

ANGELOS DALACHANIS, *The Greek Exodus from Egypt: Diaspora Politics and Emigration, 1937–1962* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017). Pp. 288. \$97.50 cloth, e-book available. ISBN 9781785334474.

REVIEWED BY LAURIE A. BRAND, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, email: brand@usc.edu



On 12 January 2019, *Al-Ahram* reported that the Egyptian foreign minister and the Greek deputy foreign minister were meeting to prepare for the third round of the Roots Revival initiative. Bringing together Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus,¹ the goal was to honor foreign communities that had lived on Egyptian soil. The initiative had been first announced by Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi during a visit to Cyprus in November 2017, and was then launched in April 2018 by inviting delegations of Greeks and Cypriots who had once lived in Egypt to a “homecoming.” Cairo made explicit the underlying “soft power” goals of this initiative: to build or reinforce political, social, cultural, and economic bridges to communities around the Mediterranean; to profile “Egypt as a country of refuge that has opened its arms to foreign communities throughout its history;” and to highlight that these “communities in turn have enriched Egypt’s cultural diversity.”²

It has become increasingly common over the past several decades for states to seek greater involvement in the communities of their nationals abroad for a range of political, economic, and cultural reasons. What is far less common is for states to reach out to former residents who are members of departed, non-national minority communities. It may seem unsurprising that attempts to court such minorities have been rare. Indeed, in the case of Egypt, the received wisdom regarding the history of these communities—Greeks, Italians, Armenians, and Jews—is that independence, the rise of nationalism, the 1956 Suez War, and the subsequent wave of nationalizations drove them out. However, as Angelos Dalachanis underlines in the introduction to this finely detailed study, this portrayal of the fate of

the Greeks in Egypt, known as Egyptians, is both reductive and inaccurate: while most Egyptians did ultimately leave Egypt, the reasons for doing so were complex, movement was not unidirectional, and not only the Egyptian, but also the Greek state played an important role in shaping the population movements.

Dalachanis's study draws on a rich set of primary materials: the archives of the Greek *koinotites* (communities) of Alexandria, Cairo, Suez, and Tanta; French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other diplomatic archives; newspapers of the Egyptian community; as well as a wealth of Greek government, UK Foreign Office, International Committee of the Red Cross, and World Council of Churches archival material. What the study does not include—with the exception of a handful of speeches by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser—are materials from local Arabic sources. The picture the book paints, therefore, is rich in its detail regarding the population, daily life, and communal governance of the Egyptians, but offers less context regarding the broader Egyptian environment. Nevertheless, the author's careful mining and deployment of the Greek and other non-Egyptian sources makes this a valuable study.

In constructing his tale, Dalachanis's primary goal seems to be to revise the faulty "memory" or received wisdom regarding the Egyptian communities' (*koinotites*) post-1937 evolution by constructing a much more complex migration and diaspora story than the stylized version of events supports. Such an account is important for scholars of the Greek diaspora, as well as of Egyptian history. For other scholars, the value of Dalachanis lies, not in a theoretical frame or argument—something the book lacks—but in the way his story of the *koinotites* illustrates the problems involved in writing about diasporas as unitary actors or in presenting their histories as stories of linear development. Indeed, one of the most fascinating aspects of this work is the way the author uses his materials to portray not just a series of Egyptian communities across Egypt, but also the differences in class background, political orientations, regional origins (the Balkans, Asia Minor, Aegean islands, etc.), and Egyptianization they embodied. It also shows how such differences shaped and were in turn shaped by evolving Egyptian citizenship and labor policies as well as the economic and political interests of Athens. Indeed, a central part of the story of the salience of class differences in these communities was the degree to which the wealthy leadership of the *koinotites* worked closely with the Greek government to achieve goals conceived in Athens, and not the other way around. While the account in no way suggests these

poorer Egyptians were lacking in agency, it does make clear how the economically privileged local leadership helped shape the migration or integration options of their less financially successful brethren.

Prior to Egyptian independence, Egyptians were the largest foreign community in Egypt. While most did not have citizenship of a colonial power, they had benefited from the conditions created by the British colonial administration and the Capitulations regime—the extensive economic and legal privileges for Europeans—that dated to the Ottoman period. Dalachanis, therefore, begins his account in 1937, with the Montreux Convention, which abolished the Capitulations in Egypt. For much of the next two decades the central challenge for the *koinotites* was to try to craft a revised set of Egyptian rights and protections to secure both elements of their distinct identity(ies) and their continued residence in Egypt.

For its part, even under the Arab nationalist regime of Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian state never sought to provoke an Egyptian departure, small or large. Indeed, the Egyptian president repeated on numerous occasions that the Egyptians had a special place in and relationship to the country. Nonetheless, policy changes were introduced in key realms as the Egyptian leadership sought to assert full political sovereignty after centuries of external control. Dalachanis examines the fraught question of citizenship and residency for a community that was well integrated and yet also distinct, in language and religion. He also takes a particularly careful look at changes in the labor market, as Egyptians were freer and increasingly educated to move into more professions and jobs. As a result, many Egyptians felt insecure regarding their economic futures. Yet, far from intervening to establish chains of orderly emigration, Athens was more concerned about the instability at home that a mass repatriation might trigger. It therefore sought the help of the *koinotites'* leadership to encourage Egyptians to stay in Egypt or, failing that, to facilitate their migration elsewhere, in particular to Australia.

Such a short review cannot do justice to the wealth of information presented in this carefully researched study. Students of diaspora, migration, citizenship, and minorities will find a trove of fascinating and instructive material for comparison and theorizing. Just as important, one hopes that scholars of other diaspora experiences will be as open as Dalachanis was to challenging what may be widely accepted, yet factually faulty, “historical memories” of migration.

NOTES

¹ "Egypt Foreign Minister, Greek Deputy Foreign Minister Discuss Preparations for Third Roots Revival Initiative," *Ahram Online*, 12 January 2019, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/321623/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-foreign-minister,-Greek-deputy-foreign-minis.aspx>.

² Nora Koloyan-Keuhnelian, "Interview: Celebrating Egyptian-Armenian Fraternity," *Ahram Online*, 22 September 2018, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/311974/Egypt/Politics-/INTERVIEW-Celebrating-EgyptianArmenian-fraternity.aspx>. The Egyptian minister of expatriates, Nabila Makram, has also met with Armenian officials to organize similar events with former members of the Egyptian-Armenian community.