

Historein

Vol 21, No 1 (2023)

Where was 1821? Space and Territory in the Greek Revolution



Review of Alexander Kitroeff, *The Greeks and the Making of Modern Egypt*; and Angelos Dalachanis, *The Greek Exodus from Egypt: Diaspora Politics and Emigration, 1937–1962*

Joseph John Viscomi

doi: [10.12681/historein.28262](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.28262)

Copyright © 2024, Joseph John Viscomi



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Viscomi, J. J. (2023). Review of Alexander Kitroeff, *The Greeks and the Making of Modern Egypt*; and Angelos Dalachanis, *The Greek Exodus from Egypt: Diaspora Politics and Emigration, 1937–1962*. *Historein*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.28262>



Alexander Kitroeff
The Greeks and the Making of Modern Egypt

Angelos Dalachanis
The Greek Exodus from Egypt: Diaspora Politics and Emigration, 1937–1962

Joseph John Viscomi
doi: 10.12681/historein.28262

To cite this article:

Viscomi, Joseph John. 2023. "Alexander Kitroeff, *The Greeks and the Making of Modern Egypt* and Angelos Dalachanis, *The Greek Exodus from Egypt: Diaspora Politics and Emigration, 1937–1962*". *Historein* 21 (1).
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.28262>.

Alexander Kitroeff

The Greeks and the Making of Modern Egypt

Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2019. 256 pp.

Angelos Dalachanis

The Greek Exodus from Egypt:

Diaspora Politics and Emigration, 1937–1962

New York: Berghahn, 2017. 288 pp.

Joseph John Viscomi

Birkbeck, University of London

How does one begin to write a review about two books that have much in common, but whose analyses of historical events and processes are structured so differently? A simple answer would be that one doesn't (or shouldn't). Indeed, I think the tendency to put such books together – such as Angelos Dalachanis' *The Greek Exodus from Egypt* and Alexander Kitroeff's *The Greeks and the Making of Modern Egypt* – demonstrates a key challenge to contemporary historical thinking. Do we compare works because they are preoccupied with similar historical subjects (people, places or events)? Or, rather, do we base our comparisons on analogous types of analysis? In this brief review, I shall attempt what I consider an impossible endeavour, to draw connections between two pieces of scholarship that have in mind divergent audiences. My attempt to do this is facilitated by two independently valuable and coherent projects about Greek communities in modern Egypt. Kitroeff's register is more descriptive than Dalachanis', whose critical mode of analysis raises far more questions about Eastern Mediterranean history. I shall flag some of these questions in this review.

Both Kitroeff and Dalachanis take distinct points of departure. Kitroeff admits his personal and academic connections to the Greeks in Egypt, what he calls “the largest and most diverse of the foreign communities in Egypt” (1) prior to the 1960s. The population of Greeks peaked in the late 1920s/early 1930s, as the 1927 Egyptian census counts 76,264 (Dalachanis, 3). In terms of nationality, there is no challenging the first part of that claim. The second part, however, is somewhat overstated, especially considering the long chronological spread he covers and the complexity of change and transformation in the

Eastern Mediterranean since the early 1800s (that is not to mention other connected regional histories). The few Greeks remaining in Egypt, Kitroeff notes, are barely a reminder of this “glorious past” (1). Dalachanis, on the other hand, begins by declaring his position outside the community. He inherited an understanding of this history from post-1960s Greek society but would come to learn that many of the stories which constituted that narrative “appeared partial or erroneous” (1). Both acknowledge that nostalgia permeates historical narratives of the Greek presence in Egypt. A dialectic of myth and reality? A sense of colonial or imperial nostalgia? A multiple, layered history including both? As we learn by reading these books together, histories of departed communities (and communities in departure) necessitate this tension for their survival.

Let me begin with Kitroeff. He contends the book is a “representative” study of Greeks in Egypt from their origins in the early nineteenth century to the community’s en masse departure by the 1960s (9). The book consists of eight chapters which overlap chronologically and thematically. This is one of its strengths. It is an attempt to articulate in a descriptive, yet layered, fashion how the Greek presence in Egypt “adapted and played a role in Egypt’s development” (4). His is an attempt to give agency to a community marginalised, and at worst excluded, by nationalist narratives of Egypt’s national development. Kitroeff weaves together these chapters by focusing on four main threads: the geographical spread of Greeks in Egypt, their socioeconomic diversity, the strong sense of nationality that pervaded the community, and the “special relationship” between Greeks and Egyptians.

