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Hats and Tarbooshes

Identity, cosmopolitanism, and violence in 1920s Alexandria

By: Daniel Woodward

ABSTRACT

In May of 1921 Alexandria was consumed by demonstrations against the British-backed Adly Cabinet. In a matter of days these protests developed into violence which targeted people based on perceived communal affiliation. In total, 88 people were killed and 238 were wounded.

Through a detailed examination of this communal and political violence, a moment that has largely be left out of the Egyptian historical narrative, I provide a greater understanding of how the complex dynamics of identity and power operated in Alexandrian society in this crucial period in the formation of the narrative of Egyptian identity.

Utilizing a variety of primary and secondary sources, I use this moment to complicate both the romantic cosmopolitan narrative which has dominated much of Alexandrian historiography and the anti-colonialist narrative of 1950s nationalism. The cosmopolitan narrative is flawed because it ignores or celebrates the inherently exploitative colonial structure of early twentieth century Egypt and, as I show using court records, relies on simplistic understandings of identity in Alexandrian society. Many anti-colonial narratives rely on similarly simplistic understandings of identity. Ultimately the goal of this thesis is to use a specific incident to explore and complicate the dominant narratives of the historiography of Alexandria.

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Introduction

Between 20 and 23 May, 1921 the city of Alexandria experienced an episode of urban violence. Initially the violence appeared anti-imperial in its ambitions: on Friday, 20 May, protesters angry about the British occupation of Egypt attacked police stations across the city. In response the police and army opened fire, killing and wounding a number of people. That evening the British military deployed across the city. The next day, protestors held funerals for those killed and demonstrators marched through the city chanting against British rule and, increasingly, the other foreign inhabitants of the city. The following day, 22 May, the violence took on an explicitly communal dimension. Groups of Egyptians marched through predominantly Greek neighborhoods chanting against Christians generally and Greeks specifically. Crowds looted shops while residents fired at them from above. This sparked a wave of identity-based violence across the city and for the next twenty-four hours gangs of young men of various communal affiliations roamed the streets, beating, and in some cases killing, passersby whom they identified as of a different communal affiliation. Egyptian witnesses later claimed that people they presumed were Europeans instigated the violence; European witnesses blamed “native” crowds. The British military eventually contained the unrest using bayonets and bullets. In total, eighty-eight people were killed and 238 were wounded.

The history of early twentieth century Alexandria is often narrated as a story of cosmopolitanism. In this telling, Alexandria was a place where people from many countries and backgrounds lived together in peace and harmony until Egyptian nationalism, usually personified by Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser, expelled foreigners from Egypt, destroying cosmopolitan Alexandria. The ideal of this cosmopolitan society is most famously expressed in the works of Lawrence Durrell, Constantine Cavafy and E.M. Forster, but it persists in both contemporary literary and academic production. The Greek-Alexandrian author Harry Tzalas provides a good example of the multi-cultural harmony imagined in this narrative:

Alexandria – the last great cosmopolitan center of the Mediterranean- special, unique, because people of different nationalities and faiths lived there, people going about their

ordinary, everyday lives. They lived side by side – Muslims, Copts, Nubians, Greeks, Italians, Armenians, Maltese, Shamis, Lebanese, Jews, English, French, Spaniards, Germans, Austrians – they were all Alexandrians; together they made up the whole. They laid the foundations of the new Alexandria upon the remains of the ancient city.¹

This description of Alexandria is at direct odds with the violence described above, which occurred in the middle of a supposed golden age of cosmopolitanism in Alexandria. How can we make sense of this disparity?

This violence has received at most limited attention from scholars. A British military tribunal convened to investigate the incident was quick to blame political agitators for the violence, partly because it furthered the British administration of Egypt's political agenda.² More recently, historians have emphasized the sectarian dimension, a focus which comes in part from contemporary interest in Alexandria as a site of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism.³ Most often, this event is mentioned in passing as one of the many disturbances which comprised the revolutionary period following the 1919 uprisings. Others have looked at it (briefly) from the perspectives of social, urban, and judicial history.⁴ No one has provided a satisfactory and detailed explanation of the events and their effects on both Alexandria and Egypt.

In 1921 Egypt was two years into a revolutionary period characterized by a series of crises following a mass uprising in 1919. The unifying goal of many of the demonstrations which comprised this revolutionary period was independence from Britain, and the British administration struggled to contain Egyptian demands and politics amidst wider context of post-World War I upheaval. As Egypt's "second city," the streets of Alexandria were an important political space, but the city was in many respects quite

¹ Tzalas, *Farewell to Alexandria: Eleven Short Stories*, vii–viii.

² In correspondence and court records, British officials were quick to link all anti-colonial agitation to Sa'ad Zaghlul.

³ Mansel, *Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean*, 238; Ilbert, "A Certain Sense of Citizenship," 25.

⁴ Neither Goldschmidt and Bunton nor Botman mention it in their general histories of the period. Ilbert alludes to it in his essay "A Certain Sense of Citizenship" and gives it slightly longer treatment in *Alexandrie. 1830-1930: Histoire D'une Communauté Citadine*; Esmeir briefly looks at the British military tribunal convened to examine the unrest, using Foreign Office correspondence as her source. Mansel gives it a few lines in his study of cosmopolitanism in Alexandria, Beirut, and Smyrna. Goldschmidt Jr., *Modern Egypt*; Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 2009; Botman, *Egypt from Independence to Revolution: 1919-1952*; Ilbert, "A Certain Sense of Citizenship," 25; Ilbert, *Alexandrie, 1830-1930 : Histoire D'une Communauté Citadine*; Esmeir, *Juridical Humanity*, 266.

different from other parts of the country. Roughly twenty percent of the population of Alexandria was composed of members of the foreign communities (although very often their families had been in Alexandria for generations) who generally enjoyed legal protections and economic advantages far above that of the “native” population.

This thesis is an attempt to understand Alexandrian society in the 1920s by exploring this moment of communal violence. The aim is to use the themes of identity and colonialism to interrogate “cosmopolitanism” as a tool of analysis for early twentieth century Alexandria. An incident of communal violence may seem an imperfect moment to analyze cosmopolitanism; a crucial theme of cosmopolitanism is that it describes a time when people from different communities cooperated and interacted peacefully; clearly times of communal unrest such as the violence of 1921 were low points of such inter-communal cooperation. Despite this, events such as those of May 1921 are useful for examining cosmopolitanism precisely because they show us exactly where the cracks were in society. Moments of public strife put pressure on societies in ways which allow us to see the conflicts and resentments which exist at a level below everyday normal interactions. Using court records, British government documents, and newspaper articles, I provide a very different picture of the city than the one which we find in literary memories. The Alexandrians I portray understand, perform, and react to identities and social categories in ways which have little to do with the conceptions of identity that inform the discourse of cosmopolitanism. They lived in a city governed by several overlapping colonial constructs that created and reinforced disparities between foreigners and locals, but also within those groups.

In order to understand the violence of May 1921 and the ways in which it can be read as a challenge to the cosmopolitan narrative, it is useful to provide some background to political context in which the violence occurred. The major feature of Egyptian politics in 1921 was the ascendance of nationalist anti-colonial political movements. Egyptian

nationalist movements go back to at least the mid-nineteenth century. There are many iterations of Egyptian nationalism, but broadly speaking we can use the term to refer to ideologies which identify “Egyptian” as a social category and argue that the land of Egypt should be ruled primarily by Egyptians. Egyptian nationalism rose in power and popularity throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for a variety of reasons; here I wish to emphasize one: it was an ideology which countered the increasing dominance of foreign powers in Egypt. Thus when I refer to Egyptian nationalism below I am emphasizing its anti-colonial character.

Historians often consider the Dinshaway incident of 1906 a paradigmatic moment which resulted in a dramatic increase in the awareness of the Egyptian population to the nationalist identity and the cruelty of the colonial system. As Cleveland and Bunton put it, Dinshaway was “the spark that ignited the flame of anti-British feeling.”⁵ What happened at Dinshaway, a small village in the Nile Delta, is not entirely clear. It seems that a group of five British officers went hunting for pigeons near the village and in the process either shot a pigeon belonging to a villager or wounded a local woman and set fire to a barn.⁶ The villagers attacked the soldiers, one of whom died of heatstroke. In response the British authorities set up a tribunal which tried fifty-two of the villagers, eventually sentencing four of them to death by hanging. The whole affair was widely covered in Egyptian, British, and other European media.

The incident occupies a central place in Egyptian nationalist lore; in the years following, Egyptians composed a number of popular works including ballads, plays, and novels commemorating the incident, often portraying it as a violation of national “honor” in gendered terms.⁷ What is often overlooked is that the outrage was very much the product of both a newly burgeoning media climate and of specific political actors, most notably Mustafa Kamil, who worked very hard to manufacture indignation, both inside Egypt and abroad.⁸ Dinshaway did not exactly “spark” nationalist sentiment in Egypt, but

⁵ Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 2009, 108.

⁶ Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation Through Popular Culture*, 93.

⁷ *Ibid.*,

⁸ Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation Through Popular Culture*, 93–95.

the ensuing uproar does demonstrate that the processes of development of mass media and of nationalist organizing had reached a crucial stage in their growth.

The nationalist movement was comprised of a number of competing visions and ideologies that were held together by a desire to see Egypt independent of foreign rule, although “foreign” meant different things to different people. To some, foreign rule meant European rule only, while to others the category of foreign included the Ottoman Empire. Major splits in the nationalist movement included those in favor of violent insurrection and those against it, those who emphasized the Islamic character of Egyptian nationalism and those who did not, those who supported the Ottoman Empire and those who did not, and those who favored working with the British in a limited fashion and those who did not. Throughout the proceedings of the military commission we find the British preoccupied with these divisions. Their main focus was, unsurprisingly, on strengthening those who wanted to work with them.

The number of British troops in Egypt vastly increased during World War I because of British concerns about the security of the Suez Canal.⁹ This, combined with periodic wartime shortages, led to further resentment of British occupation. With the end of the war and international discussions of self-determination, a group of intellectuals led by Sa‘ad Zaghlul prepared themselves to represent Egypt at the 1919 Paris Peace conference. After a number of British refusals to either acknowledge the legitimacy of this organization, now generally referred to as the *Wafd*, or to allow them to attend the peace conference, Zaghlul eventually went to Paris where he attacked the British occupation. There were large demonstrations supporting him, and the British administration, now perceiving him as a major threat, exiled Zaghlul and his delegation to Malta. Further demonstrations and strikes broke out across Egypt which constituted a significant uprising, and which would eventually lead to the release of the delegation.

⁹ The Ottoman Empire attacked the canal in early 1915 with some 25,000 troops, but were beaten by the some 30,000 British soldier defending the canal, most of whom were Indian. The Ottomans did not attempt another attack, but stationed a large force at Bersheeba obligating the British army to dedicate enormous resources to defense of the canal. See Bruce, *The Last Crusade: The Palestine Campaign in the First World War* for great detail.

Over the following two years there were more demonstrations and upheavals, largely focusing on the demand for independence. The British appointed a commission, called the Milner Mission, to study the situation, which Zaghlul led most Egyptians in boycotting. The mission eventually announced in February 1921 that Protectorate status was no longer satisfactory. In March, a new government headed by Adly Yakan Pasha was formed with Zaghlul's blessing. Adly invited Zaghlul to join him in Britain for negotiations, but Zaghlul refused without certain preconditions. This standoff led to further protests and violence, of which the Alexandria incident was one, as well as further repression from the British administration.¹⁰

In order to interrogate and critique the cosmopolitan discourse in the context of 1920s Egypt, we must first understand where it comes from and how writers and scholars have used the term in the Middle Eastern context. Traditionally the term “cosmopolitan” is attributed to Diogenes the Cynic (d. 323 BCE) who referred to himself as a “*kosmopolites*,” meaning citizen of the world or universe. Asked where he came from, he rejected affiliation with any single city-state, saying that he was instead “at home nowhere – except in the world itself.”¹¹ In Stoic philosophy, the cosmopolis, or universal city, was a “community founded on common acceptance of social norms.”¹² Cosmopolitanism in modern philosophy dates most significantly to Immanuel Kant, who wrote that mankind's capacities would be best developed in a “universal civil society” which would be achieved because of man's “unsocial sociability” which drives him to both seek and reject the company of others. The best mechanism for governing would be a “civil constitution” which would function as a “universally valid will” and help humanity fulfill “nature's supreme objective – a universal cosmopolitan state, the womb

¹⁰ The above summary is based on the following: P.J. Vatikiotis, *A History of Egypt*, (New York : F. A. Praeger, 1969), 258-268, Goldschmidt, *Modern Egypt*, 55-9, and Selma Botman, *Egypt from Independence to Revolution 1919-1952*, (Syracuse, N.Y. : Syracuse University Press, 1991), 25-34.

¹¹ Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive*, 4.

¹² See Schofield, *The Stoic Idea of the City*, 64–65; My discussion relies on Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive*, 4–7.

in which all of the human species' original capacities will be developed.”¹³ In a later essay, Kant wrote that “a *league of peace*” among the nations should be formed and that “cosmopolitan right,” here meaning hospitality in foreign lands, should be guaranteed.¹⁴ Kant was particularly concerned with the foreign relations of the cosmopolitan state—he felt that this league of peace composed of cosmopolitan states would ensure perpetual peace—but this aspect has little bearing on cosmopolitanism in the Alexandrian context. The relevant point is that a cosmopolitan society, in the traditional sense, can be defined roughly as a place where people consent to be governed by some universally acceptable norms and place of origin is of little concern.

In the historiography of the Middle East generally and in Alexandria specifically, cosmopolitanism has taken on a different meaning. The term is rarely defined but often used to describe cities such as Alexandria, Smyrna, and Beirut, where well-educated, cultured, polyglot, multinational populations lived in close proximity and relative harmony. This discourse, which gained popularity in the mid-to-late twentieth century should be understood in its historical context. The 1952 revolution which eventually brought Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser to power in Egypt was fueled by an anti-colonial discourse which emphasized Egyptian nationalism and tended to identify foreigners in Egypt as colonialists. In the twenty years following 1952 foreign assets were seized by the Egyptian government and the vast majority of foreign residents left the country. The romantic cosmopolitan discourse arose largely in reaction to the nationalist anti-colonial rhetoric and actions of Nasser and others, which made national identity primary over other identities. Cosmopolitanism spoke to a real desire for a world in which nationality was not the most important aspect of identity. Unfortunately, the discourse which emerged turned out to be as problematic as its antithesis.

The cosmopolitan discourse has been criticized on a number of fronts in recent years. Will Hanley has offered the most trenchant criticism in an article titled, “Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies.” Here he presents three crucial critiques of

¹³ Kant, *Perpetual Peace, and Other Essays on Politics, History and Morals*, 31–33, 36, 38; as quoted in Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive*, 6–7.

