

Introduction

There are presently about three thousand Greeks living in Egypt, most of them in Cairo, the rest in Alexandria. They are a pale reminder of a glorious past. In the period between the two world wars, a century after they began arriving, the Greeks in Egypt were about one hundred thousand. They were the largest and most diverse of the foreign communities in Egypt and played a prominent role in the country's banking, cotton, and commercial sectors. This book tells the story of how the Greeks first settled in Egypt in the early nineteenth century, how their numbers and influence steadily grew, how a slow decline set in as Egypt began eliminating the privileges that benefited the Greeks and other foreigners, and concludes with the nationalization of most of Egypt's economy in the 1960s, prompting an exodus that left only a few thousand Greeks who chose to remain. The book concludes with a discussion of the affection for Egypt and their past lives there that most of those who left still feel.

My connection with the history of the Greeks in Egypt is both personal and academic. My great-grandfather Alexander Theodore Kitroeff was one of the many Greeks who left their islands in the Aegean, in his case Chios, and settled in Alexandria in the late nineteenth century. He is buried there, next to his wife Polyxeni, in the Greek Orthodox Cemetery. Both my paternal grandparents were born in Alexandria in the early twentieth century, and my father was also born there. He left Egypt after the Second World War and eventually settled in Athens, where he married my mother. My grandmother also left Egypt around the same time, with her second husband, a Greek naval officer who was stationed in Egypt during the war. My grandfather stayed on until he had to reluctantly leave

Egypt and go to Athens after the company he worked for, the Associated Cotton Ginners, was nationalized in 1961.

By that time most of my father's relatives had moved from Egypt to Greece, and I grew up hearing stories about life in Egypt: the size of my great-grandfather's house in Ramla, how he forced my grandfather to go into the cotton business and limit his interest in classical music to playing chamber music in his free time, his brother's love of clay pigeon shooting and shooting real pigeons in the Nile Delta, my grandmother's experiences at the French lycée before she eloped with my grandfather, and my father's pre-Second World War childhood, which involved the freedom of swimming in the harbor of Alexandria to enduring the disciplined routines of the British Boys' School and Victoria College. All those stories were told in English or in Greek interspersed with generous helpings of Arabic, French, and a few Italian words.

My first academic encounter with the study of the Greeks of Egypt was in writing my master's thesis at Keele University. I chose to write about the Greek microcosm created in British-controlled Egypt during the Second World War—the Greek government-in-exile that was based in Cairo, the military units that managed to escape before the Axis occupied Greece, and the Greek residents in Egypt. This topic reflected the great interest in the Greek 1940s that shaped Greek historiography in the late 1970s. My supervisor was Professor Paul Rolo, who was a descendant of one of Alexandria's most influential Anglo-Jewish families, and through his guidance I became familiar with the wider context of the events I was studying, including the lives of Greek and European communities in Egypt. Moreover, during my research I received a great deal of help and advice from the author Stratis Tsirkas (the *nom de plume* of Giannis Hadjiandreas), who spent most of his life in Egypt as a left-wing activist and writer. His two most important and influential studies were one which placed the poet Constantine Cavafy in Egypt's sociohistorical context and the other was a three-part novel about the left-wing uprising in wartime Egypt, written in a style that echoed but also challenged Lawrence Durrell's own literary evocation of wartime Alexandria.

It should therefore come as no surprise that I chose to study the Greeks of Egypt when at St. Antony's College at Oxford University it came time to pick a subject for my doctoral dissertation, which appeared in book form in 1989.¹ At the time, the study of Greek diaspora communities was a major concern for many historians of Greece. The thinking in the late 1970s was

that the relative weakness of the bourgeoisie within Greece, coupled with a wealthier diaspora bourgeoisie that played a middleman or ‘comprador’ role, contributed to Greece’s allegedly distorted capitalist development. This entailed focusing on the Greek merchant communities abroad, primarily in terms of their relationship to the Greek homeland. In deciding to examine the Greeks in Egypt it made sense for me to break with that approach and place the Greeks in their Egyptian context during the period immediately preceding the Second World War, a time that witnessed the rise of the Egyptian nationalist movement. Thus, I treated the Greeks both as a cohesive ethnic group with ties to Greece but also as an entity divided along class lines depending on their social position in Egypt, thus generating different responses to the rise of Egyptian nationalism. This approach was encouraged and immeasurably enriched thanks to the guidance of three leading scholars of the Middle East: my thesis supervisor Roger Owen, my second reader Albert Hourani, and the Alexandria-born economist Robert Mabro—all fellows at St. Antony’s Middle East Centre.