He begins in the 1830s, in what can be interpreted as a subtle critique of both existing scholarship and popular conceptions of Greeks in Eastern Mediterranean Ottoman worlds, by noting that Greeks were not “deracinated compradors” ready to change roles at the turn of a switch. Rather, they developed, contemporaneously, deep attachments to multiple locations (30). Kitroeff speaks of “countries”, but I imagine there would have been interplay between various forms of communal and political membership in this context.¹ Regardless, it importantly demonstrates that the development of national identity was not a linear process, but rather involved plural and multiscalar understandings of and experiences with emplacement that might appear contradictory if read through the teleological lens of the nation-state. Often social and political mechanisms worked together to express internal coherency and to address the many contradictions that emerge through migration and displacement. These mechanisms allowed for a diverse social stratum, forms of political membership, and migration histories to be included in the wide frame of “the Greek community”. Indeed, as Kitroeff illustrates, considerations of labour markets (47), taxation (55), residency rights (98), land ownership (103) and citizenship (119) shaped the Greek community in different ways internally and in relation to Egypt, Greece, Egyptians and others with whom Greeks resided, worked and competed in Cairo, Alexandria and the

provinces.

Kitroeff details internal tensions – for example, discussing the active role played by Egypt's Greeks in Greek national (and nationalist) politics in the late nineteenth and across the twentieth century – while always keeping in mind the presence of Greeks in local Egyptian politics. The relationship between Greeks and Egyptians operates at multiple levels and cannot be reduced to a simplified notion of crosscultural solidarity. On one hand, Kitroeff studies with great clarity the connections at the level of governments, state and empires. Here, the focus is placed frequently on the elite members of the community. This is not a critique. Rather, I believe it is a key point because, as he shows, these members of the elite often mediate communal, national and imperial politics. The first three chapters, for example, which show a rise in prominence of Greek economic and industrial activities in Egypt, also reflect on how the economic elite struggled (at times) to control the political actions of working-class Greeks. On the other hand, Kitroeff addresses the often-conflicted relationship between Greek and Egyptian workers on the ground. On this point, there is much to say. Despite notions of solidarity that run through some of the historiography on foreign communities in Egypt,² Kitroeff notes that even when sharing the workspace, Greeks (and other European immigrants, such as Italians) tended to draw higher wages than their Egyptian colleagues (41). Competition on national terms inflected hierarchies between Egypt's multiple foreign and native populations. Many Greeks, Kitroeff shows, understood themselves as protected by their own national consuls (and courts) and therefore came to perceive departure, rather than reform, as a resolution to the processes of nationalisation that marked Egypt's long decolonisation (163).

In other words, the divisions between classes and social strata, while certainly on-the-ground realities for Greeks, were navigated by the conditions that allowed Greeks to live in Egypt in the first place. Such conditions demarcated internal divisions; but they also structured a kind of internal coherency in relation to other communities. The legal landscape of the Capitulations, Ottoman-era treaties that granted residency and economic privileges to subjects of various European nations, was among the most important of these conditions. Due to the privileges and protections conferred on some non-Egyptian communities by the Capitulations, they were also a source of constant contestation: both for British colonial authorities seeking to consolidate control after 1882 (58) and for Egypt's nationalist movements after 1919 (chapter 3). Debates about the Capitulations bubble in the background through much of Kitroeff's narrative, but his layered approach to this story has the effect of obscuring the significance their ending would have for Egypt's foreign populations – especially for Greeks and Italians.

Dalachanis' *The Greek Exodus from Egypt* takes as its point of departure the beginning of the end, the 1937 Montreux Conference which set the terms for the abolishment of the Capitulations in Egypt. These legal regimes had been cancelled in other Ottoman territories much earlier; this tardiness is part of what makes Egypt such a compelling site to examine diasporic community making (and unmaking).³ Like Kitroeff's

layered, longue durée narrative, Dalachanis' choice to begin in 1937 is wise in its own way. He disrupts the common understanding of Greeks (and other foreigners) as having been expelled in Nasser's Egypt – a narrative perpetuated to some extent by the popular literature around these departures.⁴ For Dalachanis, the “exodus”, or mass departure of Greeks from Egypt, was “the expression and partly the culmination of a complicated process that had been developing over the previous decades” (7). Moving from 1937 to 1960, most of the book deals with predeparture social life and political economy, but in doing so it avoids the teleology of exodus. Dalachanis, instead, develops a series of short, medium and long-term processes, showing that departure was not an inevitable outcome to structural transformation or *histoire évènementielle*. He illustrates how the conditions of living in Egypt slowly changed for Greeks, and he does this well. But a more significant contribution comes from Dalachanis' references to how Greeks increasingly imagined their futures beyond Egypt (33), how uncertainty fuelled questions about remaining there (47) and, ultimately, how departure commenced immediately after the Second World War due to an awareness among Greeks that the labour market and Egypt's broader sociopolitical culture shifted in ways that no longer conformed to their interests (49). Thus, pivotal events like the Suez “crisis” of 1956 and the nationalisations that followed into the 1960s, which have been framed as catalysts for the en masse departure of foreigners from Egypt, were events that punctuated more protracted processes for many individuals.⁵