¹⁴ Kant, *Perpetual Peace, and Other Essays on Politics, History and Morals*, 117–118; Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive*, 7.

cosmopolitanism as it has been used in Middle East historiography. The first is that the cosmopolitan discourse inherently focuses on the elite, and is therefore elitist. This is perhaps the most obvious yet the most important of Hanley's critiques, and examples of this elitism are rampant in the literature. Durrell's central characters in *The Alexandria Quartet* are all clearly of the elite, either because of their position as foreigners or because of their standing in Egyptian society. Sami Zubaida evaluates the cosmopolitanism of historical figures on a number of material conditions, all of which coincide with an elite identity: languages spoken, alcohol consumed, titles held.¹⁵ Cosmopolitan is, for Hanley, "a long word that is shorthand for wealth and secularism."¹⁶

Naguib Mahfouz provides a good account of how this elite cosmopolitanism may have felt to a non-elite Egyptian:

Alexandria in the twenties was a European city, where Italian, French, Greek or English were heard far more often than Arabic. The city was beautiful, and so clean that one could have eaten off the streets. Anything from Europe could be found in Alexandria for half the price: cinemas, restaurants, dance halls... But that was all for foreigners. We could only observe from the outside.¹⁷

The historian Khaled Fahmy echoes this criticism of cosmopolitan discourse, writing that "the openness and cosmopolitanism of Alexandria, much celebrated by novelists, poets and historians alike, is essentially predicated on ignoring and silencing the city's Arabic-speaking population."¹⁸ This point is well-taken: there is little place in the cosmopolitan discourse for the poor and middle-class Arabic-speakers who made up the bulk of Alexandria's population, but it is also worth noting that this discourse ignores lower-class foreigners as well.

Hanley's second critique is that the cosmopolitan discourse exudes grief for a more tolerant past which may be largely imagined. Durrell captured this grief in a 1982 introduction to E.M Forster's *Alexandria: A History and Guide*, writing of a 1977 visit to

¹⁵ Zubaida, "Middle Eastern Experiences of Cosmopolitanism"; This criticism of Zubaida is made by Hanley, "Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies," 1349–1350.

¹⁶ Hanley, "Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies," 1350.

¹⁷ Naguib Mahfouz, "Alexandria for the Egyptians"; as quoted in Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive*, 1.

¹⁸ Fahmy, "Towards a Social History of Modern Alexandria," 281.

the city: “foreign posters and advertisements have vanished, everything is in Arabic, in our time film posters were billed in several languages with Arabic subtitles, so to speak.”¹⁹ The grief here is for a past that was certainly real (the multi-lingual movie posters), but this quote also demonstrates a certain elitism in the period Durrell is mourning; movie posters were in foreign languages because those were the languages which the foreign elites who could afford to go to the theaters understood. Describing Durrell’s feelings about the Arabic movie posters, Michael Haag gives us a more pure sense of this grief: “All about him lay ‘Iskandariya,’ the uncomprehended Arabic of its inhabitants translating only into emptiness.”²⁰ Haag presents Durrell’s lack of comprehension as sad because the city which Durrell depicted so famously had changed. He does not address the implications of the fact that Alexandria’s most famous chronicler did not understand the language of most of its inhabitants.

Hanley’s third critique of cosmopolitanism in the Middle East historiography is that it privileges formal labels over content. He argues cosmopolitanism is never defined and is used as a stand-in for several more specific labels, such as “elite,” “foreign,” or “European.” As Hanley writes, “Cosmopolitanism is a blanket that masks social indeterminacy, concealing more than it reveals.”²¹ Fahmy provides a similar critique, saying that “this discourse of cosmopolitanism is objectionable not only for its often dubious ethics... but also for its limited explanatory power.”²² Indeed, a central problem with the narrative of Alexandria as cosmopolitan is that it does a poor job of actually describing the society as we find it presented in the archival sources. A solution which Hanley offers is specificity:

“the critical step in this revision of cosmopolitanism in Middle East studies is to call groups by their proper names. Elites can be called elites. Other categories for which cosmopolitanism is a stand-in... should be taken out of their cosmopolitan clothing and given attention on their own terms.”²³

¹⁹ Forster and Durrell, *Alexandria: A History and a Guide*, xviii.

²⁰ Haag, *Alexandria, City of Memory*, 2.

²¹ Hanley, “Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies,” 1352.

²² Fahmy, “For Cavafy, with Love and Squalor: Some Critical Notes on the History and Historiography of Modern Alexandria,” 277.

²³ Hanley, “Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies,” 1359.

Along these lines, my aim is to use the words and narratives of Alexandrians and British administrators to tell a very specific story about the violence of 1921.

Hanley argues for another solution: we must widen the scope of cosmopolitanism and recognize that there are “multiple cosmopolitanisms,” meaning cosmopolitanism which existed at multiple levels of society, not just the elite.²⁴ His dissertation, “Foreignness and Localness in Alexandria, 1880-1914,” is in part an attempt to utilize this concept of multiple cosmopolitanisms.²⁵ He points to Alexandrian neighborhoods such as the area around Sisters Street²⁶ (where the worst of the violence in 1921 occurred) where lower-class Egyptians and Europeans lived and worked near one another and identifies a “vulgar cosmopolitanism.” Here Hanley is transposing the idea of cosmopolitanism on to the lower classes, removing the elitism but maintaining the rest of the discourse. This is an interesting idea and Hanley certainly does an excellent job furthering our understanding historical Alexandria, but it is ultimately flawed.

Hanley’s politics are ultimately cosmopolitan in the original sense of the word. In his call for specificity, he says, “In order to preserve a dream of social mixing, it is important to be precise about its precedents, even if precision makes the past appear less rosy and its cosmopolitanism less widespread.”²⁷ I do not reject the idea of “social mixing” as a worthy goal, and I fully endorse the idea of precision in history, but I question the idea of using Alexandria as an embodiment of that dream to any degree, with its “social mixing” being so dependent on colonial exploitation. It is impossible to say if a “cosmopolitan dream” in the original sense has ever existed, but my feeling is that the Alexandrian example shows us that we must be imaginative in creating new modes of political and economic organization, and look to the past as much as a warning as a model.

Another critique of cosmopolitanism which Hanley alludes to is the inherent colonialism of Alexandrian society in the period. This colonialism worked on two levels: British political and economic control of Egypt, and the system of privileges, usually

²⁴ Ibid., 1360.

²⁵ Hanley, “Foreignness and Localness.”

²⁶ The Arabic name of the street is *Sharia’ Saba’ Binat* or Seven Sisters Street but the English sources always refer to it as Sisters Street.

²⁷ Hanley, “Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies,” 1360.

referred to as capitulations, granted to subjects of some eighteen foreign powers in Egypt. Michael Reimer, in his book on the nineteenth century, provides us with a good framework for understanding the latter form of colonialism, describing the city as a “bridgehead of European colonialism” in Egypt as it was a place where European financial forces penetrated the country.²⁸ Ilbert provides us, without quite admitting it, a good description of how broader European colonialism functioned in his authoritative *Alexandrie, 1830-1930 : Histoire D'une Communauté Citadine*.²⁹ He highlights the inherent contradictions of the ruling structure and elite of Alexandria: in one sense, Alexandria was locally governed to a much greater degree than other areas in Egypt by way of its Municipal Council. On the other hand, less than one percent of the population of the city ever had a say in governance. Hala Halim correctly criticizes Ilbert for not recognizing this arrangement as inherently colonial.³⁰

There is a paradox in the cosmopolitan discourse which mirrors the paradox of Kant’s “unsocial sociability.” In some iterations of the discourse cosmopolitan cities were places of mixing, where national identity or communal affiliation was deemphasized, while in others harmony is maintained because groups remain essentially apart. Sami Zubaida provides a useful example of the former understanding in “Middle Eastern Experiences of Cosmopolitanism” when he writes that cosmopolitanism consists of “ways of living and thinking,” which are “deracinated from communities and cultures of origin, from conventional living, from family and homecenteredness.”³¹ Robert Ilbert provides a good example of the latter aspect of this paradox, although he is more nuanced than Zubaida:

any cosmopolitanism (in Alexandria) was only a function of the ‘free city’ where the effective rulers knew each other personally, as much through business relations as through community or family solidarities... Alexandria taught that a pluralist society could in fact function if based, not on the insistence of some abstract universality, but upon the recognition of the autonomy of different groups.³²

²⁸ Reimer, *Colonial Bridgehead*, 3.

²⁹ Ilbert, *Alexandrie, 1830-1930 : Histoire D'une Communauté Citadine*.

³⁰ Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive*, 40–41.

³¹ Zubaida, “Middle Eastern Experiences of Cosmopolitanism,” 15.

³² Ilbert, “A Certain Sense of Citizenship,” 30–31.

Cosmopolitan Alexandria was therefore both a place where communal and national identity was simultaneously subordinated to the universal, and privileged.

This paradox of identity is, in many ways, the crux of the cosmopolitan narrative, and as we shall see in chapter three, it does not reflect actual understandings and performances of Alexandria during the “golden age” of the cosmopolitan city. Authors such as Halim and Robert Mabro have criticized the imagined cosmopolitan identity as being Eurocentric, an important point, but it does not help us understand actual understandings of identity. Hanley, in his dissertation, argues that the categories of “foreign” and “local” may be useful for understanding identities and practice of identity in Alexandria in the period leading up to World War I.³³ This is a useful distinction, but it is just one of several made by residents of Alexandria during the violence of 1921. A thorough re-examination of the cosmopolitan discourse depends on the production of new and more complex understandings of identity in Alexandria.

My point in this discussion is that the cosmopolitan discourse needs to be set aside if we are to begin to understand historical Alexandria. Cosmopolitanism is a flawed tool of analysis because it is elitist, does not account for the violence and exploitation of colonialism which made it possible, and is based on flawed assumptions about the ways in which identity operated in the period before nationalism and the nation-state became the dominant self-identifier in the Middle East. Its inherent universalism has no historical basis in Alexandria at least. There was certainly some degree of inter-communal harmony and mixing in Alexandrian society, but it occurred within a stratified and colonial socio-political structure. The narrative remains popular because it allows people to imagine a happier time when the world was not as neatly and violently divided as they imagine it to be now. This is a classic “golden-age fallacy” and its continued prevalence in literature and academia precludes any real understanding of the ways in which power, exploitation, and class actually function in human societies.

³³ Hanley, “Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies.”

Through revisiting the violent events of 20 to 23 May 1921, this thesis will attempt to provide a picture of Alexandria which goes beyond the limits of the cosmopolitan narrative. For the purposes of this work I will use a general definition of cosmopolitanism which matches its use in Middle East studies; that is, the term cosmopolitanism describes a segment society (while often making claims on the society as a whole) which is elite, polyglot, literate, and composed of people from different cultural backgrounds. This may accurately describe the most elite strata of Alexandrian society, but it is a poor representation of the society as a whole.

In the following pages I examine a number of contemporary narratives by both Alexandrians and the British rulers of Egypt in order to draw out their understandings of identity. According to social identity theory, social identity is the knowledge of belonging to a particular social category or group. In social situations people derive their sense of self largely from the categories to which they belong.³⁴ Social identity is crucial for understanding a society on a macro-level because it is the basis on which political power and social status are created. Once formed, some identities or categories hold higher status or power than others. Hopkinson Pasha, the British commandant of the Alexandria City Police (1902-1917) and director of the Alexandria municipality (1917-1923) could horsewhip a fellah at the tram station because he held certain (high) social identities, while the fellah held other (low) ones.

It is important, however, to emphasize the fluidity of social identities, up to a point anyway. People hold multiple social identities at the same time. In the example above, Hopkinson Pasha was simultaneously British, European, a government official, and a large man with a whip. The categories of British and European were more or less permanent, while the other two were variously temporary. All four categories deeply informed his behavior and the reactions of both the fellah and bystanders. As we shall see, Alexandrians had complex relationships to social identities and in times of strife, as

³⁴ Stets and Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," 225.

in 1921, one's performance of identity could mean the difference between life and death. The understandings of identity described in the chapters below are a challenge to the discourse of cosmopolitanism because they present a far more complex and nuanced picture of social status and power dynamics in Alexandria than those offered by cosmopolitan readings.

This work is not a comprehensive study of the city, or even the event in question: such a study would require extended research in the Egyptian archives, as well as with the French, Greek, and Italian consular records, and a number of other sources. My research has centered on the British archives and Egyptian newspapers, which could provide differing and distinct perspectives on the event, and speak to the ways in which colonial power interacted with Alexandrians.

The most important source for this work is the records of the Military Court of Inquiry convened by the British Administration to investigate the causes of the violence. This document consists of some 300 pages of (translated) testimony from witnesses, a number of pamphlets and speeches collected by the secret police and submitted as evidence, and a final report written by the court officers. While the procedure for calling the witnesses was problematic (see chapter two), the testimonies allow us to hear from residents of Alexandria, and particularly the lower-class Europeans who are written out of history in the cosmopolitan discourse. The report written by the court is a fascinating document which reflects the biases and political needs of the British administration in Egypt, and I examine it at length in chapter two.

The first two chapters deal explicitly with the colonial context of Alexandria. In the first, "Colonial Contexts" I lay the historical groundwork for understanding the violence of 1921 by arguing that Alexandria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century must be understood as a society controlled by a layered colonialism. The first layer consisted of a system of economic and legal privileges for foreign residents which gave them distinct advantages in economic, political, and social life. This system existed in all Egyptian cities where foreigners resided, but it was in Alexandria, the city with the largest population of foreign residents, where society was most affected. The second layer of colonialism was the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 and the formal

annexation of Egypt as a protectorate in 1914. The British occupiers exercised *de facto* control over the political and security apparatuses of the country, but never had full control of the other foreign communities. The elite society of Alexandria, often identified as cosmopolitan, existed precisely because of this context of multiple colonialisms.

The second chapter, “Narratives of Violence,” departs slightly from the theme of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism by analyzing the reactions of the British colonial regime to the violence of 1921. I focus on two different reports created by different arms of the British administration, one from a Military Court of Enquiry which High Commissioner Edmund Allenby tasked with exploring the causes of the violence, and one from the Commandant of the Alexandria City Police, Grant Bey. These reports differ greatly in how they describe the causes and facts of the violence, particularly in the ways in which they treat lower-class European communities in Alexandria. The treatment of lower-class Europeans in each report, I argue, reflects the particular bureaucratic and political aims of the body which composed them. The military court had two goals: to satisfy the foreign consuls of Alexandria who were putting enormous pressure on the British administration following the violence, and to blame Egyptian anti-colonialist politicians, most notably Sa‘ad Zaghlul, for the violence in order to discredit them. The result was a report which is decidedly uninterested in discovering how the majority of the victims of the violence—Egyptians—died, absolving Europeans of any blame.

The police report, on the other hand, was mainly concerned with absolving the Alexandria City Police of any wrong-doing during the events; Egyptian members of the force were accused of beating, robbing, and killing Europeans on 22 and 23 May. This report argues the low-class Europeans started the worst of the violence by firing on demonstrations from their houses and continued to fire on the police and Egyptian army once they arrived to try to calm the situation. In the differences between the two reports we are able to see both a glimpse of Alexandrian social categories and the ways in which the colonial administration viewed and interacted with these categories. The British administration cast itself as an aloof and neutral arbitrator in Alexandria. As top layer of a complex colonial system they were in fact anything but aloof and neutral, and their actions and narratives were an important constitutive part of Alexandrian society.

