

on his island. The lights didn't go on again, either on that evening or on the following nights, but his eyes grew used to it little by little, they didn't get tired any more, they didn't hurt.

And finally, as he stood there waiting, all of a sudden the dawn broke. All of a sudden, he saw the sun rise, simultaneously from the vertical street and from the other one, the horizontal.

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Greek Workers in Egypt 1900-1930

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STUDIES OF THE GREEK DIASPORA of the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and the early twentieth centuries have concentrated on the activities of merchants who were the dominant element of diaspora communities based in the mercantile centers of Marseille, Venice, Trieste, Thessaloniki, Istanbul, Odessa, Smyrna, and Alexandria. The history of the "ordinary people" of those communities the small owners and employees who were the most numerous element within each community remains to be written. Likewise, the emergence of a Greek working class element therein has not been satisfactorily accounted for.

The reasons for this are quite straightforward. At best one could say that the activities of the dominant, mercantile bourgeoisie were awarded a higher priority. At worst, the implications of class-based activity by Greek workers was willingly ignored by Greek nationalistic historiography. Admittedly there are several methodological obstacles to reconstructing the life of groups which belonged to an anonymous mass and left behind very few records of their activities. Furthermore, the fact that "history from the bottom up" is enjoying so much popularity currently does not necessarily force us to consider that all anonymous groups were in fact significant historical actors in their time. All the same, it can be safely said that the emergence of a working stratum and the stirrings of a labor movement in the Eastern Mediterranean are subjects which merit closer attention than they have received before.

What work has been done on the study of early labor movements in the Eastern Mediterranean has concentrated primarily on the situation in Thessaloniki and to a lesser extent several other Ottoman urban or industrial centers.¹ There are several theoretical issues addressed by

¹Aside from the work of Greek scholars such as G. B. Leon, A. Liakos, K. Moskoff,

those studies, all of which focus upon the economic, geographic, and above all, ethnic obstacles which delayed, if not prevented, the formation of an Ottoman working class "in itself" as well as "for itself." Those very same obstacles lay in the way of a similar type of development in Egypt, a semi-autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire by the late nineteenth century.

This article, eschewing a more abstract theoretical comparison between the Ottoman and Egyptian circumstances will limit itself to describing the Greek role in the emergence of the working class and the labor movement in Egypt, a country with a large and prominent Greek community. In its conclusions this article will list several theoretical considerations arising from the Greek labor experience in Egypt, both for labor historiography and for the historiography of ethnic minorities as well. The annotated form of those considerations claim no definite status, rather, they represent merely a set of semaphore signals towards a more theoretical examination of this subject.

The working class in inter-war Egypt, following the country's move towards industrialization after W W I has been recorded as amounting to 5% of the economically active population according to the national census of 1927. Samir Amin states that by W W II workers formed about 10% of urban populations in Egypt.² Those workers were occupied in the transport industries and in light and heavy manufacturing such as the cigarette industry, cotton ginning, marine construction and ship repairs, and other, ancillary sectors, the so-called Suez Canal industries. While no reliable figures exist stating the exact number of Greek workers, one contemporary estimate fixes their number at about 6,000 by 1937.³

The numerous foreigners in early twentieth century Egypt staffed industries where a certain level of skill and literacy was required. This was more commonly found among recently arrived Europeans immigrants than in the native population. The Greeks were especially prominent in the cigarette and in the "Canal" industries.

It was inevitable that the early manifestations of working class consciousness should occur in Egypt among the foreign workers. The

and A. Panayotopoulos, relevant studies by Ottomanists in general are cited in P. Dumont "Η Όθωμανική Έργατική Τάξις τις Παραμονές της Έπανάστασης των Νεοτούρκων" in V. Panayotopoulos ed. *Έκσυγχρονισμός και βιομηχανική Έπανάσταση στα Βαλκάνια τον 19ον αιώνα* (Athens, 1980), and in D. Quataert, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire 1881-1908, Reactions to Economic Penetration* (New York, 1983).

²H. Riad *L' Egypte Nasserienne* (Paris, 1968), p. 41.

³G. Athanasiades *Ο παροικιακός Έλληνισμός και η Παιδεία του* (Cairo, 1948), p. 19.

earliest forms of union organization and of strike action took place in the two industries mentioned above; the Greeks were heavily involved in both cases. This applied not only in the early period, which begun in the 1890's, but also during the more developed and politicized period, which coincided both with the rise of the Egyptian nationalist movement and, perhaps more importantly the Bolshevik revolution in Russia.