Dalachanis narrates this history with a critical, yet deeply source-based definition of what defines community. On the one hand, he draws attention to the terms that were worked out in Greek circles to situate their placement in Egypt by referring to the term “*mutamassirun*”, or Egyptianised Greeks. This becomes Egyptian Greeks. An interesting sidenote, which perhaps sheds light on some specific boundaries of Greek experiences in Egypt, a similarly rendered term does not exist for Italian residents in Egypt, the second-largest population of foreign residents. Rather, over the course of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Italian residents came to be known as *italiani d'Egitto*, Italians “of” or “from” Egypt, a linguistic nuance that betrays distinct configurations in social and political membership regimes among populations in proximity (and in another “community” that would undergo a similar “exodus” in roughly the same period). For “community”, Dalachanis draws from British archives. He employs the term because, its vagueness aside, it did have repercussions in the political climate of colonial Egypt. Indeed, there were institutions that aimed to preserve and intensify sentiments of Greekness and even to prevent the assimilation of Greeks into Egyptian society (191). This occurred first and foremost in schools, but also was facilitated by the unique connections between Greek governments and the Greek Orthodox Church (52), whose interests were often in conflict with the state's. In both Kitroeff's and Dalachanis' books, the relationship between the Greek state and the Greek Orthodox Church could have been presented in clearer terms; this perception might

stem from my own position outside modern Greek history.

These terms of communal membership are further articulated with “repatriation”, at once an idea and a practice that indicates how such social and political membership unfolded in and through the lives of individuals between Egypt and Greece (3–5). Dalachanis’ empirically deep reading of the politics of departure is fascinating; for example, his demonstration that the “psychological” states of the community factored into diplomatic and state-level ruminations over departure (203, 212). On this, his book could be put in dialogue with scholarship on departures from other decolonising or postcolonial spaces (such as Andrea Smith’s *Europe’s Invisible Migrants* or Elizabeth Buettner’s *Europe after Empire*).⁶ There is much to be gained from the central focus of Dalachanis’ analysis on the links between labour, regional politics and migration. In carefully placing migration and repatriation in the transregional framework, Dalachanis contributes – on the opposite end – to Julia Clancy-Smith’s social history of migrants in nineteenth-century Tunisia.⁷ More crucially, he does the important work of suggesting although he never quite makes it explicit – a meeting point between histories of labour migration (his chapter 3, which I found to be the pinnacle of the book) and the displacements provoked by decolonisation processes in and beyond North Africa.⁸

In many ways, both of these works complicate our understanding of decolonisation. Kitroeff and Dalachanis demonstrate how the absence of direct colonial ties between Greece and Egypt meant that the relationships among migrants, citizens, colonial subjects and indigenous populations conjured a constellation of social, religious and political affinities that did not neatly “unravel” but rather created new entities in its undoing. Indeed, as Dalachanis shows, repatriation was not a resolution seen by the Greek state as ideal (25) and various attempts were made to “decongest” the Greek community of its poorer members by encouraging emigration to Australia, Africa and North and South America (180). Similar processes occurred with the dispersion of Italians from Egypt.⁹ These complexities confound simple narratives of a rearrangement of privilege and marginality in the modern Mediterranean.

Together, these two books contribute to a more complete understanding of the role of political communities in an Egypt that was structured by colonial interests, anticolonial movements and by competing imperialisms, but also in a wider context of labour migration and burgeoning conceptions of nationality and nation-making.¹⁰ This conjuncture of legal, social and political histories has stimulated a new body of research that has provided us with a sense of how ideas and practices of belonging intersected with migration histories in Egypt.¹¹ Although dotted with many “events” – in the traditional sense of the term – these two books are decipherable only through a more processual approach to historical time. At one point, Kitroeff draws attention to the small minority of Greeks in interwar Egypt who interpreted ongoing events as “the effects of inevitable changes”, in contrast to the majority who saw such events as “crises” (163). An important consideration for our contemporary conditions. Although neither Kitroeff nor Dalachanis puts it in this way, the transformation

brought by the end of the Capitulations and the departure of Greeks from Egypt in both narratives demonstrates how necessary it is that – as scholars of migration – we take account of the enduring legacies of legal and political practices after they cease to exist as concrete realities. It is a firm reminder of the interplay between process and event. Kitroeff and Dalachanis, each in their own way, combat the nostalgia that pervades popular conceptions (and sometimes historiography) of Egypt’s colonial past. They do so without permitting an antinostalgic approach to reduce their interpretations to contrary claims. The Greek communities these books describe are, in the end, both myth and reality, demonstrating that the complexity with which we treat early-nineteenth century worlds did not vanish with the dissolution of empires, but rather has continued to shape postcolonial and decolonised worlds.