The final chapter is an exploration of social identity and category in Alexandria as revealed by testimony to the military court. I analyze constructions and performances of identities, most notably “European” and “Egyptian” and show that these categories are not self-evident but were composed of complex understandings of class, nationality, religion, and race. Here I argue that social categories were fluid and overlapping, and ultimately far more complicated than the understandings of identity offered by the cosmopolitan discourse. People were capable of simultaneously privileging and subordinating their communal or national affiliations and their reasons for doing so at a given moment were complex and personal. Ultimately I suggest that a better understanding of Mediterranean port cities such as Alexandria should focus on how both conflict and cooperation were crucial features of everyday life, and that social categories in these cities cannot be reduced to simple binaries such as foreign and local or Christian and Muslim.

Chapter One

Colonial Contexts

On Sunday, 11 June 1882, following a dispute between a Maltese man and an Egyptian driver about a taxi fare, a wave of inter-communal violence swept across Alexandria. The details of this episode are eerily similar to the violence of 1921. One European observer described his experience:

Sunday, June 11, 1882, at about 4 or 5 P.M. I was at home in the street of the Palloni baths. Arabs came along the street in a tumultuous manner, carrying divans, clocks, and small pieces of furniture; they were followed by guards (Mustafazin), with guns, bayonets, and sticks. I went to my mother's house in the Street of Sisters, and from the balcony I saw that the Mustafazin were firing on the Europeans; soldiers and Arabs mixed together, pursued Europeans who happened to be passing; there was a panic, and everyone tried to make off in safety to the port. Going from my house to the Street of Sisters, I saw three dead Europeans lying on the ground... One was well-dressed... the others I did not know, they were of the middle class.³⁵

In this testimony we find many of the themes that we will see in testimony about the violence in 1921: angry crowds making identity-based assaults on Europeans, members of Egyptian security forces participating in these assaults, a focus on identity signifiers such as clothing, and a focus on the class of both victim and assailant.

Like the violence of 1921, this episode also occurred in what might be called a revolutionary context. In the late 1870s a movement of Egyptian army officers led by Colonel Ahmed 'Urabi had been gathering support within the army. Their grievances were against both Turco-Circassian dominance of the Egyptian military and the general corruption and incompetence of the government. In 1881, the Khedive ordered 'Urabi to leave Cairo. He refused and dismissed the leadership of the military and called for the election of a new government. Under great pressure from 'Urabi, Khedive Tawfiq formed a new government in February 1882 and 'Urabi took the post of War Minister. Some historians have characterized 'Urabi's actions as a limited military uprising, but Juan Cole argues convincingly that it was part of a broader revolutionary moment in Egypt in

³⁵ *Parliamentary Papers*, 1882: vol. 83, Egypt No. 16, "Correspondence respecting the Riots at Alexandria on 11th June, 1882." As quoted in Reimer, *Colonial Bridgehead*, 173.

which oppressed segments of society attempted to reformulate the social and economic order.³⁶ The end result was, of course, formal British occupation of the country.

In January of 1882 the French and British governments, fearing that the new Egyptian government would default on its loans, sent a joint note affirming their support for the Khedival authority. In Alexandria this note was widely interpreted to mean that one or both of the powers would intervene in short order.³⁷ In May of 1882 France and Britain sent warships to the coast of Egypt, further heightening tensions. These developments caused deep and immediate resentment amongst segments of Egyptian society towards the European population of the country, and in June it took only a minor dispute to set off a wave of inter-communal riots in Alexandria. A month later, the British staged an invasion at Alexandria under the pretext of protecting the foreign communities from this inter-communal violence.

The motivations of the British government for authorizing this invasion were of course more complex than the protection of the foreign communities in Alexandria—control of the Suez Canal and enforcement of debt payments were probably the two most significant motivating factors—but this moment is worth emphasizing because it shows how closely tied the existence of the foreign communities, and with them the narrative of cosmopolitanism, were to establishing colonial structures in Egypt.

In order to put the Alexandrian experience in its colonial context, in this chapter I provide a brief social, political, and geographic history of Alexandria starting in the early nineteenth century. My major contention is that the cosmopolitan society portrayed by writers such as Cavafy and Durrell existed and indeed could only exist in an inherently colonial socio-economic context.³⁸ The colonialism in Alexandria was not, however, a simple case of economic and political dominance by one power; throughout the nineteenth century the capitulatory powers in Alexandria expanded their control of social and economic life in the city, making it what Michael Reimer calls a “colonial

³⁶ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution*, 3–21.

³⁷ Reimer, *Colonial Bridgehead*, 176.

³⁸ Halim argues that discourse of cosmopolitanism was a “Eurocentric discourse” which relied on the Hellenistic construct of Alexandria-as-cosmopolis and emphasized continuity between the ancient Hellenist past and the present. Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive*, 2–3, 33.

bridgehead” in Egypt for the international economy.³⁹ In 1882 the British occupied Egypt adding another layer to and formalizing the colonial dynamic, but they never fully controlled Alexandria’s other foreign communities. This layered colonialism created the conditions for the existence of the small and elite segment of society which is identified as cosmopolitan.

Layered Colonialism

Before proceeding to a history of this layered colonialism and its effects on the life of the city, it is useful to define precisely what I mean by “layered colonialism.” In his book *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Jürgen Osterhammel provides the following definition of colonialism:

Colonialism is a relationship between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority and their ordained mandate to rule.⁴⁰

In early twentieth century Egypt, there were two forms or layers of colonialism which meet the crucial part of Osterhammel’s definition, namely that the fundamental decisions affected the lives of the colonized are made by the rulers and largely in pursuit of the rulers’ interests. The first form was what we might call Mediterranean colonialism. It is characterized by the existence of a number of foreign communities in Alexandria which exploited the economic resources of Egypt, most notably cotton, and used their financial leverage to ensure a system of distinct legal and economic advantages for themselves. The system of legal advantages, described in more detail below, was a crucially colonial part of this system because it was responsible for making fundamental decisions affecting the lives of Egyptians, often to their disadvantage.

The more obvious layer of colonialism was British control of Egypt. This dates to the invasion of 1882 on the pretext of ending communal riots in Alexandria and ending the ‘Urabi rebellion, but was actually aimed at imposing austerity measures on the

³⁹ Reimer, *Colonial Bridgehead*, 3.

⁴⁰ Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, 16.

Egyptian government so that it would pay its debts to primarily British and French creditors. The country was nominally ruled by the Khedive and remained technically an Ottoman possession, but from 1882 onward it was British administrators backed by an occupying army who held real power, making the crucial political, legal, and security decisions. In 1914, following the outbreak of World War I, the British government declared Egypt a protectorate, seeking to remove any pretense of Ottoman control. Alexandria, as Egypt's main port and home to its largest foreign population was a crucial space for both layers of colonialism, and it was in Alexandria that the most important interactions and competition between the two layers occurred.

Colonial Institutions

Capitulations

One of the most important institutions of dominance in Egypt was the system of capitulations which existed in Egypt throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is this system which granted foreign communities many of the privileges which were leveraged into economic and political control. Capitulations were a series of legal agreements between the Ottoman Empire and various European powers which granted the subjects of those powers economic and legal privileges in Ottoman lands. They effectively meant that most foreigners in Egypt were not subject to local laws and paid few if any taxes. The capitulations may have made sense when they were conceived—a time when there were few foreigners in Egypt and the movements of those who were present was tightly controlled—but as the foreign population increased in Alexandria they gave distinct economic advantages to one segment of the population. By the mid-nineteenth century Egyptians heavily disputed the capitulations and the foreign consuls fought ceaselessly to maintain them.

Governance under Muhammad 'Ali

Historians often date the modern history of Alexandria to the reign of Muhammad 'Ali Pasha, which started in 1807; this is a convenient starting point for a history of colonialism in Alexandria because it is under Muhammad 'Ali that we see a shift in Egypt's (and Alexandria's) relationship to its foreign communities. The population of the city was probably only around fifteen thousand at the time of the French invasion in 1798, but the city was an important point of entry into the Egyptian market for European and Ottoman trading ships.⁴¹ Alexandria also had a long history of foreign inhabitants. Throughout the Ottoman period, Alexandria was home to a diverse population of foreign merchants which included Maghribis, Turks, Jews, and Syrian Christians. In the eighteenth century there were also roughly forty Greek families living permanently in the city and a large number of Greek sailors who passed through the city on trading vessels.⁴²

After Muhammad 'Ali took the city in 1807, he privileged it militarily and economically. He oversaw large-scale fortifications which protected the city, and undertook a project of improvement to the western harbor's shipping facilities. The most important project was, however, the construction of the Mahmudiya Canal which, upon completion in 1821, vastly increased the city's water supply, allowed for the cultivation of around a hundred thousand new feddans, and better connected the city to Nile cargo traffic.⁴³ The increased water supply was particularly important as it allowed for substantial increase in the population of the city.

One important feature of governance in the city during Muhammad 'Ali's reign was an increase of power of the foreign consuls in matters of local governance, and the development of separate governance structures for foreigners and natives. In this period, Alexandria became the primary home for all of the foreign consuls-general in Egypt. Consuls-general were usually of merchant background and were tasked with officially

⁴¹ The population figure comes from Jomard in 1798 and Reimer argues it is the most credible. Reimer, *Colonial Bridgehead*, 31, 47.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 36–41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 58–60; The human and financial costs of the canal were staggering; Helen Rivlin writes that it was a "brilliant conception," yet "badly planned, badly executed and carried on at great cost and suffering to the Egyptian people." Even so, it solidified Alexandria's status as the premier Egyptian port and provided the water which allowed for a significant increase in population. Rivlin, *The Agricultural Policy of Muhammad 'Ali in Egypt*, 218.

representing the interests of their countrymen in Egypt. In some cases, consuls-general were not even of the nationality whose interests they represented, as was the case with the Greek merchant Jean D'Anastasy, who was the Swedish consul-general in 1840.⁴⁴ The consuls-general sought close ties to the Muhammad 'Ali and his family, and he relied on them to provide expertise for various social and industrial projects.

This was the case when in 1831, the Muhammad 'Ali asked the consuls to participate in a Sanitary Board to help combat the spread of plague. The consuls agreed and the board instituted restrictive quarantines which inspired deep resentment from both the European and Egyptian populations.⁴⁵ In 1834, elites in the city, working with the khedival and consular authorities created the Commissione di Ornato or 'Board of Works' which worked on projects such as street-widening and mapping the road network, and also gave building permits to certain types of projects. The Commissione di Ornato did not preempt the authority of the central government—plans had to be approved by the appropriate ministry—but it did represent a significant increase in the involvement of foreign elites, in the governance of the city.⁴⁶

The Cotton Boom

By 1848 the population of Alexandria reached 104,189, according to the 1848 census, an increase of nearly seven hundred percent over fifty years. Of these 104,189 people, 11,666 or 11.2% were foreign nationals. Robert Mabro emphasizes the rising population of foreigners in the city, but the more important point is that in the first half of the eighteenth century the population of Alexandria grew mostly because of internal Egyptian immigration to the city.⁴⁷ The third quarter of the nineteenth century (1848-1882) saw a dramatic rise in population, both foreign and Egyptian. The 1882 census lists 231,396 people in the city, of whom 46,118, or 21.5% were foreign nationals.

⁴⁴ Reimer, *Colonial Bridgehead*, 83–84.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 67–73.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 73–76.

⁴⁷ Mabro, "Alexandria 1860-1960: The Cosmopolitan Identity," 248; Reimer makes this point about internal immigration quite clearly. Reimer, *Colonial Bridgehead*, 93.

It is this period in which the foreign population of the city consolidated its financial power in the city. In 1858 the central government completed construction of the Cairo-Alexandria Railroad which deepened Alexandria's ties to the rest of the country and allowed Alexandrian merchants quicker access to agricultural goods coming from rural areas.⁴⁸ By 1868 the city was also home to at least fourteen shipping companies, which connected to ports across the Mediterranean.⁴⁹ In the 1860s the price of cotton in European markets quadrupled because of the American Civil war; Alexandria, as the primary export hub for Egyptian cotton, profited enormously. The main beneficiaries of this boom were the foreign merchants with their ties to and understandings of European markets and their significant economic and legal advantages. In 1878 a writer in the newspaper *Al Watan* lamented the fate of Egyptian merchants struggling to keep up with their European counterparts "as for the (Egyptian) merchant, he has been impoverished by a stagnant market and forced to cling for shelter to the hem of the foreigner, who can, if he pleases, ruin him or allow him to remain as he is."⁵⁰ In practice, foreign merchants and the institutions they built to protect themselves dominated the Egyptian economy at the expense of Egyptians.

Civil Government and Society

In 1868 the Egyptian government formed a provisional municipal council in order to draft a municipal code and organize city government along European municipal lines. Reimer points out that this was initially an attempt by the Egyptian government to exercise some control over the foreign communities by subjecting them to a form of local law. The consuls saw it for what it was and rejected it.⁵¹ The council was eventually established in 1890 and while its actions were still subject to approval by the Egyptian government, its planning schemes had great effect on the landscape of the city. It was also an inherently elitist institution. The property or income requirements for

⁴⁸ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution*, 192.

⁴⁹ Reimer, *Colonial Bridgehead*, 168.

⁵⁰ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution*, 193.

⁵¹ Reimer, *Colonial Bridgehead*, 145.

participating in the municipal elections were such that less than one percent of the population was eligible.⁵²

Police

The Alexandria City Police was a diverse organization which broadly reflected the power structure of the city. At the lowest rung of the police hierarchy was a group of Egyptian recruits called *ghafir* (pl. *ghufara* ') meaning roughly guards or watchmen. They were, in Hanley's words, "the least powerful, the worst paid, and the worst trained... not infrequently they proved powerless and useless."⁵³ Within the *ghufara* ' there was a hierarchical structure. The recruits patrolling the streets were called *tawaf*; they were supervised by a deputy known as the *wakil*; overseeing the company was a chief called a *shaykh*.⁵⁴ Many of the *ghufara* ' were not native to Alexandria, coming originally from the Delta or Upper Egypt. Police stations were called caracols, and inside of them worked a clerk, a soldierer, and a police sergeant. The chief of a station was called the *ma'mur*.

Above the *ghafir* corps was a hierarchy of European police, which Lord Dufferin referred to as "a cosmopolitan army of occupation."⁵⁵ Until the 1880s most foreign police in Alexandria were Italian; after the British invasion a number other nationalities were recruited including Swiss, Turks, and Albanians. After an 1883 police riot the high command sought to replace "dangerous" Turkish and Albanian officers.⁵⁶ In the early twentieth century British officers replaced Italian officers and the highest ranks were held exclusively by British men. Thus the hierarchy of the police reflected the hierarchy of colonialism: Egyptians occupied the lowest levels, a mixed group of Europeans held more privileged positions in the middle, and the British were at the top.

⁵² Ilbert, *Alexandrie, 1830-1930 : Histoire D'une Communauté Citadine*, 287–290.