Several sources mention that the first labor union in Egypt was the one formed by the cigarette workers in 1899. This was an organization incorporating Greeks, Armenians, Italians, and other nationalities. The common working conditions in this manufacturing industry soon resulted in ethnic divisions among the workforce being superseded. There existed three different categories of tobacco workers according to the three stages in the manufacturing process at the time. The most important of those stages, or rather the one requiring the greatest skill, was the final stage when shredded tobacco was stuffed into paper cylinders. This task required not only skill but also speed, since those engaged in it were paid on a piece work basis; another method used was to wrap the paper around the tobacco. The majority of those engaged in this stage of production were known as "cigarette makers" or "cigarette rollers" and they were Greeks who had learned the required skills either in Macedonia or Anatolia.⁴

A job demanding less skill was that performed by the "tobacco cutters"; it entailed cutting the leaves with knives. The job of the "tobacco workers" required even less skill as it involved packing, unpacking and other manual operations.

When the first German and British-made cigarette machines were brought into Egypt in 1907, the top-paid jobs of the skilled "cigarette makers" were threatened. Every machine introduced would make 45-60 "cigarette makers" redundant. The outbreak of World War I found the introduction of those machines still in the experimental stage, but by the end of the war they were coming into general use.

The introduction of the machines was resisted vigorously by the "cigarette makers" who had shown early signs of militancy. In 1899 they had formed the first labor union in Egypt, named "*L' Union Internationale des Ouvriers Cigaretteurs d' Egypte*." It organized two successful strikes in 1899 and 1903 with demands for higher wages and improved working conditions. Working for long hours and inhaling tobacco dust in badly ventilated factories gave rise to a number of health complaints. The author of the earliest study on working conditions in

⁴J. Vallet *Contribution a l' Etude de la Condition des Ouvrieres de la Grande Industrie au Caire* (Valence, 1911).

Egypt reports that he was refused access to the cigarette factory owned by a Greek, Nestor Gianaclis.

The most important strikes, in opposition to the installation of machines took place after W. W. I. During the war years the "cigarette makers" had seen their wages rise sharply from between 20 and 30 piastres to 60, 80, and in some cases to 100 piastres a day [100 p. = about 1 pound sterling]. There was, therefore, all the more reason for them to dread the advent of machines. Some of them were producing as many as 5,000 cigarettes a day and earning the going rate of 20 piastres per 1,000 cigarettes produced. The first strikes after the war occurred at the factories of Gianaclis, Melkonian, Maspero, Vafiadis, Kuriazis Freres, Coutarelli, and Kassimis. During the months that followed there were further strikes at the factories owned by Matossian, Livanos, and Gamsaragan. Of the twenty-one strikes handled by the Labor Conciliation Board during the first half of the year 1921, a period of general strike activity, three had affected the cigarette companies of Papatheologos Brothers, Laurens, and Dimitrino.⁵

The number of separate firms involved indicates among other things that Greek workers had no qualms about striking against Greek employers. While this is the earliest recorded case of Greek employees striking against Greek bosses, this was imitated by other Greek workers later on in Egypt.

A secondary Greek source mentions that five years before the cigarette workers union was formed, a group of workers in the Suez "Canal industries" composed of a number of nationalities including Greeks, organized a strike which was to fail.⁶ In 1908, some Greek workers and some employees of the "Suez Canal Company" formed a mutual benefit society. The membership began to drop after 1912, but about 50 members remained during the war years. A combination of grievances led to a mixed nationality strike committee being elected at the end of the war. It included two Greeks, two Italians, one Austrian and one Egyptian. The committee led a month-long strike in May 1918 forcing the management to grant a 20% wage rise, a maximum eight hour working day and better living conditions, as well as a reduction in the years of employment required for a pension from 30 to 25 years.⁷

⁵Egyptian Labour Conciliation Board, Report, March-June 1920, FO 371/5030; Commissions de Conciliation du Travail, 4eme Rapport, Jul.-Sept. 1920 FO 371/6324; Commission de Conciliation de Travail 5eme Rapport, Jan.-June 1921, FO 371/6234.

⁶K. Frangoulis *Ἡ Συμβολὴ τῶν Ἑλλήνων στὴ Διῶρυξη τοῦ Σουέζ* (Alexandria, 1924), p. 41.

⁷Ibid p. 108.