When I started writing this book I thought that producing a concise history of the Greek presence in modern Egypt would be relatively easy. A few years ago I had the opportunity to revisit the subject of the Greek role in Egypt when the Cultural Foundation of the Piraeus Bank Group in Greece asked me to edit contributions by an international team of scholars on aspects of the history of the cotton sector in Egypt. These were destined to form the academic blueprint of a cotton museum the Group planned to establish in Egypt, along the lines of several ‘technological museums’ the Group set up in several areas in Greece. Unfortunately the outbreak of the Greek economic crisis forced the Group to shelve the plan for a cotton museum in Egypt, but hopefully such an undertaking might materialize in the future. At any rate, I believed that my task would be a smooth one in distilling the knowledge I gained working toward my master’s thesis and my doctoral dissertation, reworking part of my book to relieve the cumbersome theoretical apparatus, deploying what I had learned doing the cotton museum project, and taking into account the substantial number of excellent studies on foreigners and Greeks in Egypt. Presenting an overview of a historical trajectory that spanned over a century and a half is not easy for any subject. In practice, the job of presenting the Greek role in Egypt—from the era of Muhammad Ali to the nationalizations of private industry that took place under President Gamal Abd al-Nasser—is challenging. The Greeks did not have merely a superficial, colonial-type of presence in the

country but instead penetrated deep into its fabric, its economy, and its cities and provincial towns. They developed a complex network of ethnic institutions that fostered their identity, strengthened their ties to each other, and formed a strong bond to their homeland. Finally, the Greeks in Egypt saw themselves as having a special relationship with Egypt and the Egyptians. This sense was built by invoking the relations between the ancient Egyptian and Greek civilizations, and in the modern era, the idea that Greeks were contributing to Egypt's development more as partners rather than foreign residents.

These four aspects of the Greek presence in Egypt—the geographical spread, the varied socioeconomic profile, the strong sense of nationality, and the special relationship between Greeks and Egyptians—are threads that run through this study and, woven together, show how the Greeks adapted and played a role in Egypt's development. The geographical dispersion of the Greeks throughout Egypt was remarkable. Several British observers noted with a mixture of admiration and surprise that they found Greek traders or grocers operating in the most remote parts of the Egyptian provinces. The biggest concentration of Greeks was in Alexandria; the wealthiest resided in the Quartier Grec and may also have had houses in the Ramla district, where many middle-class Greeks lived. A little further out the suburb of Ibrahimiya was home to thousands of middle- and lower-middle-class Greeks. Out of the approximately one hundred thousand foreigners resident in Alexandria, according to the Egyptian census of 1927, over thirty-seven thousand were Greek and their number remained as high and began to dip only after the Second World War. Compared to their fellow Greeks in Cairo, the Alexandrians were wealthier overall and more 'cosmopolitan' because Alexandria had a larger percentage of foreign residents and was oriented toward Europe economically and culturally. By the same token, the Cairo Greeks were able to adapt a little bit better to the Egyptianization measures. After the Greek exodus in the early 1960s in the wake of the nationalization measures, more Greeks remained in Cairo than in Alexandria.

Outside Egypt's two major cities there were large numbers of Greeks in the towns along the Canal Zone. They had arrived to work on the opening of the Suez Canal and stayed to work in the company that ran the operations, ancillary jobs, or in white-collar or retail positions. There were also many Greeks working in a range of jobs in the Delta and towns in Upper Egypt. The Greek grocer, *baqqal* in Arabic, was ubiquitous. Baedeker's guide

to Egypt published in 1898 informs its readers that for expeditions off the railway track between Cairo and Luxor one used a donkey and could rest assured that “in most towns the Greek bakkal keeper will provide a simple sleeping room.”² Very often, and certainly in the smaller towns, the Greeks were the only Europeans. By the same token, when the Egyptians began to play a greater role in their country’s economy in the 1930s onward, many Greeks left the provincial towns and resettled in Cairo and Alexandria. The conflicts in the Canal Zone in the 1950s meant the steady diminution of the Greeks in that area. Until the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was a significant demographic presence of Greeks in Alexandria and Cairo, all the more noticeable because almost all the other Europeans had left Egypt.

Next to considering the geographical spread of the Greeks throughout Egypt it behooves one to take into account the class divisions that divided them horizontally based on their wealth and social status. The elite was made up of the major bankers and cotton merchants at the very top, and others in finance, import–export, and owners of major manufacturing firms a little further down the pecking order. The Greek middle class consisted of senior- and middle-level employees in the major banks and commercial and manufacturing enterprises, doctors, lawyers, accountants, and owners of retail shops, cafés, cinemas, and restaurants. What we could call the intellectuals, the writers, literary critics, journalists, and teachers were significant in that they shaped the contours and the content of the identity of the Greeks of Egypt. Among them were philosophical and political differences, and differences in the way they regarded Egypt, with some adopting a superior vantage point but others considering themselves and other Greeks as part of Egyptian society.³ The lower-middle class, the petty bourgeoisie, included owners of small businesses and shops, and middle- and lower-level employees. There were also Greek workers in manufacturing and jobs associated with the Suez Canal. One of the earliest strikes in the history of labor in Egypt was in the cigarette manufacturing sector and pitted Greek craft workers against Greek capitalists.⁴ By the 1950s the Greek grocers had left the provinces but could be found in Alexandria, and during the Suez Crisis-induced blackout in the city, a young André Aciman and his mother sheltered in a Greek grocery.⁵ Finally, a small but not insignificant number of Greeks were in the margins of society and legality, involved in the sex trade, smuggling, and selling drugs. In the early twentieth century, when there was a wave of emigration from Greece to Egypt, “Many Greek girls for instance were said to be lured on the promise of a job or a marriage match and welcomed upon their arrival by