⁵³ Hanley, "Foreignness and Localness," 85.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Mixed Courts

Like the police force, the legal system of Alexandria also represented the jumbled hierarchies of power that existed in the city. The Mixed Courts were created by Nubar Pasha in 1875 in an attempt to streamline the incredibly complex legal system created by both the capitulatory regime and the legal system of Ottoman times. The system was based on both French jurisprudence and British common law, and cases were heard in French by a mix of Egyptian and foreign judges. The Mixed Courts dealt with most cases involving foreigners although the consular courts still had jurisdiction in some cases. In 1883, the new British administration created a new institution commonly called the Native Courts, which dealt with issues involving only local subjects. The result of all of these reforms was a legal system which was marginally less confusing, but maintained preferential treatment for foreign subjects. Will Hanley provides a useful chart for understanding basic jurisdiction in Alexandria:

Case type and defendant		Plaintiff or Petitioner		
		British subject	French subject	Local subject
Civil or commercial	British	British consular courts	Mixed Tribunals	Mixed Tribunals
	French	Mixed Tribunals	French consular courts	Mixed Tribunals
	Local	Mixed Tribunals	Mixed Tribunals	Native Courts
Criminal	British	British consular courts	British consular courts	British consular courts
	French	French consular courts	French consular courts	French consular courts
	Local	Native Courts	Native Courts	Native Courts
Personal status		British consular courts or religious courts	French consular courts or religious courts	Religious courts

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If a British subject brought a case against a local subject, that case went to the Mixed Courts where, the legal system assumed, both parties would receive neutral treatment. On the other hand, if a local subject made a complaint against a British subject, the case would be heard in the British consular courts, which was hardly neutral territory. Power

⁵⁷ Ibid., 4.

structures in Alexandria were layered, complicated, and usually contested, but as this legal system demonstrates, essentially colonial.

Urban Geography

The geography of Alexandria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries does not neatly fit that of the classically colonial, or bifurcated city. By the early twentieth century ethnic or communal segregation was not a significant feature of the city. Often groups were segregated by street or block, but rarely by quarter.⁵⁸ Class was a more clear dividing line. The neighborhoods of Labban and Attarine were lower-class areas which had significant foreign populations, particularly Greek and Italian, while the upper-classes lived in areas such as Moharrem Bey and Ramleh. This organization is a reflection of the particular kind of colonialism of Alexandria. The British *metropole* did not make significant attempts to plan the city as we see in the classic bifurcated colonial cities the Maghrib. The planning was left to an elite commission which ultimately did not have the authority to impose its will and significantly reshape entire quarters of the city.

Competing Colonialisms

Here I have outlined some of the conditions and structures which made the power structure of Alexandria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century one of layered colonialism. The economic and legal privileges afforded to foreign communities under the capitulation system gave them tools with which to increase their control of the economy and governance as both the economy and foreign population of Alexandria grew. When the British invaded Egypt they slowly brought the various arms of the Egyptian government under their control, forming a new political order.⁵⁹ An important point about this layered colonialism is that no single group ever completely dominated.

⁵⁸ Ilbert, *Alexandrie, 1830-1930 : Histoire D'une Communauté Citadine*, 400–406.

⁵⁹ For an interesting example of the complexities of this process in a different context see: Brown, “Brigands and State Building: The Invention of Banditry in Modern Egypt.”

As the occupying power, the British administration was most powerful, but for diplomatic and political reasons it could not always dictate outcomes. Ilbert points out that British administrators treated Alexandria as a sort of necessary evil: necessary because it was an important port and central to their business interests, but evil because it was full of different groups who were liable to create problems which could not be dealt with by force because of their international backing. The society which emerged alongside this layered colonialism is the very society which is often considered cosmopolitan. Proponents of the cosmopolitan narrative of Alexandria too often ignore the exploitation which made the conditions of that society possible.

Chapter Two

Narratives of Violence

On the eighth day of a military inquiry into the communal and political violence that occurred in Alexandria between 20 and 23 May, 1921, an Italian chemist named Pasquale di Bella gave shocking testimony: At 11 pm on Sunday 22 May, he was awoken by cries at his window. He found his wife and sixteen-year-old daughter at the window crying out “Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!” He got up from his bed, looked out the window, and saw a man on the ground, his body on fire, surrounded by “a crowd of Arabs” who were laughing, shouting, and clapping their hands. According to di Bella, “There was naturally a bad smell from the burning body,” and a crowd sitting in a café across the street shouted, “That is a good smell. That is Egyptian butter.” A woman then came with a stick and stirred the fire on the body, to make it burn more. A line of Egyptian army soldiers marched by and did nothing. The next day di Bella witnessed a number of instances where Egyptian soldiers and policemen fired at the windows of houses where Europeans lived and were cheered on by crowds.⁶⁰

This testimony, while dramatic, is fairly typical of the testimony of European subjects to this military court, which served in part as a forum where they could tell their stories of the atrocities they had experienced. On 24 May, High Commissioner Edmund Allenby had ordered the formation of a military court of inquiry to investigate the events of the previous days. The goals of the inquiry were to discover the “origin, cause and circumstances” of the disturbances, the “actual facts,” “the measures taken to deal with them,” and finally to “express an opinion” which may “lead into political investigations.”⁶¹ By 30 May the court had already begun notifying witnesses that they were compelled to testify. It eventually heard testimony from some 317 witnesses over the course of twenty-two days.⁶² In July, the court reported its findings to British military

⁶⁰ *Minutes of the proceedings and report of the Military Court of Enquiry into the Alexandria riots, May, 1921*. London : H.M.S.O., 1921, 82-83. Hereafter referred to as MCE.

⁶¹ MCE, 2.

⁶² On the notifications see “New Censorship In Egypt.” *Times* [London, England] 30 May 1921: 9. *The Times Digital Archive*. Web. 9 Mar. 2013. On records on the number of witnesses see MCE, 3.

and political authorities and, later that fall, the proceedings were published and released to the general public.

The court and its subsequent report were the British Administration's attempts to establish a particular narrative of the events of 20-23 May as truth. To do so, the administration utilized the rituals of modern legal practice to construct a façade of impartiality. This was a problematic exercise for two reasons. The first reason is that a military court by its very nature operates outside of the context of regular modern law. The very convening of this court revealed the exceptional position of British political power in Egypt and the absence of judicial procedure which might reasonably be expected to deliver justice to European and Egyptian offenders alike.

The second reason is that there were competing narratives, both within and outside of the administration, whose existence revealed the inherently self-interested nature of the court and its report. A reading of the report in light of these other narratives lays bare the political needs of the colonial British administration in producing this report. These needs, broadly speaking, were to satisfy the foreign consuls in Alexandria and to further a narrative which posited a need for a continued British (military) presence in Egypt, in one legal form or another. The latter task was accomplished by blaming Sa'ad Zaghlul and his allies for instigating the unrest, and then focusing on the misconduct of Egyptian soldiers and police officers in order to demonstrate that Egyptians were unable to maintain security. In early August of 1921, the Commandant of the Alexandria City Police forwarded a very different report on the violence of 20-23 May to the High Commissioner.⁶³ This report compiles information from many of the on-the-ground reports which I found elsewhere in the British National Archives and adds the Commandant's analysis of events. In a number of places this analysis is strikingly different from the analysis of the Military Court of Inquiry.

In this chapter I will analyze these two narratives of the violence. In doing so, I hope to show how the British colonial administration sought to muster the power of narrative to achieve its colonial goals. These two reports also demonstrate the complexity

⁶³ FO 141/517/4 (Alexandria Riots [May, 1921], Court of Enquiry)

of colonial power in Alexandria and the ways in which it was disintegrating in the revolutionary period. In *Colonial Bridgehead*, Michael Reimer describes Alexandria as “both a bridgehead of European colonialism and a crucible of Egyptian national integration and identity.”⁶⁴ The Military Court reflects European colonial power, both British and Mediterranean, as it attempted to deal with violence caused in part by increasing Egyptian nationalistic expression. It also reflects the tensions between British and Mediterranean colonial power in Alexandria. As I will show, the court was convened, in large part, to satisfy the foreign consuls. Justice and the establishment of the truth of events were, despite the court’s claims, far less important than giving European subjects, such as di Bella, a forum for narrating their version of events.

The police report reflects the needs of a different institution of British colonial power: the Anglo-Egyptian security apparatus. Here I use “Anglo-Egyptian” because the Interior Ministry was nominally under the control of and largely staffed by Egyptians. Despite that, there were high placed British officials who wielded most of the power. One of these was Alexandria City Police Commandant A.C Grant. The police report on the violence reflects his views of events and constructs a narrative which served his own political and bureaucratic needs: absolving the Alexandria City Police of wrong-doing. Thus the two reports reveal the complex political needs of various actors within the British Administration, which were predicated on intricate calculations about the strength of capitulatory powers in Alexandria and Egyptian nationalist politicians. These contradictory needs in turn reflect the contradictions inherent to the British colonial enterprise in Egypt.

While in this chapter I show a number of occasions where the reports, particularly the Military Court report, lie, misconstrue, and twist information, the goal is not to make my own truth claims about what happened. My goal is rather to demonstrate the ways in which the reports (again, particularly the Military Court document) marshal the power of formal procedure, language, and logic to construct a narrative to serve the political interests of the British colonial regime.

⁶⁴ Reimer, *Colonial Bridgehead*. 3.

The two reports also differ significantly in how they present and use evidence. The final police report relies significantly on first-hand reports from police officers at the scene of the violence. There is certainly room for error in such first-hand reports, but aside from instances of police misconduct, the interest of the officer (absent instances of police misconduct) would likely be to provide an accurate picture of events in order to facilitate clear decision making by his superiors.. The Military Court report, on the other hand, tends to be very selective in presenting events and is dependent on the testimony of witnesses who were largely referred to the court by the foreign consuls. The Military Court provides a selective version of events, while the police report provides selective analysis. The analyses in both reports are illuminatingly self-serving and I take neither at face value.

The questions which form the basis for my analysis are as follows: What was the goal of convening a military court? How did this court fit into the broader context of the legal system of Egypt and Alexandria at the time, and what can this tell us about the legal system? What were the goals behind the writing of the police report? How did the report of the court differ from the police report and why? What do these differences tell us about the goals of both reports and about the structure of power in Alexandria? Underlying these questions is the theme of narration. Why do various actors need to narrate events and how do they choose to do so? What does this tell us about political violence and the politicization of violence in Egypt during this period?

Part I: The Military Court of Inquiry

Context

The legal regime of Alexandria in this period was incredibly complex. Here I will not provide a detailed history, but merely a brief sketch. In 1876 the system of capitulatory courts was overhauled into the Mixed Courts, which heard most cases involving foreigners. In 1883, an institution called the Native Courts opened, dealing with cases in which both parties were Egyptian subjects. The foreign consuls maintained

courts which tried mostly personal status and civil cases involving foreign subjects.⁶⁵ The important thing to note here is that this was a highly complex and politicized system in which the focus was on justice for foreigners, not Egyptians. The history of military trials under British control in Egypt goes back to the aftermath of the ‘Urabi Rebellion and the British occupation in 1882. The British authorities decreed that the rebels should be court-martialed yet left the implementation of this to the Khedival authority. In 1906, the military tribunal which followed the Dinshaway incident brought new, and largely, negative attention to the institution.

Following Dinshaway, there was debate within the British administration about how the application of justice, and particularly attacks on the British army, would be handled. Lord Cromer, the long ruling High Commissioner of Egypt, advocated imposing martial law in 1907, but was wary of convening special tribunals headed by judges from the regular legal system; this, in his opinion would only reinforce the idea that civil law judges were “merely political agents,” pawns of the British authority.⁶⁶ After the outbreak of World War I, the British authorities did impose martial law and declared Egypt a protectorate. Throughout the war and the period that followed, the British administration convened a number of military tribunals, dealing mostly with offenses against the British army or other Europeans. Thus the military courts tasked with dealing with the unrest of 1921 were a continuation of a policy which began during the Khedival Courts Martial of 1882, and continued from the Dinshaway tribunal to the military courts convened under martial law starting in 1914. While these courts were not exceptional in that sense, it is unlikely that Egyptians saw them as institutions which might deliver them justice, given their publically politicized history.

Two military courts were charged with investigating the violence of May, 1921. One, *The Military Court of Enquiry into the Alexandria Riots May 1921*⁶⁷ was tasked with discovering the causes of the events, and it is the report of this court which I spend much of this chapter analyzing. The task of investigating crimes and punishing the

⁶⁵ Hanley, “Foreignness and Localness,” 4–5. Hanley has a helpful chart for understanding the breakdown of this system.

⁶⁶ Esmeir, *Juridical Humanity*, 261–262.

⁶⁷ The official title which uses “enquiry”. I use “inquiry” when I refer to the Court in this chapter unless I refer directly to the title.

perpetrators apparently fell to a separate standing Military Court in Alexandria, for which I could not find the records.⁶⁸ We do know, based on their appeals, that this second court sentenced Mohammad Mahrous, Abu Zeid Salem, and Nafar Abbas Gaballa, Mohammad Hassan Ali, And Ibrahim Isma‘il el-Tarabishi, and at least three others to death.⁶⁹ It also sentenced the prominent Zahglulist Abdulla Koraim to fifteen years hard labor.⁷⁰ Charges brought to this court included: “Murder,” “Pillaging,” “Unlawful Possession of a Sewing Machine,” (six months labor) “Setting fire to a house,” “In streets after curfew,” “Assaulting Military Patrol,” “Inciting others to break into coffee shop,” “Taking part in and inciting others to take part in disorderly demonstration,” “Assaulting a Greek Subject,” “Assaulting Europeans,” “Failing to close his shop, at 21:00 hours,” “Found carrying a leg of a chair,” (one month hard labor), “Loitering suspiciously,” (fourteen days labor), and “Breaking into a house for the purpose of throwing broken bottles on the military patrol.”⁷¹ The existence of this second military court which carried out the actual investigation and sentencing of crimes alleged suggests that the sole purpose of the existence of the Military Court of Inquiry was to provide the British administration with a conclusive narrative with which to counter Zaghul’s anti-colonial narrative.

Goals

The Military Court of Enquiry into the Alexandria Riots May 1921 was commissioned by High Commissioner Allenby just one day after the violence ended. Allenby appointed Colonel Commandant F.C.P. Keily of the 234th Infantry Brigade as president, with Major P. Grove White and Captain W.B. Morehead as the second and

⁶⁸ FO 141/819/2 (Military Courts: publicity of settings and proceedings) contains a letter from one Judge Thorpe which is responding to a request for information about Military Court dealing with the violence in Alexandria, as Zaghul was complaining publically about its secrecy. Thorpe responded that the dealings of his court (presumably the court charged with investigating and punishing specific acts) were likely being confused with the Military Court of Inquiry convened by Allenby, whose proceedings were, to Thorpe’s knowledge confidential.

⁶⁹ FO 141/480/2 (Mohamed Hussein Mahrous and Abou Zeid Salem: Convicted by Military Court for murders in); 141/819/3 (Nafar Abbas Gaballa, sentenced to death by the Military Court in connection the Alexandria Riots); FO 141/583/1 (Riot and murder statistics: Casualties, executions and sentences). Gaballa’s sentence was reduced to ten years hard labor.

⁷⁰ FO 407/189 (Further Correspondence Part LXXXVI), 186.

⁷¹ FO 141/583/1. This from pages of statistics sent to the Acting High Commissioner by General Congreve in September, 1921.

third members. Judge J.P. Kershaw of the Native Court of Appeals was legal advisor to the court. Allenby used Martial Law to invest the court with the power to summon witnesses and enforce their attendance, to administer oaths, to direct searches, and to order the seizure of documents and other evidence as it deemed necessary. The goal: to get at the “root of the disturbances,” and determine the “actual causes” of the violence. This was an exercise which “may lead into political investigations or investigating into matters which have a political bearing.”⁷²

From this initial order, which from a legal point of view is essential to the court’s very existence, we find that the court had a two-fold mission. The first was to establish truth: what happened and why. The second, to, if possible, determine the direction for future political investigations. Interestingly, one of Allenby’s advisors deleted the sentences about political investigation from the notice before it was published, but it is clear from the administrative documents surrounding the establishment of the court that everyone in the administration understood this to be a central objective.⁷³ The court was therefore an inherently political body.

