt was able to find a definitive solution to the new situation in which the Greeks of Egypt found themselves. The Egyptian Greeks, however, still maintained the hope that “the old,

familiar endearing face of [pre-1937] Egypt” (41), as the president of the Greek Chamber of Commerce of Alexandria argued in 1952, would finally reappear.

It is true that after the Free Officers’ Revolution, Egyptian President Muhammad Naguib reassured the *koinotites* (the official Greek communities), underlining their importance for Egypt. Naguib used similar words regarding other minority groups too—for example, the Jews: recall his visit to the Sha’ar Ha-Shamayim Synagogue of Cairo in 1952.¹ On the other hand, the Egyptian Left tried to balance between its anticolonial stance and its feelings of (Greek) national belonging. But, as the book clearly shows, Nasser’s intense program of Egyptianization was leading to a new kind of Egypt, one in which post-Ottoman negotiations of foreignness and localness—to reference the work of Will Hanley—no longer found a place.²

Part Two, “Change and Adjustment (1937–60),” addresses the ways in which the Egyptians did not manage to find a place for themselves in this changing environment, focusing first on the labor market and then on education. While underlining the difficulty of transforming an introverted community that was suffering from unemployment and could no longer be self-sufficient, Dalachanis nonetheless argues that between the 1940s and the 1950s, many employees of Greek companies still remained in Egypt. At the same time, the capital of large Egyptian business started to be transferred abroad. Echoing seminal studies by Robert Tignor and others, the author confirms how it was especially in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis (1956) that the Nasserist programs of economic nationalization, even though directed more against private firms than against specific ethno-national groups, irremediably made the Egyptian—as well as Jewish or European—big business, “catatonic” (111). In the educational realm as well, the Greek community did not succeed in securing new positions or modifying the system of schooling that had already been in place in the pre-1937 era. Knowledge of Arabic continued to be limited, and only in the postwar period did its teaching in Greek schools become more systematic. In addition the Egyptian educational system traditionally privileged classical over technical education. This, together with the appeal that European schools had for middle- and upper-middle-class Egyptians, further estranged much of the community from the local scene and labor market.

Nonetheless, Dalachanis confutes the idea that leaving Egypt was the inevitable outcome of a process that began with the abolition of the Capitulations. As Part Three, “Leaving Egypt before 1960,” further explains, the exodus depended on a number of social, political, and economic factors, as well as on roads (not) taken. Additionally, the author notes how the Greeks of Egypt had never been a fixed

entity: they were a dynamic and even volatile group of people. There had always been Greeks who left Alexandria and Cairo in times of crisis, and newcomers who arrived when local conditions improved—not to mention migration within Egypt. The proximity with the Greek motherland made this mobility more evident than for other minorities present in Egypt at the time, so the exodus should be understood against this background as well. Dalachanis reminds us that when the Greeks started to think about leaving Egypt, the Greek state—which had just come out of the Second World War and was traversing a period of economic uncertainty—developed migration strategies in conjunction with the Egyptian community and international organizations, limiting the return of those who were destitute and instead redirecting them to other countries, such as South Africa.

On the whole, *The Greek Exodus from Egypt* shows the importance of conceiving the final decades of what is popularly known as “cosmopolitan Egypt” as not merely the outcome of nationalistic policies but also of several, interplaying social and economic factors. Part Four, “The Exodus,” highlights the point that, as opposed to what common knowledge and romanticized visions of Egypt and its Greek diaspora contend, the Egyptians were not all well-off, polyglot merchants; no mass expulsion ever occurred; and the exodus did not depend directly on the Arab-Israeli conflict or decolonization. In the early 1960s the departures were often well organized and related to both individual and collective reasons. While one can only agree with Dalachanis, some readers may be left wondering what would happen were one to listen a bit more to the—perhaps nostalgic, yet not to be entirely ignored—voices of the Egyptians, in addition to diplomatic and community documents. It is likely that this, together with a deeper theoretical discussion of crucial categories such as, first and foremost, diaspora, would have made the author’s findings even more compelling. It would also have led to a less rigid opposition between history and memory than that argued in the conclusion.

Still, *The Greeks of Egypt* constitutes an excellent addition to the scholarship dedicated to the Greeks of Egypt and to Egypt in general. It is recommended reading for anyone interested in the social and economic history of diasporic groups and their migratory experiences in the modern Mediterranean.

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Notes

- 1 Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 75.
- 2 Will Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality: Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).