The theme I found most thought-provoking about both books – and remarkably different from the experiences of Italians in Egypt – is the degree to which Greek national and international politics were fought out within Greek communities in Egypt. These “internal” dynamics always seemed to confound the scales at play. One might be inclined to look at this Egyptian context of extraterritorial jurisdiction (and its afterlives) and to say that these are exceptional circumstances. These dynamics, however, reveal something central to the experience of migration. Individuals, workers, families, collectives and communities move while geopolitical realities are reconfigured beneath, around and through them. One need not look further than the evolving questions raised by Brexit for EU labourers and residents in the UK. A problem with transnational history and the history of migration (two fields that are often, but not always, connected) has been an overemphasis on fluidity and a tendency to reify divisions between state and society at the expense of more complex interconnections. A strength of both Kitroeff’s and Dalachanis’ books is that they convey a tense circulation of ideas, practices, objects and people between diverse and changing political bodies. In many ways, these books are a testament to the limits of methodological nationalism and transnationalism. These are not histories of “diaspora” communities as such (though I do think the term hinders Dalachanis more than it allows his work to speak to a wider intellectual community). They demonstrate, instead, the nature of separate, yet interconnected, national and regional histories, and the importance of transregional processes in the elaboration of cultural, social and political sensibilities.

¹ Konstantina Zanou, *Transnational Patriotism in the Mediterranean, 1800–1850: Stammering the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

² For some examples of this framework, see Joel Beinen and Zachary Lockmann, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882–1954* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1998); Anthony Gorman, “Egypt’s Forgotten Communists: The Postwar Greek Left,” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 20, no. 1 (2002): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mgs.2002.0006>; Ilham Khuri-

Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

³ Sarah A. Stein, *Extraterritorial Dreams: European Citizenship, Sephardic Jews, and the Ottoman Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁴ For some examples of these departure memoirs, see André Aciman, *Out of Egypt: A Memoir* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995); Gini Alhadeff, *The Sun at Midday: Tales of a Mediterranean Family* (New York: Pantheon, 1997); Lucette Lagnado, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit: A Jewish Family's Exodus from Old Cairo to the New World* (New York: Ecco, 2008).

⁵ Barbara Curli, ed., *Italy and the Suez Canal, from the Mid-nineteenth Century to the Cold War: A Mediterranean History* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) includes several chapters which make similar arguments.

⁶ For two wide-ranging analyses of the impacts of decolonisation on the political landscapes of postwar Europe, see Andrea L. Smith, ed., *Europe's Invisible Migrants* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003) and Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁷ Julia Ann Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c. 1800–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁸ Interestingly, the Greeks in Egypt allow for the kind of comparative project sought after in Manuel Borutta and Jan Jansen, eds., *Vertriebene and Pieds-Noirs in Postwar Germany and France: Comparative Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁹ Joseph John Viscomi, "Un'integrazione fallita? La partenza degli italiani dall'Egitto nel secondo dopoguerra," *Archivio Storico dell'Emigrazione Italiana* 14 (2018): 83–95.

¹⁰ On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Omar Youssef Cheta, "A Prehistory of the Modern Legal Profession in Egypt, 1840s–1870s," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50 (2018): 649–68, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743818000855>; Matthew H. Ellis, *Desert Borderland: The Making of Modern Egypt and Libya* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); Aimee M. Genell, "Empire by Law: Ottoman Sovereignty and the British Occupation of Egypt, 1882–1923" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2013); Will Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality: European, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Aaron G. Jakes, *Egypt's Occupation: Colonial Economism and the Crises of Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); Shana Minkin, *Imperial Bodies: Empire and Death in Alexandria, Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

¹¹ Marcella Aglietti, Mathieu Grenet and Fabrice Jesné, eds., *Consoli e consolati italiani dagli Stati preunitari al fascismo (1802–1945)* (Rome: Collection de l'École française de Rome, 2020); Costantino Paonessa, ed., *Italian Subalterns in Egypt between Emigration and Colonialism (1861–1937)* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2021).