There was debate within the British administration about the scope of the court. A letter from legal advisor M.S. Amos to Judge Kershaw describes a disagreement between Allenby and General Congreve about the temporal range of the court’s investigations. Congreve was concerned that the court would “lead to a general investigation of the political history of Egypt during the last twelve months.” Allenby did not want to “impose any hampering limitations upon the scope of [the] inquiry,” but thought that it would not be “necessary for the purposes of a report to him to investigate the nature or causes of the political discussions in Egypt.”⁷⁴ It is unclear here why Congreve sought to limit the time-frame of the inquiry. As I will show in the following section, the result of this decision was a report which thoroughly ignored the political issues which motivated the initial demonstrations in the first place.

⁷² FO 141/517/4.

⁷³ FO 141/517/4.

⁷⁴ FO 141/517/4

In the end, Amos informed Kershaw that the he was expected to “ascertain to what extent the late disturbances are due to the political movements in the country, or have been deliberately excited by the Agents or political leaders.”⁷⁵ Here Amos is communicating to Kershaw the administration’s expectations. There is some flexibility in the time-frame of his report, but clearly his focus must be on anti-British political agitation. The only question in the pre-determined narrative was the extent to which Zaghlulist agents deliberately provoked the violence. To a certain extent the narrative was set, the details just needed to be sifted and filled in.

Witnesses

With this understanding, the court was convened on 30 May and heard testimony from 317 witnesses over the course of twenty-two days. On several instances the court members also visited witnesses in the hospital and homes to examine physical evidence, usually bullet holes. The index to the published proceedings divides the witnesses into ten distinct groups: British subjects, French subjects, Italian subjects, Greek subjects, Chzecho-Slovak and Bulgarian, British Army, Egyptian Army, Alexandria City Police and Guard company, and finally local subjects (Egyptians, but this category also included “Syrians and Berberins”).⁷⁶ The court heard from one hundred twenty local subjects, fifty-eight and fifty-two Italians and Greeks, respectively, and fewer from the other categories. The court likely focused on categorization at least in part because of the complexity of the Alexandrian legal system and its need to define status.

How were these witnesses selected? On 4 June, the sixth day of hearings, Gaafar Fakhry Bey led a deputation of Egyptian lawyers to the court where they requested information on the steps taken by the court to hear from Egyptian witnesses. The court’s response was that the procedure so far had been to call witnesses based on lists provided to them by consular authorities, and that it had not yet received any list of witnesses from Egyptian groups but was interested in hearing from some, as “it is impossible... to

⁷⁵ FO 141/517/4

⁷⁶ “Berberin” is an Egyptian Arabic term for Nubian.

comprehend thoroughly the situation without hearing both sides.” The deputation of lawyers suggested that they act as intermediaries between the court and potential Egyptian witnesses, and the court agreed.⁷⁷ During this exchange, the court emphasized that it wanted to hear from Egyptians of “good position.” The final report laments that aside from some journalists, none of the one hundred twenty native subjects met this criterion.⁷⁸

What does this methodology tell us about the court? First, it makes apparent one of the main impetuses for convening the court: satisfying the consular powers in Alexandria. The consular powers had far greater influence in Alexandria than any Egyptian organization, and the attacks on Europeans during the previous days had frightened them. Following the attacks, they began to press the British administration to allow them to store arms in the consular buildings and to, in effect, operate private militias to protect consular properties. British administrators took a dim view of this idea, thinking it might endanger public peace if, for example, a Greek consular employee shot an Egyptian; it would also diminish the prestige of the British military by giving the impression that it was not capable of securing foreign interests within Egypt.⁷⁹ Ironically, this last charge was one argument the administration used to dismiss the idea of complete Egyptian independence; if Egyptian forces were incapable or unwilling to protect foreign citizens over four days, how would they be capable of doing so for an extended period of time?

One means of allaying the consuls’ fear and anger after the violence was a tribunal where their subjects could tell their stories, make accusations, and seek justice. The result of this was that the court took no actual steps to hear from Egyptians until the lawyers complained and offered to handle the work of finding them. Even after this, only a third of the witnesses were Egyptians, despite the fact that they made up the majority of the dead. This last point did not escape Sa’ad Zaghlul.

⁷⁷ *MCE*, 67.

⁷⁸ *MCE*, 264.

⁷⁹ FO 141/748/6 (Measures taken to protect British subjects in Egypt during and after the nationalist riots of 1919).

Secondly, the court's use of the phrase "both sides" tells us much about how it was inclined to view the violence: as an issue between Egyptians and non-British, lower-class Europeans.⁸⁰ In this formulation, which we find continually through the court records, the British military and administration is presented as a detached and neutral arbiter, stepping in only when unruly Alexandrians, both "native" and "European" got out of hand. This formulation of course ignores the central role of the occupying power in fostering the anti-colonial discontent that led to unrest in the first place.

Lastly, the insistence on hearing from Egyptians of "good position" reveals the elitist world-view of the court. As the court stressed, it did indeed hear from one hundred twenty Egyptian native subjects, but most of these testimonies were extremely short and the court generally ignored them when it presented its findings. One of the few Egyptian witnesses who spoke at length was Gaafar Fakhry Bey (possibly because he spoke English), and he is the only Egyptian whose word is reckoned with in the final report, albeit as the token elite Zaghlulist. The court thereby left mostly silent the Egyptians who saw, participated in, or tried to prevent the violence.

Court Voice

How did the court deal with the witnesses? It is difficult to gauge the accuracy of the transcription of testimony in the published version of the court proceedings, but we do know that British officials cleaned up and edited it significantly. For one thing, all of the testimony is presented in English, when presumably much of it was done with the help of a translator. We also know that a British Arabist named Brumskill edited the report, witness list, and presumably the testimony.⁸¹ Therefore, we must keep in mind

⁸⁰ Greeks and Italians were the largest non-Egyptian population in Alexandria and the British administration often treated them as a thorn in its side.

⁸¹ FO 141/517/4. Brumskill expressed his dismay at the state of the proof in August: "The impression that a manuscript copy exists or did exist is erroneous; the evidence was taken down verbatim in shorthand & and typed proof of this was produced + corrected. The proceedings were subsequently retyped in 6 copies [from one of which the printed "white paper" has been made.] and the typed proof was then destroyed. With the assistance of my own rough notes on the evidence, certain lists of witnesses in my possession, + by checking some of the names at the Governorate and Government Hospital, it has been possible to verify or correct many of them which were of doubtful accuracy."

that the published proceedings may be significantly different from what actually occurred in the court.

In the proceedings, at least, the court started interviewing almost every witness by asking “will you tell us what you saw during the recent disturbances?” Occasionally the court officers interjected with clarifying and occasionally leading questions, if they felt that the witness was not focusing on a specific point. Most Egyptian soldiers and police officers were asked directly if they fired at windows, or if they saw Europeans firing from windows. Many European witnesses were asked to state clearly whether or not Egyptian policemen or soldiers had directly targeted windows. One witness said that she saw Egyptian soldiers dressed in black with steel helmets, to which the court commented that “they must have been policeman.”⁸² In several instances the court added a note to the record indicating that they did not believe a certain witness. After spending the thirteenth day of testimony hearing from eighteen Egyptian soldiers of the Third Battalion, which was accused of shooting at the windows of houses, the court ended the day by noting that “the evidence of all the Egyptian Army witnesses is word for word the same – obviously the story has been agreed upon by them. The Court has now examined eighteen, and does not consider that any useful purpose would be served by continuing to hear the remainder.”⁸³ Such interjections and addendums by the court make it clear what the court officials were really interested in – attacks on Europeans, especially by Egyptian policemen and soldiers. The obvious discipline issues that such attacks created aside, they were clearly the focus of the court because they had been a primary complaint from the consuls and British economic interests.⁸⁴

A letter from the President of the Greek Community of Alexandria, M. Salvago to Allenby provides a good example of the demands of the foreign consuls. Following the resolutions of a meeting of the Greek Community after the violence, Salvago deplored “the indifference of the civil authorities who, in spite of having been forewarned, failed to maintain... the calm.” He went on to “note with profound emotion the large number of victims that have been struck down by projectiles coming from those whose duty it was

⁸² *MCE*, 65.

⁸³ *MCE*, 137.

⁸⁴ FO 141/517/4

to maintain public order.” The letter finished by appealing to the British administration “not to deprive the city of Alexandria of the efficacious protection of H.B.M.’s force.”⁸⁵

A letter from the British Chamber of Commerce in Alexandria to Allenby dated 31 May struck a similar note, except significantly, it emphasized that the violence of the previous week demonstrated that “the time is not yet ripe for this country to be endowed with Independence, or even self-government without control.” In the view of Chamber of Commerce, British commercial and financial interests in Egypt “would be seriously jeopardised by any such far reaching concession.”⁸⁶ The High Commissioner’s office forwarded this letter to the Portuguese and Norwegian diplomatic agents and the Greek Community.⁸⁷ From these letters we see the issues around which the consuls and commercial interests were exerting pressure on the British administration. Those interested used accusations of Egyptian military and police misconduct to argue that Egyptians were not capable of independently securing their country. The High Commissioner convened the military court in order to deflect some of this pressure.

The Report of the Military Court of Inquiry

The final report of the Military Court of Inquiry was the primary vehicle for the British administration to further its narrative about the events in Alexandria. In the following section I will analyze this document in some detail in order to explore the following questions: what were the stated and unstated goals of the inquiry? How did the report stake out its claims to truth? And what does this report tell us about the relationship between the British administration of Egypt and political actors in Alexandria?

The very first sentence of the report reveals much about its goals and methodology:

For the purposes of this enquiry it is not necessary to go any further back than about March 21st of this year, when the Tewfik Nessim Ministry fell and the Adly Yeghan Ministry was

⁸⁵ FO 286/772 (Alexandria Riots)

⁸⁶ FO 141/816/21 (Official protests regarding the Alexandria Riots of May 1921)

⁸⁷ FO 141/517/4

appointed amidst the universal acclaim of the Egyptian people. The Milner Report had already been published, offering a wide ground for settlement, based on Egyptian aspirations.⁸⁸

This introduction immediately set the limits for the court's interest, in both temporal and political terms. By limiting the time period of interest, the court confines the political grievances to the immediate and tangible, keeping focus away from the deeper issue which motivated most Egyptian activists: the presence of the British in Egypt. It also shows that the court decided to follow General Congreve's warning against providing a lengthy summary of the political situation in Egypt.

In 1920 the British government had tasked a commission led by Lord Alfred Milner with examining the "Egypt Question" and recommending future action. The Milner report, released in early 1921, recommended changing Egypt's legal status to something other than protectorate but advised that Britain should still maintain a military presence. Zaghulists were fond of referring to this as a "veiled protectorate." In referencing the Milner Report in the second sentence, the authors end all discussion of Egyptian nationalist claims by proclaiming that the report put forward basic outlines for reasonable settlement, Egyptians just needed to agree to them. Many in the Zaghulist camp obviously disagreed with this assessment. It is my argument that this easy dismissal of anti-colonial grievances severely limited the ability of the court to provide an accurate account of the causes of the unrest, if that is in fact what it was aiming to accomplish. The crowds generally went out on Friday May 20 to protest the British occupation of Egypt, and this anti-colonial grievance was a major component in the anti-foreign sentiment which led to much violence.

This is not to say that the court ignored political activities; indeed, it placed a good deal of blame on Zaghulist agents and other actors who sought to create strife for their own political benefit. The report divides the unrest into two sections: the first, which it refers to as the "political aspect" lasted from noon on Friday, 20 May to evening on

⁸⁸ *MCE*, 248.

Sunday, 22 May; the second, which the report calls “the general attack on Europeans” lasted from Sunday evening to the end of the day on Monday, 23 May.⁸⁹

“The political aspect”

The first section of the report, which deals with the political causes of the violence, begins by providing the court’s view of politics in Egypt since the formation of the Adly Ministry in March, 1921. The narrative is wholly favorable to the Adly Ministry, which, in the court’s view, was “immensely popular.” For evidence, the court states that demonstrations in favor of Adly were so popular that “the Ministry finally had to discourage them (the demonstrations) from coming to the ministries in order that they might have time to do some work.” The report immediately jumps forward to 13 May, when the Ministry convinced High Commissioner Allenby to lift press censorship.⁹⁰ The impression created here is of a government earnestly working to achieve the aspirations of an adoring public, only to be foiled by the return of Sa‘ad Zaghlul on 4 April.

The report passes quickly over the negotiations between Adly and Zaghlul over who would be the president of a delegation which would meet with the British government to negotiate the status of Egypt, but mentions that a final split only occurred after Zaghlul accused the Adly Ministry of being “nominees of the British government.”⁹¹ According to the report, this split divided public opinion between “Zaghlulists” and “Adlyites,” and also caused a major rift within the *Wafd*. This controversy became “more and more bitter” until 29 April, when a “serious disturbance took place between the rival factions at Tanta” and the police were called in to restore order. The crowd attacked the police, and the police were “obliged to fire on it.” Zaghlul responded by “thunder[ing]” against the government for “allowing the people to be murdered” while the government ordered an enquiry into the event. The report points out that following the Tanta incident, the Ministry sent out orders that a Tanta incident must

⁸⁹ *MCE*, 252.

⁹⁰ *MCE*, 248. Alas, martial law could not also be lifted due to “various technical difficulties.”

⁹¹ *MCE*, 248.

be avoided “at all costs,” an order which had an “unfortunate effect” and “direct bearing” on subsequent events in Alexandria.⁹²

This narrative differs from evidence available in other British documents on significant points. Firstly, I found little evidence that the Adly Ministry had widespread popularity for any reason other than Zaghlul’s initial endorsement of it. Secondly, the weekly reports sent from the Interior Ministry to the Foreign Office in London contain few references to pro-Adly street action in this period, while describing weekly and sometimes daily pro-Zaghlul and anti-British demonstrations in Cairo, Alexandria, and other cities.⁹³ Throughout March and April, the Adly Ministry was increasingly associated with the British regime and its demands. A pamphlet circulated in early May referred to the Adly Ministry as the “Ministry of the Protectorate.”⁹⁴

As for the Tanta incident, police and military reports from Tanta contradict the Military Court’s narrative. These reports make no mention of “rival factions.” A military report by a certain Colonel Stafford states that rousing anti-Ministry speeches were made at a central mosque, and afterwards large demonstrations started marching around the city. At around 2:30 pm these demonstrations “got out of hand” and the police arrived and were ordered to shoot. “One policeman, however, fired low killing one if not two persons,” which enraged the crowd, and people began to attack the police station and the house of the police commandant.⁹⁵ Even Zaghlul’s response to Tanta is mischaracterized: the report claims that he “denounced the government for allowing people to be murdered.” In fact, he directly blamed the government for “shooting the people at Tanta

⁹² *MCE*, 248-249. I could not find any documents directly related to this inquiry in the British National Archives at Kew, although a weekly report from the Interior Ministry claims that the publication of the public prosecutor’s report Tanta troubles has “completely checked the efforts of the Zaghlulist to exploit this incident.” This seems to be an inaccurate reading, evidenced in part by the report of visit of the wife of a prominent Zaghlulist Egyptian Army officer visited the tombs of the Tanta victims in May and was greeted by a sizeable crowd on her return to Alexandria. FO 141/816/19 (The undesirability of the continued presence in Alexandria of Rashidi, Secretary of the retired Egyptian Officers’ Club, and his wife); FO 407/189, 151.