The strike at the Canal was one of the many organized by workers in Egypt between 1918 and 1924. Several mixed nationality membership labor unions were formed, though several involved "employees" rather than "workers." Greeks were prominent in almost all of those unions. For instance, the Association of Bank Employees was formed in 1919, with 523 members employed in the fourteenth banks in Alexandria — they elected a Greek president. In the same year another organization, named the "International Union of Banking Employees and Workers" was formed in Cairo; all four elected officers were Greeks. Also, an international seamen's union was established; in the 20-man executive there were sixteen Greeks and four Egyptians.⁸ Other unions formed at an earlier period also contained a mixed nationality membership and a strong Greek presence. Examples are the "Tailors Assistants Union" (1901), the "Association of Barbers" (1901), the "Union of Metal Workers" (1902). The "Union of Tram Workers" and the "Union of Railway Workers" were predominantly "Egyptian" unions.⁹

While the strikes in the transport sector during this period were the most important in terms of size, degree of disruption and participation of native, Egyptian workers, the strikes in the cigarette industry were crucial in breaking down ethnic divisions among the workforce. Interestingly enough, according to one Egyptian newspaper report, strikes in Alexandria were more militant, better organized and usually successful because the work force there was made up of a broad range of nationalities. In Cairo, on the other hand, where strikes involved Greeks only, the success of the strike could be threatened by intervention of Greek diplomatic authorities.¹⁰ Because of the system of "Capitulations" in existence in Egypt up to 1937, foreigners not only retained their nationality but were also politically and judicially dependent on the Consular authorities of their own country.

The ready participation of Greek workers and employees in mixed nationality labor unions contrasts with the behavior of most Greek small owners, shopkeepers and "white collar workers." That category showed preference for smaller "ethnic" unions or associations.

There are at least two explanations which can be offered for this contrast. The first refers to the widely known and studied divergence in the practices of the working class and the petty bourgeoisie accor-

⁸*Ταχυδρόμος* (Newspaper, Alexandria) 27/9 June-30/12 June 1919.

⁹Al Sayid Rifaat "History of the Socialist Movement in Egypt 1900-1925" Phd Dissertation Karl Marx University Leipzig 1970 English copy p. 65.

¹⁰*Ταχυδρόμος* 10/23 Feb. 1918.

ding to their social position, their interests, their working conditions, their non-ownership or small scale ownership of the means of production and so on. Those reasons need not be repeated here.

The second explanation supplements the first. Workers do not automatically acquire a "working class consciousness." Strikes may be produced spontaneously, but the movement in Egypt, especially between 1918 and 1924, with its widespread unionization and inter-union solidarity, displayed a level of sophistication far above that achieved by spontaneity. The level achieved was at least partially the result of efforts of two groups working towards the development of the labor movement in Egypt, the anarcho-syndicalists and the communists.

Compared to a number of studies on the communist movement in Egypt, the influence of the anarcho-syndicalists remains unknown. This second group drew the attention of the British authorities at that time as much as the communists did.¹¹ This in itself however does not prove much because diplomatic reports on radical movements throughout the world around the time of the Bolshevik revolution tended to exaggerate the potential strength of such groups. Several Greeks were involved in the small communist movement. The anarcho-syndicalist faction was even smaller and represented by two Italians, Pizzuto and Colalto. Significantly, both groups made inroads in the labor movement and became influential, playing an important role up to 1924. In that year a general crack-down on Egyptian nationalists brought with it a number of measures against radicals who were either imprisoned or deported.¹²

Greek socialist intellectuals had set up the *Group d' Etudes Sociales* in Alexandria which was mistakenly misrepresented by British intelligence officers as the forerunner of the communist party. In actual fact this was more of a book club for radical intellectuals and was not directly involved in the formation of the communist party. The only living survivor of this group, Maria Iordanidou, a prolific novelist in her later years with a love for caricature, has written that a member of the group "walked into the offices of the club one evening and told us: 'You know, they have just opened a communist party down the road,' talking nonchalantly, as if he were announcing the opening of a grocery store."¹³ Two members of the group in fact did participate

¹¹W. Laqueur *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East* (London, 1961); S. Bashear *Communism in the Arab East 1918-1928* (London, 1980).

¹²British diplomatic reports on "Bolshevism in Egypt" FO 371/13150 and FO 371/6313.

¹³I. Iordanidou *Σάν τὰ Τρελλά Πουλιά* (Athens, 1978).

in the formation of the Communist Party in Egypt, known as the Socialist Party until it accepted the twenty one conditions of the Comintern in 1923. One of those members was Maria's future husband, Ioannis Iordanidis, a Greek teacher at Victoria College (the English school in Alexandria, run on public school lines) who was in contact with the Communist Party of Greece. He asked Maria, who knew Russian, to draft a letter to the Comintern asking for his help and guidance in the activities in Egypt. Arrangements were made for the letter to be smuggled to Moscow with Athens. The other member involved in the communist party was Sakellaris Yannakakis, a self-educated sponge-merchant from the island of Kalymnos who had close contacts with the Greek Alexandrian literati. He frequented the *Γράμματα* publishing house and on more than one occasion attempted, unsuccessfully to convert the poet C. P. Cavafy to "historical materialism."¹⁴

Those two Greeks were the most influential Europeans in the communist party together with the German Jew Joseph Rosenthal, whose anarcho-syndicalist tendencies cause him to be expelled from the Party on explicit instructions of the Comintern. The European communists in Egypt were fully aware of the need for Egyptians to lead the communist movement there. They tried to remain in the background while encouraging Egyptian members to shoulder more responsibilities. But a few years after the party was broken up by the authorities in 1942, it fell to Yanakakis to begin to reorganize the communist network.