local intermediaries disguised as the groom's relatives."⁶

Aside from identifying the class stratification of the Greek entity, the challenge is to understand whether their motivations stemmed from their class interests, their national identity, or both. In seeking to understand those motivations I have not assumed that either class or national interests were consistently dominant. Instead I have tried to show how the specific historical context shaped those motivations. I have found that even though the Greeks were divided into distinct classes, they only sometimes operated based on their class interests, and at other times based on national identity, and in some instances even tried to combine both. If there is anything that clearly emerges from the study of the Greeks of Egypt, from the wealthiest entrepreneurs to the smallest grocers, it is that they were alert to their changing environment and tried to adapt to new circumstances as best they could.

The Greeks themselves did not use the term 'ethnicity' because they considered themselves a national group and the same was true of the way Egypt classified them. The definition of who was Greek was blurred because some had Ottoman and later Egyptian citizenship, others British or Italian because they came from islands such as Cyprus or Rhodes that had been ruled by Britain and Italy. But in practice, despite the primacy of those with Greek citizenship, there was a sense of a culturally defined entity who were Greeks—they spoke Greek and were Greek Orthodox Christians—with a small minority of them being Jewish. There were also a few Greek-speaking Muslims from Crete who considered themselves Greek. Those common cultural bonds produced a sense of cohesion and solidarity expressed by informal family ties and preferences about whom to employ, whom to work for, and where to shop. The Benachis, the Choremis, and the Salvagos, the three most prominent Alexandrian families, cemented their economic and social ties through marriages among themselves and with members of other important families, such as the Mitarachis and the Sinadinos. Prior to the First World War there were even instances of marriages between first cousins. There was a strict division of labor between the sexes in these prominent families: the men ran the family business and sat on the boards of the Greek community organizations, and the women ran the household as well as Greek philanthropic projects. Formally, those common cultural connections were manifested in the establishment of Greek social and cultural organizations, many of which had the term 'Hellenic' in their English and French titles because that, rather than the word 'Greek,' served as a reminder that modern Greeks claimed continuity with the ancient Hellenes.

The principal organization was the ‘community’ (*Κοινότητα* in Greek), which was modeled on the self-governing local administrative bodies Greeks had formed back in the Ottoman era. The community organization was run by the wealthy Greeks and thanks to their contributions it administered Greek schools and in larger cities Greek hospitals, programs to assist the poor, orphanages, and old people’s homes. These were often named after their benefactor; for example the Benachi Orphanage, the Kaniskeris Orphanage, the Antoniades Old People’s Home in Alexandria, and Achilopouleos Girls’ School and the Melachrino School in Cairo. Despite the existence of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Alexandria—one of the oldest churches in the eastern Mediterranean—it was the local community organizations that ran the Greek Orthodox churches that Greeks established throughout the country. This enabled the community organizations to claim that they were the body that spoke for all the Greeks in each town. Their leaders had left for Egypt from places which were under Ottoman rule and where the local notables exercised considerable power. In Egypt their powers were relatively circumscribed, but that did not prevent them from assuming a leadership role. The dependence on the patronage offered by the community institutions to most of their fellow Greeks cemented their hegemonic role.⁷ In contrast, there was no single institution claiming to represent the entire local Italian population.⁸ Beyond those core institutions, Greeks established a broad range of cultural, social, and sports organizations. Another strong bond was their connection with their places of origin, their allegiance to Greece and its political parties, and their dependence on Greek consular authorities for protection and confirmation of their privileged status in Egypt. That status was based on the Capitulations, the extraterritorial rights foreigners enjoyed in Egypt. After they were abolished in 1937 and ‘Egyptianization’ policies began to increase, the Greeks still relied on Greece’s diplomatic representatives and the Greek government, hoping optimistically that the special relationship with Egypt would protect them from the worst of those measures. Their responses were different because the Greeks were not a single cohesive entity. The differences notwithstanding, among the Greek responses, there is a common denominator in the way the Greeks of Egypt reacted if we compare them with other foreign minorities, each of which had its own particular connection to Egypt. In placing the Greeks in their Egyptian context, I examine the ways other foreigners reacted to change, and not surprisingly there were differences and similarities at every turn.