⁹³ FO 407/189 contains these weekly reports. The government did organize pro-Adly demonstrations in mid-March, but there is little pro-Adly street action after that. Various newspapers took differing stances on the ministry.

⁹⁴ FO 407/189/ 150.

⁹⁵ FO 141/748/2 (Situation reports from various sources, mostly relating to Cairo, Port Said and Alexandria, on nationalist demonstrations and rioting).

and respecting and rewarding the police who did the shooting.”⁹⁶ The result of these mischaracterizations is minimizing the legitimacy of Egyptian nationalist grievances towards the colonial order.

From here the Military Court report goes on to describe the increasingly violent protests in the days prior to 20 May. The focus is on several points: first, that the protesters were increasingly carrying rocks and *nabouts*;⁹⁷ second, that the police strategy was to arrest the leaders of the protests quietly instead of directly confronting the crowds, but the *Chef de Parquet*, Margushi Bey released them on 19 May; and three, that the Adly Ministry initiated the strategy of not directly confronting the protesters and that this led directly to the greater violence of subsequent days.⁹⁸ The effect is the construction of a narrative in which the mob is presented as angry, violent, and unreasonable, yet nevertheless directly controlled by leaders. This narrative depicts the police as noble—on several occasions the *Mamour*⁹⁹ of Gumruk Caracol rides out to inform the protesters that they are in violation of the Illegal Assembly Act, only to be met with stones—but constrained by the toothless policies of an Egyptian-led government and the hopelessly complex judicial system of Alexandria embodied by Margushi Bey. The one entity left unscathed here is the British administration, which certainly had more control over the security apparatus than the report lets on, with British nationals holding high posts within the Interior Ministry as well as leading the Alexandria City Police.

On the morning of Friday, 20 May, the report notes that the Governor and Police Commandant summoned an Egyptian elite named Ahmed Yehia Pasha, where he promised to stop night demonstrations, ban the presence of labeled dogs in demonstrations (recently protesters had been carrying dogs labeled “Adly” and “Rushdy”), and prevent a large disturbance from taking place after noon prayers that day.¹⁰⁰ Again, we find the court attributing full responsibility for demonstrations to elites.

⁹⁶ FO 407/189, 138.

⁹⁷ A type of wooden stick used as a weapon.

⁹⁸ *MCE*, 249-250.

⁹⁹ Commander of a police station.

¹⁰⁰ *MCE*, 250.

To provide specifics of the violence that occurred that day, the report directly reproduces the account of the police report. There is no need to repeat the details in full here, but the general outline is that following noon prayers, large demonstrations left several mosques, and protestors attacked police stations in Manshia, Gumruk, Lebban, Attarine, and Karmus. There were also reports of looting in a number of areas, particularly Attarine. Police fired on the crowds in a number of instances, killing roughly eighteen people.¹⁰¹ In the early evening, there was a miscommunication between Allenby's office in Cairo and the police and military commanders in Alexandria, which resulted in Colonel Blake of the British Army assuming command of the city and ordering a curfew for 10 pm. At 7:50 pm, Allenby's advisor clarified this order and the army stood down.¹⁰²

To make sense of this violence, the court chose to engage with the testimony of Gaafar Fakhry Bey (sometimes Gaafar Bey Fakhry), an Egyptian notable and one of the "principle Zaghlulists" in Alexandria. The aforementioned Ahmed Yehia Bey apparently fled the country before the court could take his testimony. The report points out that in his testimony Fakhry Bey admitted that the demonstrations were both provocative and Zaghlulist, and that he feared trouble. Immediately following this we find:

The court agrees with him. There can be no doubt that the demonstrations were intended to provoke another 'Tanta incident' – which has caused many Adlyites to go over to the Zaghlulists. The Government were determined to prevent this. When the demonstrators found that the police let them alone, they armed themselves.¹⁰³

It is noteworthy here that the court provides precisely no evidence for the initial assertion that demonstrators sought to provoke another Tanta incident. In the following paragraph, the report states that once the protestors died, the "object of the Zaghlulists was achieved. Saad Pasha Zaghlul issued his manifesto against the Government for shooting down 'innocent victims.'"¹⁰⁴ Again there is no evidence for this presented in the report beyond speculation. It is also noteworthy that it chose to engage with Fakhry Bey's testimony as

¹⁰¹ FO 141/517/4.

¹⁰² *MCE*, 250-251.

¹⁰³ *MCE*, 251-252.

¹⁰⁴ *MCE*, 252.

though he were directly responsible for the violence. Finally the report again paints the Government, referring to the Adly Ministry, as well-meaning but ultimately hapless.

The next day protestors held funerals for some of those killed by the police, which Fakhry Bey and other notables attended. At these funerals several *sheikhs* and other leaders made speeches denouncing the government for killing the protestors. In describing the politics around these funeral, the court gets worked into such a righteous fury that it is worth quoting at length:

When Saad Pasha is pictured to the common people as prophet; when they are urged to shed their blood; when the dead are described as martyrs; when the people are being worked up by daily demonstrations to a dangerous pitch of excitement, one would have thought that educated Egyptians such as Fakhry Bey, Yehia Pasha, and their friends would have read the signs in the sky, and realized that elements were being let loose which could not be controlled. But they did not. Their eyes were directed solely upon achieving political advantage. They had forced the Government to shed the blood of Egyptians, and they expected thereby to oblige the government to resign. It did not occur to them then, or even a considerable time after the storm had burst, that the attack on Europeans must have a very serious bearing on the question of self-government in Egypt.¹⁰⁵

There is a lot in this statement, about the responsibility of elites for street violence, about how the British administrators viewed nationalist politics, but it is the last line which gives away the heart of politics of the report and the narrative which it sought to build. If Egyptians could not protect Europeans in Egypt, how could they be expected to govern themselves?

“Moslem feeling was rising”

This point is a central theme in the lengthy second part of the report, which deals largely with communal unrest and particularly the misconduct of Egyptian soldiers and police officers during the unrest. In preface to an accounting of the attacks on Europeans (for that is what the report describes), there is a note about the effect of the Greco-Turkish War (1919-22) on communal relations in Alexandria, particularly on the feelings of Muslims towards Greeks. The court notes rumors that Turkish emissaries were

¹⁰⁵ MCE, 252.

collecting money for the war effort in Alexandria. There is no mention of similar, very public efforts by Greek organizations which raised at least 6,000 Egyptian pounds several months earlier.¹⁰⁶ According to the report, Egyptians marched through European neighborhoods carrying pictures of Mustapha Kemal, chanting “Zito Kemal,” Zito being Greek for “long-live,” and generally “Moslem feeling was rising.”¹⁰⁷

There is little doubt that anti-Greek sentiment was an issue amongst some Muslims in Egypt during this time. There were reports from across the Nile Delta region of anti-Greek propaganda. A British political report from Tanta in late April noted that unknown persons were seeking Red Crescent donations by telling Muslim Egyptians that their “brothers are being shot down by Greeks. Your brother Moslems are fighting for existence against Christian Powers.”¹⁰⁸ Another similar report from early May claimed that resentment towards Greeks in rural areas was rising because of perceptions that they were exploiting the fellaheen economically.¹⁰⁹ The point here is not that the report was exaggerating anti-Greek propaganda. The point is that the authors used it to construct their narrative, which required a singular, fanatical Muslim mob.

To begin the narrative of anti-European violence, the court starts by detailing several instances of robberies targeting Europeans on Friday and Saturday. One of these incidents is worth exploring. According to the Court report, an Italian man was sitting in a park when “some young men of the Mohammad Aly Technical school got into an altercation with him. They must have offered him violence – it is certain that they stoned him – for he fired three shots.”¹¹⁰ The man then ran away and hid in the house of some strangers. The students followed and attempted to burn the house down, but a police officer dissuaded them. This is a slightly different account from the testimony of a police officer involved which the report cites as its source. According to the officer the problem started after the students told the Italian to leave the area; he replied “‘No, you go’. The Italian drew his revolver and fired in the air, whereupon the boys began to stone him.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ *The Sphinx*, No. 455, February 5, 1921, 402.

¹⁰⁷ *MCE*, 253.

¹⁰⁸ FO 407/189, 71.

¹⁰⁹ FO 407/189, 147.

¹¹⁰ *MCE*, 253

¹¹¹ *MCE*, 218.

Here we see the report assigning direct blame to the Egyptian students, whereas the actual testimony was more ambiguous.

A brief report on this incident was published in *Wadi El Nil*, a pro-Zaghlul newspaper published in Alexandria. Here the Italian was identified as “a man with a hat who had been sitting with a European lady” (رجل بقبعة كان يجالس سيدة افرنجية). There is no mention of the boys stoning him or trying to burn down the house. According to this report the police immediately arrested the lady and the man ran off, but the police apprehended him later and began an investigation.¹¹² Obviously we cannot know who first offered violence—*Wadi El Nil* certainly had its own reasons for omitting unfavorable facts towards the Egyptian party—my point is that the court assumes the Egyptians were responsible when all other sources (including its own) described a more ambiguous situation.

The court found this incident significant because, in its words, “subsequent events tend to show that this burning out of houses was part of a programme.”¹¹³ There is of course no evidence offered that the threat to burn the house was serious, or that the subsequent house burnings were systematic in any way. Indeed, structure fires and urban unrest have a long and connected history.

According to both the court’s report and other reports, the inter-communal violence started in earnest in the early evening on Sunday 22 May. The court acknowledges that it heard testimony from several Egyptian witnesses who attributed the outbreak of sectarian violence to aggression on the part of people they described as “Europeans,” but it dismisses these accounts as inherently suspect due to the character of the witnesses. One, Zaki Mohamed, testified that he saw an Italian barber named Chinso fire three shots at a passing demonstration. The court negates this testimony by attacking Zaki Mohammed’s character, saying that he “gave his evidence violently and somewhat insolently (the extremist agitator type).” The court dismisses another Egyptian witness who testified that he saw a Maltese man fire shots from a window as “the same type as

¹¹² *Wadi El Nil*, May 22, 1921, 3.

¹¹³ *MCE*, 253.

Zaki Mohamed.”¹¹⁴ Reading the testimony of Zaki Mohamed, one gets no impression of insolence or violence, nor that he is an agitator. His report is a relatively short and straightforward narrative.¹¹⁵ Of course this testimony is not provided verbatim and it is impossible to read ninety-year-old body language.

Zaki Mohammed reported what he saw to a police officer, who went to investigate (with a “Moslem” officer in tow) and discovered that the area was quiet. The report concludes that “there is not possibility of doubt that the report was deliberately false” because “if the incident happened the barber’s shop would have been destroyed by the mob,” which is a bit of a leap of logic.¹¹⁶ We cannot know whether or not Zaki Mohamed was or was not lying, but I want to point out that again the conclusion of the report goes beyond the logical conclusions that the evidence it offers. The court relies heavily on the power of logical statement, but repeatedly the statements do not stand the test of logic.

Next the court cites historical precedents for Egyptians lying about other nationalities firing at them. The court states that in Cairo in 1919 “mobs attacked and murdered Armenians on the pretence that they had fired on them from windows.” In Port Said, also in 1919, a crowd attacked some Syrians, supposedly for the same reason. The court does not provide evidence for the falseness of these claims, but it is perhaps worth noting that the British archives contain a number of Interior Ministry reports which describe Greeks behaving provocatively. In 1919, a British General even wrote a letter to the Greek Consul:

I have the honour to inform you that some of the subjects of H.M. the King of Greece, who are now in Cairo, - are using fire arms against the Egyptians. I beg of you to be so kind as to warn all that do so, that I wish this practice stopped – as I am personally responsible for their safety with the troops under my command. In the meantime subjects of Greece who are using fire arms against the Egyptians, are thereby creating & inciting a hatred against them which may bring revenge on their compatriots in the Provinces. I know full well that the Greeks are anxious to help my troops, but the best way they can do so is by refraining from firing at Egyptians.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ *MCE*, 253.

¹¹⁵ *MCE*, 224.

¹¹⁶ *MCE*, 253.

¹¹⁷ FO 141/521/1

Juan Cole argues in *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East* is that Europeans were very active participants in urban violence in Egypt in the late nineteenth century. He goes so far as to say that “Europeans were on the whole much more boisterous than the locals.”¹¹⁸ I cite this to demonstrate that while there may well have been precedents of Egyptians fabricating reports, there was certainly also precedent for Europeans acting provocatively and using armed violence against Egyptians. The report repeatedly uses an authoritative voice to provide a specific version of events which, when examined more closely are far more complex than the court lets on. The authoritative voice is one of the most important literary devices employed by the court to establish its narrative.

“Veritable pandemonium”

In the next section, the Military Court report describes the serious fighting on the evening of Sunday 22 May, when inter-communal violence became the main feature of the events. For much of this section the court relies on the testimony of Assistant Commandant of the Alexandria City Police. The report portrays the Assistant Commandant, Gordon Ingram Bey, as a hero, nobly risking himself to save endangered Europeans. The outline of the story is as follows. At around 9:40 pm Ingram Bey arrived on Anastassi Street where he found “veritable pandemonium.” Crowds were blocking the main streets and on the smaller Worsha Street he found a house on fire with three Greeks inside. There was no exit but a burning window, on the other side of which “a crowd of natives with clubs were waiting to beat them to death.” Several other houses were on fire and on the roofs women and children were “screaming with terror and hurling down stones” while men were firing shots from the windows. Several wounded Europeans rushed to Ingram Bey for help, while some “friendly natives” complained that the Greeks had fired on them. Ingram Bey “acted with the greatest courage” and tried to convince the Europeans to stop firing, but found them “in a state of indescribable panic and could do nothing.” Eventually police reserves arrived and cleared the street using bayonets, and Ingram Bey ordered the fire brigade to put out the fires. He then cleared the Hammamil quarter where a Greek shop had been

¹¹⁸ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution*, 194.

looted. By midnight, the situation was under control. In the words of the report, “it being Ramadan, the Moslems went off to eat, shouting to the Europeans that the next day they would do worse things.”¹¹⁹

Here we have all of the elements of a good story: a villain in the murderous crowds, innocent victims in need of saving, and a strong, masculine, and British hero to save them. The hero does his work in the face of great danger and with great speed. The villain, temporarily defeated, leaves vowing future revenge.