The activities of communists and anarcho-syndicalists on behalf of the workers were recognized by a number of unions that elected several activists of both groups as their union officers. For instance, Pizutto became secretary of the "Federation of Workers" which incorporated twelve unions with a total membership of 1,500 workers. Rosenthal was elected as honorary president of the Tailors Assistants. At the First May Day celebration in Alexandria, held in 1921 and at which "speeches were made in nearly all the languages spoken in Egypt to celebrate the unity and solidarity of workers," a message received from Dr. Skouphopoulos, secretary of the "Isthmus of Suez Workers Union" was read out by Rosenthal. The message concluded as follows:

To the sound of the worker's song and amid fine enthusiasm, the proleteriats of the Isthmus of Suez salute their comrades of the Alexandria General Federation of Labor. Long live May Day and the workers of every country.¹⁵

¹⁴Interviews with Stratis Tsirkas, Lambis Rappas, Odisseas Karayannis, Ilios Yannakakis, and Timos Malanos.

¹⁵Egyptian Defence Security Report May 7, 1921 FO 371/6297.

To sum up, Greek workers in Egypt distinguished themselves from the larger petty-bourgeois element within the community by engaging in mixed nationality labor union activity. The petty bourgeoisie was much more concerned with appealing to ethnic sentiment among their group. An example of this mentality is provided by a speech of the secretary of the Greek Grocery Owners Association. He was addressing a meeting of the association of Greek Grocery employees as a guest speaker and he concluded his speech by asking for his audience's demands on their Greek employers to be restrained, in the name of "national interests."

What are the more general conclusions pointed to by the Greek experience in Egypt? Firstly, it is clear that even in a multi-ethnic society such as the one which existed in Egypt up to 1952, ethnic obstacles were overcome and a class-based workers movement did make its presence felt. Much like the Ottoman experience (where there was a large urban concentration of workers) despite relatively low economic development in Egypt, the labor movement did become a political force of some significance. This is not to suggest that vertical, ethnic links were completely obliterated — especially in Egypt those links survived at least up to the abolition of the "Capitulations" just before W W II. Moreover, at the time when the Ottoman and Egyptian multi-ethnic societies were disappearing, other multi-ethnic societies were being formed, admittedly with a larger working class element and at a higher level of economic development. Those new multi-ethnic societies witnessed powerful immigrant labor movements. Some of the obstacles faced, in particular the "ethnic" type divisions, were in many ways similar for Ottoman, Egyptian as well as American and, later on, other labor movements. Perhaps it is time to stop treating the emergence of the labor movement in the eastern Mediterranean as part of a quaint pre-history of more modern labor movements and award it the status of a direct ancestor whose experiences are well worth learning about and bearing in mind.

Secondly, there are certain conclusions relevant to the study of ethnic communities as a whole. The Greek experience in Egypt showed that despite an appearance of ethnic solidarity, there were serious class divisions within the ethnic fold. In some cases, where Greek employed Greek, there were relations of exploitation. In other cases there was simply a relationship of dominance of the rich over the poor through the network of ethnic public benefit establishments (schools, hospitals etc), paid for by the wealthy for the benefit of the less privileged. When one talks about class differences within an ethnic community one need not imply direct opposition and exploitation. But the differences in interests which did exist, within the ethnic shell, can help us understand

why in times of crisis (as in Egypt in the interwar period) there are several alternative proposals to ethnic survival.

What has been said above implies a theoretical understanding of how class and ethnicity can "cohabitate" and does not necessarily act as an "either or" relationship. This cannot be elaborated fully here.¹⁶ Suffice it to say that if one thinks of class as economically determined and ethnicity as culturally determined one is able to approach the relationship of ethnicity and class not as a mutually exclusive one, but as two different sets of factors shaping the history of an ethnic minority over time. Those two influences shaped the behavior of Greek workers in Egypt in two different ways. One was labor union activity along the lines of horizontal, class interests. Later on, during the debate over community's future in Egypt, the workers and socialist intellectuals evolved their own set of views as to what was to be done (just as the wealthy merchants did, the industrialists, the shopkeepers, the Greek Church and the Greek diplomatic authorities) to ensure the future of the whole of the Greek entity. The class conscious workers were also concerned about their ethnic community.