Following this, the report undertakes an analysis of the initiation of the violence on Sunday. It starts by admitting that “the Court has very little evidence as to how this trouble began,” before presenting evidence from Italians that bands of men were breaking street lamps and shop windows that afternoon.¹²⁰ Citing Egyptian testimony the Court asks:

The natives say the Greeks began it by firing from windows at them. If this is true, why do they bring no evidence of it? The only evidence they bring is that an *Italian* fired in the street at 6pm (proved to be false) and a *Maltese*, who fired from a window in Anastassi Street about 9:30 (the riot was in full swing then). Even if that is true, is it any reason why they should attack the Greeks? It is as logical to say that because a British mounted policeman was killed by natives the British inhabitants of Alexandria would have been justified in massacring Greeks. The first wounded came into Lebban Caracol about 9pm. They were all Europeans.¹²¹

This statement is a wonderful example of the court’s hollow conceit. In asking why Egyptians did not bring evidence of Greeks firing first to the court, the court fails to imagine that Egyptians may not have seen a British Military Court as legitimate or capable of delivering justice for them. Similarly, the court takes the fact that the victims coming into Lebban Caracol were Europeans as evidence that the crowd started the violence. One wonders whether a wounded Egyptian that evening—whether he or she was part of the crowd or not—would have gone to a police facility, which had been attacked by protestors several times over the past few days, in the middle of such violence. Police stations had been marked as dually government and European space, both by the attacks of the protestors and the actions of the police. It is unlikely that an Egyptian would consider a

¹¹⁹ All of the details in this paragraph are from *MCE*, 254 but much of it is taken directly from the police report found in FO 141/517/4.

¹²⁰ *MCE*, 255

¹²¹ *MCE*, 255.

police station a safe environment during such strife. The high number of Egyptians wounded suggest that they were turning elsewhere.

The court also martials the power of logic to prove its case, despite an inherent lack of logic in its statement. The first error is assuming that the court has heard all of the testimony in existence. It cites two accusations, one of an Italian firing, and one of a Maltese firing; it fails to acknowledge that it may not have heard from an eyewitness to a possible initial shooting from the windows. Secondly, the court expects logic from what it deems a mob and then feigns surprise when it does not find evidence to support this logic. I will explore the themes of social signifiers and identity further in the next chapter, but here it is most important to note the use of logic statements and the basic weakness of the logic on which these statements rely.

The court ends its analysis of the outbreak of violence that night by saying that “the Court is of the opinion that the attack was deliberate and premeditated by the natives,” but provides little evidence beyond speculation to bolster this claim.¹²² It is perhaps more accurate to say that this finding of the court was pre-meditated.

“A new and ominous feature”

Much of the remainder of the Military Court’s report deals with the conduct of the Egyptian police, guards (sing. *ghafir*, pl. *ghufara*’; generally listed in the report as *bulak-el-ghafar*), and soldiers stationed on the streets, particularly around Anastassi Street on Sunday night and Monday.¹²³ The *bulak-el-ghafar* were the force which fired on the crowds on the Friday, 20 May. In the view of the court something suspicious had happened between then and Sunday night to “change the sentiments of the people,” for when the *ghufara*’ arrived on Anastassi Street on Sunday the crowd shouted “They are Egyptians! They are our brothers!”¹²⁴ The court is laying the foundation for the narrative of this

¹²² *MCE*, 256.

¹²³ Ghafir is usually translated as guard. According to Hanley this force was the lowest level in Alexandria’s security hierarchy. In rural areas the ghafir corps often acted as corvee labor, but in the city they were guards who either patrolled or manned posts. Hanley, “Foreignness and Localness,” 84. They seem to have been recruited as part of the regular army and then sent to work as *ghufara*’. *MCE*, 256.

¹²⁴ *MCE*, 256.

section: that the targeting of Europeans on Monday was a deliberate plot between the crowd organizers and the Egyptian police, guards, and soldiers tasked with controlling them.

Before “proceeding to the narrative of the events of Monday,” the court saw fit to describe precisely the forces available to the Commandant of Police.¹²⁵ From Commandant A.C. Grant Bey’s testimony, it seems that he had about 360 ordinary police, not armed with rifles who were “of no use at all in a riot,” and 360 *ghufara*’ who were armed with rifles.¹²⁶ On Saturday morning 280 men from the Egyptian army arrived from Cairo. The court draws attention to the fact that “these men came from Cairo, and are not of Alexandria. They had therefore no local connection.”¹²⁷ As of 3:30 am on Monday morning, there were twenty-five Egyptian soldiers and twenty-five *ghufara*’ posted in the district around Anastassi Street. The officers posted them there and then went to their barracks, not to return until the following afternoon. According to one officer’s testimony, all of the soldiers on the street were very junior because the more senior men did not like to serve under the command of the police.¹²⁸ The *ghafir* company was dressed in a black uniform with steel helmets, while the Egyptian army soldiers were wearing khaki and red tarbooshes. The pages spent detailing these forces on the street boost the truth claims and perceived authority of the court: they provide hard numbers, specific types of ammunition, orders given, and troop deployments.

The narrative of the events of Monday begins with this: “as soon as the Moslems had had their meal and taken a little repose, they returned to the attack.” Around 5 or 5:30 am large crowds began to arrive on Anastassi Street “armed with clubs, axes, and tins of petrol.”¹²⁹ I found no reference to this gathering in other documents, but the court’s account comes from the testimony of a police sergeant; the court opted to believe the sergeant in this case. By 7:30 there was looting and the crowd was allegedly beating Europeans.

At around 7 am a crowd of Italian subjects awoke the Italian Consul M. Vivaldi demanding protection. He proceeded with the crowd to the Governorate building where the

¹²⁵ MCE, 255.

¹²⁶ MCE, 10-14.

¹²⁷ MCE, 257.

¹²⁸ MCE, 257.

¹²⁹ MCE, 258.

Greek consul and other officials were discussing what action they should take. Shortly after 8:30 am “a crowd of natives advanced against the Italians” and the whole of Mohammed Ali Square, the area surrounding the Greek and Italian, erupted into chaos, with “everyone in a hat” being “set upon by bands of natives and beaten senseless or killed.”¹³⁰ This narrative fully attributes the aggression in this case to the Egyptians, whereas most other reports say that the Italians fired at passing Egyptian workmen. For this, the court relies solely on the testimony of the French Consul, M. Pierre De Witasse.¹³¹

It is worth examining the testimony of De Witasse here, for comparing his testimony with the narrative presented by the report will allow us to see the way that the report manipulates testimony, even sympathetic testimony. De Witasse testified that he arrived at the Governorate around 8:30 am and went inside. Soon afterwards, he was summoned to the balcony by a group of Italians who said, “They are assassinating the people under the windows of the Governorate.” De Witasse went out on the balcony, where he witnessed a Syrian man get shot with rifle fire from an unknown quarter. At the same time he saw a “mob of natives” pursuing Europeans who were retreating and firing revolvers, while the police did little.¹³² You will notice here that De Witasse provided no testimony as to how the altercation started. This testimony is what the court renders “Very shortly after 8:30 am a crowd of natives advanced against the Italians, waiting outside the Governorate, who retaliated with rifle shots.”¹³³ This is not technically an alteration of De Witasse’s testimony, but it does create the impression that the Egyptians attacked the Italians. As we will see, the police report (and others) took a different view of the incident.

Some lines after this, the court quotes Ingram Bey at length, describing how he came upon a picket of *ghufara*’ who complained of being sniped at from the windows and how he subsequently caught one of them firing at a window. Around this time, Ingram Bey also came across two wounded soldiers, and the report uses this as a departure to say:

It has been alleged that the police and the Egyptian army soldiers were incensed by these two casualties and therefore acted as they subsequently did. But long before that both the

¹³⁰ MCE, 258.

¹³¹ MCE, 26.

¹³² MCE, 26-27.

¹³³ MCE, 258.

buluk-el-ghafar and the Egyptian army soldiers... had to a man joined the mob and used their arms against Europeans. The evidence is overwhelming...¹³⁴

The court here provides six cases of *ghufara*’ or Egyptian soldiers beating, robbing, or shooting Europeans. The court was especially careful to note what the offenders were wearing. These cases are horrifying. One George Stratis was trying to get to his shop when a crowd detained him. An Egyptian army soldier allegedly called to the mob, “get away from him – I will finish this business,” and shot him in the stomach. Stratis ran to the door of an Italian, but when he got to the door a *ghafir* shot him in the head. In another case, two boys, Jean Vrousos and Dubriches (no first name given), were walking down the street and passed a picket of soldiers. A soldier allegedly said, “Look at these birds,” while another fired, killing one of the boys. Next a *ghafir* allegedly shot the other boy through the leg, and when the boy got up crying, “Mon pere, mon pere!” another *ghafir* shot him again.¹³⁵

These stories—and reading through the testimony there are many more of varying brutality—caused the court to write,

One begins to understand why the natives had greeted them [the soldiers and police] with applause when they appeared on the scene Sunday night. There can be no manner of doubt that they then knew that both the Egyptian army soldiers and the buluk-el-ghafar were on their side. One could not have stronger proof of the premeditation of the attack on the Europeans.¹³⁶

There is little doubt that some members of the Egyptian army and *ghafir* corps committed terrible crimes against Europeans. But the court finds evidence of premeditation where it is simply not clear that such premeditation existed. Is it not conceivable that inexperienced soldiers stationed on the street in an extremely volatile circumstances, getting shot at from windows and separated from their officers, might have spontaneously decided to start attacking and robbing their perceived aggressors? In the court’s imagined scenario, the lower ranking *ghufara*’ and soldiers were part of a conspiracy to join the crowd before they were stationed on the street. The court does not imagine that the officers had “any knowledge of how their men were going to behave,” but claims that

¹³⁴ *MCE*, 259.

¹³⁵ Summaries of both cases from *MCE*, 260.

¹³⁶ *MCE*, 261.

“they [the officers] are Egyptians and should know their people.”¹³⁷ This view of class and responsibility mirrors the court’s perceptions more broadly: low-class Egyptians perpetrated it, but the upper-class should have known better. As we will see, the police report takes a very different line from the court on the subject of the behavior of the police.

From here the report goes on to spend several pages describing incidents in which police and soldiers were caught in the act of shooting or robbing Europeans and subsequently lying about it to passersby or the court. The themes of the narrative are the same: European victims, lying, childishly brutal Egyptian soldiers, and heroic and trustworthy British witnesses.

Responsibility

The conclusion of the Military Court report is short – little longer than a page – but it pulls no punches. It starts by stating definitively that there is no evidence that the Europeans started the violence and that the mobs were definitely organized. The evidence for this is testimony from the French Consul that a man with a whistle was directing the mobs. Unfortunately, the court finds “no evidence as to what this organisation was; or by whom it was directed – it had a very definite existence, and must of have been formed for some purpose.”¹³⁸ While the exact purpose of the mob is unknown, the court quickly puts responsibility on the Zaghlul and his political organization, which was “determined to force the Government to repeat the Tanta incident.”¹³⁹ The court never explicitly draws the line between the organized mob and Zaghlul, but the reader quickly surmises it.

The court also blames the violence on an historical “fanatical hatred of Europeans” among “the lower classes” in Egypt. This hatred was manifested in 1882, when “Great Britain was forced to occupy the country,” during the Dinshaway incident in 1906, in 1919, and “now again in 1921.” It “was the same thing” in each case.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ *MCE*, 262.

¹³⁸ *MCE*, 266.

¹³⁹ *MCE*, 266.

¹⁴⁰ *MCE*, 266.

According to the report, this hatred is only acted upon when government becomes weak and the people no longer fear security forces. Furthermore, “given similar circumstances, this feeling will always manifest itself in the future, as it has done in the past, and a very long period of time must elapse before that feeling can be eradicated.”¹⁴¹ All of this means, the court concludes, referencing the testimony of the Italian, French, and Greek consuls, that foreigners in Egypt will never consent to being protected by “a force exclusively composed of Egyptians.”¹⁴² The report closes with an extended quotation from the testimony of the French consul, in which he recounts the events of 1882, specifically that Europeans “were met with bayonet thrusts” when they sought help from the Egyptian police. “Exactly the same thing that happened on the 11th June, 1882, has happened on the 22nd May, 1921.”¹⁴³

What does this conclusion, and indeed the report as a whole, tell us about the court and its *raison d’être*? First of all, it is striking how openly the conclusion of the report leads the reader to the politics of the British administration in Egypt: a continued British presence is absolutely necessary, and Zaghulist agitators instigated the unrest. The actual body of the report has very little proof of this last claim. The only proof of organization behind the violence towards Europeans is that the protestors burned houses and had whistles. The only connection to Zaghulist agitation comes two days before the communal violence started, when Abdulla Koraim made a speech at the Abul Abbas Mosque.

The majority of the narrative, which deals with attacks on Europeans, particularly by Egyptian security forces, served the interest of the British Administration in two ways. First, it sought to show that Egyptians were incapable of protecting foreign interests in the country, which was the British narrative for why they occupied Egypt in the first place. Second, it gave the foreign consuls in Alexandria what they wanted, a feeling that justice was being done and a promise of a continued British presence in the city. What

¹⁴¹ MCE, 267.

¹⁴² MCE, 267.

¹⁴³ MCE, 267.

the report entirely ignores is the responsibility for most of the victims of the violence: the sixty-four dead Egyptians.

Contaminated

On 4 July, 1921 General Congreve wrote to Allenby summarizing the findings of the military court. Congreve was concerned that the court did not achieve its anti-Zaghlulist objective, writing that it

failed to show any connection between the rioters and the agents, or heads, of any of the political parties, though on the evidence of Mr. S. White of the Public Securities, money from somewhere was most probably at the bottom of the whole affair. I have seen the President of the Court on this subject and am assured by that every effort was made to obtain evidence of this but without result.¹⁴⁴

Here Congreve admits the ultimate goal of the report: to connect the violence to political machinations. The report clearly presented its findings as proof of a political connection between the violence and the anti-colonial independence movement. It is revealing that a senior British officer did not find the evidence of this connection very compelling.

Congreve went on to argue that from his military point of view, the most concerning aspect of the violence was the conduct of the Egyptian army and police. He was “of the opinion that the Officers of both units are chiefly to blame for what occurred, i.e. the deliberate murder of Europeans.”¹⁴⁵ Interestingly, he felt that the problem probably lay with the soldiers more than the police:

It will be noticed... that on Friday the Guard Company fired on the mob and behaved itself in a soldierly way as regards discipline. On Monday, however, the guard company was as deeply implicated as the Egyptian army. The Egyptian Army arrived in Alexandria on Saturday, it seems therefore possible that the Egyptian Army may have been contaminated before arrival and affected the guard company on arrival.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ FO 141/517/4

¹⁴⁵ FO 141/517/4

¹⁴⁶ FO 141/517/4

It is interesting that Congreve regarded potential nationalist political activity as a contagion and felt that it could very possibly be spread from unit to unit by mere hours of contact.

The next day, Allenby forwarded the report to the Foreign Office in London, writing that “the report speaks for itself,” and that “comment upon it would be superfluous.” He then weighed the merits of publishing the report, saying that he had already “received requests for advanced copies,” but that “publication will almost certainly be resisted by the Egyptian official delegation (here he is referencing the delegation sent by the Egyptian government to London to negotiate the status of Egypt)” because “they will consider it to weaken their case for claiming the withdrawal of British troops from such centres as Alexandria and Cairo.” According to Allenby, the “events of May in Alexandria have aroused such widespread indignation in the British and foreign communities that there is nothing we can do to shield the Egyptians from the conclusions drawn by foreign governments.”¹⁴⁷ Allenby concluded his letter by saying that he was “on the whole, in favor of publication,” as “otherwise it may be suggested that we are withholding information in the interest of a particular bargain which we desire to achieve in Egypt.”¹⁴⁸ The Military Court was, from its formation immediately after the violence ended to the discussion of the publication of its report, always less a tool of establishing the actual truth of the violence and more a tool of establishing a truth that was useful for the British administration in furthering its political aims in Egypt.

Sa‘ad Zaghlul saw the court for what it was, and when the report was finally published in December, 1921, he complained bitterly about it. Speaking to a *Reuters* correspondent on 20 December, he said “it would appear from recent documents (namely, the published report) that the events in Alexandria last May had been turned to advantage by the British Imperialists,” and outlined four specific reasons why the court was illegitimate:

- a. Because the Egyptian authorities did not participate in that enquiry which was conducted solely by the British military authorities who were further swayed by their political prejudice.

¹⁴⁷ FO 141/517/4

¹⁴⁸ FO 141/517/4

- b. Because the inquiry was not public but was secretly conducted
- c. Because a committee of Egyptian lawyers offered to collect evidence regarding the events and presented to the court of inquiry many witnesses to be examined, but the court heard only a few of them and refused to hear the majority of these witnesses.
- d. Because although the number of those who were killed and wounded among Egyptians was many times more than the number of foreigners killed and wounded, yet no foreigner was condemned or even tried, while nineteen Egyptians suffered the penalty of capital punishment, apart from many others who were condemned to other forms of punishment.¹⁴⁹

He went on to demand “an international inquiry” into the events and stated that he was sure that the “result of that inquiry would not be against the Egyptians, if indeed it would not prove to be in their favor.” He then spoke for Egypt as a whole, saying

The Egyptian nation considers that the accusation brought against it in connection with those events to be an insult to its honour, as xenophobia is conspicuously absent in Egypt. Moreover it is in Egypt’s own interests to continue to live in harmony with foreigners. If any proof were needed in support of these statements it is only necessary to point out that the events took place in one quarter of Alexandria without similar occurrences taking place elsewhere in the town or in any other part of the country.¹⁵⁰

Zaghlul’s response report raises a number of issues which speak to the both the flaws of the court and the politics surrounding it. The first and most obvious issue with the court of inquiry and the other military court which ultimately sentenced participants in the violence to death is a total lack of interest in culpability for the deaths of the many Egyptians who died. As noted above, this is largely because many of them were killed by the British Army. Formal acknowledgement of this by the court would have given anti-colonial activists such as Zaghlul fodder for their rhetorical attacks on the British occupation of Egypt. Zaghlul’s response also shows us how acts of violence were used by political actors on all sides to further their political goals. Zaghlul accused the British administration of using the violence for their own advantage, precisely the charge that the court made against Zaghlul and his allies when it said that the “demonstrations were intended to provoke another ‘Tanta incident’” which could be used to condemn the government.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ FO 141/517/4

¹⁵⁰ FO 141/517/4

¹⁵¹ *MCE*, 251-252.

Finally, Zaghlul's response shows us how the safety of foreigners in Egypt had become a central issue in the negotiations around the status of Egypt. As shown above, various consuls argued that foreigners could never be protected by an Egyptian police force, which meant that Egypt could never be truly independent. Gaafar Fakhry Bey recognized the implications of this during in an exchange with the court during his testimony:

Court: "They (the consuls) say they cannot agree that their nationals are being properly protected unless some international police force is formed, if it is proved that the buluk-el-ghafar and the Egyptian army join with the mob against foreigners.

Fakhry Bey: So that is what they are scheming at?

Court: It is not scheming it is common sense.

Fakhry Bey: If for Alexandria, why not for all of Egypt?¹⁵²

Zaghlul was clearly aware that the issue of the safety of foreigners was one which would be used by both the British administration and the foreign consuls to argue against independence for Egypt. He tried to counter this claims with sweeping claims of his own, such denying the existence of any xenophobia in the country.

Part II: Police Report

In early August 1921 the Alexandria City police sent a final report about the violence from 20-23 May to the High Commissioner's office. This report is a combination of police reports from the time of the violence and analysis of the events written afterwards. The analysis almost certainly reflects the point of view of Grant Bey and Ingram Bey, the Commandant and Assistant Commandant of the Alexandria City Police, respectively. It is of particular interest because it provides a distinctly different narrative from that of the Military Court. In the following section I will outline the

¹⁵² *MCE*, 126.

findings of the police report and, while doing so, compare it to what we found above in the Military court report.

Precursors

The narrative of the police report begins by listing six occurrences which set the stage for the violence. The first is the arrival of Sa'ad Zaghlul during which the crowd expressed "uncontrolled frenzy and fanaticism" which was "thoroughly characteristic" and indicated "the presence of a serious danger."¹⁵³ The second occurrence was the Milner Commission's proposed abolition of the protectorate and the actual abolition of press censorship. The proposed abolition of the protectorate supposedly "lent support to theory that British authority in Egypt was on the wane," and the Egyptian papers used the abolition of press censorship to take full advantage of this impression.¹⁵⁴

The third occurrence was a taxi strike in Alexandria at the end of April. Taxi drivers went on strike to protest the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) program of having the police seize taxi horses and take them to the hospital for care; the hospital then charged the taxi drivers sixteen piasters a day. They marched through the streets waving an Egyptian flag, shouting "Long Live Saad Zaghlul!" "Down with the S.P.C.A.!"¹⁵⁵ The police report says that this strike was marked by "general contempt of authority and insolence... especially towards Europeans." Furthermore, the report speculates that "possibly certain notables encouraged the strike in order to make political capital out of it and to embarrass the government."¹⁵⁶

The fourth occurrence was the involvement of the Boy Scout organization in Alexandria, which greatly increased the patriotic feelings of the people, particularly the lower classes. In the words of the report,

bands of berberine waiters, cooks, and others of that class, who formerly spent the early afternoon sleeping in their masters' houses were induced to employ their spare time in

¹⁵³ FO 141/517/4

¹⁵⁴ FO 141/517/4

¹⁵⁵ FO 407/189, 100 The issue between the taxi drivers and the S.P.C.A goes back decades. See Chalcraft, *The Striking Cabbies of Cairo and Other Stories: Crafts and Guilds in Egypt, 1863-1914*.

¹⁵⁶ FO 141/517/4.

undergoing a semi-military form of training... At all hours troops of native boy scouts... mainly composed of all the native riff-raff of the city, paraded the streets to the annoyance of the better class citizens and especially of the Europeans.¹⁵⁷

This apparently continued until British troops took over the town during the violence and a “pernicious form of propaganda was thus satisfactorily dealt with.”¹⁵⁸

The fifth occurrence was the Tanta incident and particularly the suspension of the Commandant of Police in Tanta following the incident. This, the report argues, encouraged the popular party to believe that they could “disregard the authority of the police with impunity.” Perhaps more dangerously, the sacking of the commandant also caused Egyptian police officers, “whose position in the case of riot is always one of extreme difficulty,” to feel that the “last incentive to decisive local action was now removed.”¹⁵⁹ The highlighting of this particular grievance perhaps reflects a deep concern of the authors of the police report: that the leaders of the Alexandria City Police might themselves be fired in the wake of the violence. The final issue was the protests during Ramadan – “always a troublesome period for the police” - in the week preceding 20 May.¹⁶⁰

In this analysis we find certain similarities with the report of the Military Court. The most obvious is pointing to both the return of Sa‘ad Zaghlul and the Tanta incident as important precursors to the violence. We also find that the police and court members held similar notions of class in Egyptian society: that the lower classes composed the unruly mobs but received a good amount of direction from the elites. This is perhaps unsurprising as both the court and the upper echelons of the police administration were staffed by British men who likely came from similar class backgrounds.¹⁶¹ We also see that the police report, like the Military Court, expects that the crowd responds only to force and that the sacking of the Commandant in Tanta demonstrated weakness, which the crowds in Alexandria acted on. It may also be that the Commandant in Alexandria,

¹⁵⁷ FO 141/517/4.

¹⁵⁸ FO 141/517/4.

¹⁵⁹ FO 141/517/4.

¹⁶⁰ FO 141/517/4.

¹⁶¹ See Mak, *The British in Egypt : Community, Crime and Crises 1822-1922* for details on the class origins of various groups of British subjects in Egypt in this period. .

Grant Bey, was eager to provide justification for remaining in his position despite such horrible violence on his watch.

The differences between the two reports here are small and perhaps unsurprising, but they also provide us with a starting point for understanding the way they grow as each narrative progresses. The first difference is that the police report is far more attuned to local issues than the Military Court report. It highlights the specific activity which the police dealt with in the months before the violence, issues which were not mentioned to the court. The police report is also specifically focused on the issue of police morale and, as will become apparent, absolving the police force of as much responsibility for what happened as possible; the Military Court was specifically interested in incriminating Egyptian police officers.

“A very truculent—almost revolutionary frame of mind”

The narrative of the police report begins in earnest when it is describing the protests during the week leading up to 20 May. It goes into considerably more detail about each protest than the Military Court report, but the basic framework is the same: protestors grew more aggressive and began carrying more weapons, while the police did little more than warn them, eventually quietly arresting the ringleaders. At this point comes the first full-throated defense of police strategy prior to 20 May:

The population was in a very truculent-almost revolutionary frame of mind... The storm centre was approaching, and if, as was hoped, it could be weathered without disaster, there was every reason to expect a calmer atmosphere would be reached, as popular passions subsided.... The ministry must have shared this view, as on Wednesday the 18th May, he (Grant Bey) received strict orders to avoid a tanta[*sic*] incident “at all costs.”¹⁶² (Emphasis original)

The narrative device here is different than that of the Military Court. Protests and political agitation are portrayed using a weather metaphor. This creates the image that the authorities did not have real control; the best they might be expected to do is cover the windows with plywood, stay indoors and hope for the best. Instead of blaming the Adly

¹⁶² FO 141/517/4

Ministry for ordering that a Tanta incident must be avoided, as the Military Court did, the police report expresses satisfaction with this order, as it vindicated the Grant Bey's passive policy.

Like the Military Court, the police report happily blames the *chef du parquet*, Margushi Bey, for releasing the ringleaders who were arrested on Wednesday 18 May: "the action of Margushi was proof, in the eyes of the agitators, the government... did not intend to take steps against the rioters, and encouraged the leaders to persist." Indeed, the report blames Margushi Bey personally for this, claiming that he witnessed the demonstration on Thursday and noted its aggressiveness to Grant Bey, and that it therefore "seems incredible that he should have so signally failed to realise the danger of the situation."¹⁶³ The police report places failure solely with Margushi Bey, and the impression is that if he had not released the eight or so ringleaders there would have been no violence the following day.

"No justification whatsoever..."

As noted above, the Military Court report reproduces the timeline from the police report to describe the events of 20 May; it is therefore not worth rehashing them here. Two things are noteworthy in the Police report's treatment of these events: the first is that they are reported in the form of a diary, with a specific time preceding each entry. This gives the report a form of military authority, which is further bolstered by the second noteworthy item: that there is no analysis of the events. They are presented as straightforward diary of a police force struggling to deal with attacks on a number of its facilities. Here, a taste: "15:55: Mounted troop arrive at Manshia and drove off the crowd which started for Gumruk..." and "18:35: Labban again attacked."¹⁶⁴ This form of timed reporting of events continues for the rest of the report, but in following days there are significant breaks for analysis.

¹⁶³ FO 141/517/4

¹⁶⁴ FO 141/517/4

For the events of Saturday and Sunday, the police report follows the same format and the description of events largely mirrors that of Military Court report. We find, however, major differences in the analysis of the start of the violence on Sunday evening and the issue of Europeans shooting from windows. Like the Military Court, the police report begins by saying that there is no definitive proof as to whether or not the “Europeans i.e. the non-Moslems commenced disorders by firing in panic upon the native crowds, or whether the latter were the aggressors.”¹⁶⁵ Later, the report provides the Grant Bey’s view of the matter: “From all reports received and from the evidence of the Assist. Commandant as to what occurred after his arrival on Sunday night, The Commandant is inevitably led to believe that the version ‘that the first shot was fired by a European with very little, if any, provocation,’ is correct.”¹⁶⁶ This language is similar to that of a telephone message from City Police to the High Commissioners office on Monday, 23 May, which said that “the Commandant believes that the Europeans started it (on Monday). They certainly started it last night.”¹⁶⁷

Still, more important to the police report than who “started it” is the fact that the Europeans kept shooting. As the report states, “The Commandant can find no justification whatsoever for the firing by Europeans (i.e. non-Moslems) ; which continued from the houses during the operation of clearing the quarter with the bayonet... as the Police were wearing steel helmets and were easily distinguishable.”¹⁶⁸ The problem, for the police report, is that the people in the houses were firing while the police were in the street. This shooting is used to forward the narrative of a noble yet worn-out police force, the Egyptian members of which were tried heavily:

The fact moreover that after their arrival [the police company’s] and under their very eyes, Europeans (of a very low type) continued, quite unnecessarily, to shoot down their own countrymen and to hamper their own efforts to control the situation (some of the police

¹⁶⁵ FO 141/517/4.

¹⁶⁶ FO 141/517/4.

¹⁶⁷ FO 141/748/2. It is worth noting that Grant Bey’s testimony to the Military Court did not cover this topic at all, at least according to the published version. He discussed the steps taken to prevent the demonstration and read from the diary of events mentioned above, but did not provide his opinion on who was responsible for the outbreak of violence. *MCE*, 10-14.

¹⁶⁸ FO 141/517/4.

were themselves hit) was a very severe strain on their loyalty and on that of the men of the Egyptian Army.¹⁶⁹

The report sympathetically presents the Egyptian police as torn between loyalty to their job and loyalty towards their country. The report is also sure to be specific about what kind of Europeans were responsible for this: “Europeans (of a very low type).” The “behaviour of these Europeans” had a deep “effect on the native mind,” which was already “dangerously excited by the Friday shooting and the funeral which followed... news spread rapidly over the city that ‘the Greeks were killing Muslims.’”¹⁷⁰

All of this is very different from the narrative of the Military Court which forgives the people shooting from windows as “the natives were trying to burn them out of their houses like rats.”¹⁷¹ This narrative places primary blame on the low-class Europeans for shooting police and riling up the crowds. It is nearly as contemptuous of these low-class Europeans as it is of Egyptians, as when the report says that while many respectable small tradesmen live on Anastassi Street, “it is chiefly known to the police as the haunt of criminal classes, both European and native; European prostitutes, pimps, souteneurs, and roughs of every kind.”¹⁷² The classed reading of events provided by these reports sheds some light on how class was a very important layer in Alexandria’s colonial society, and one which cut across communal lines.

“The mischief being done”

The police report takes a very different view of the events of the morning of Monday, 23 May, from the Military Court. The police narrative starts with a note from 2:15 am, saying that all was quiet and “no incident occurred until morning. The Europeans were the first to move.” Remember that the Military Court started with weapon-bearing Egyptians gathering at about 5:30 am. The narrative picks up at 8:20 am when the Italians were leaving their consulate to protest at the Governorate building. This crowd was “in a state of wild excitement bordering on hysteria, and carrying

¹⁶⁹ FO 141/517/4.

¹⁷⁰ FO 141/517/4.

¹⁷¹ *MCE*, 256.

¹⁷² FO 141/517/4.

revolvers.” After reaching the Governorate, about two hundred of the protestors rushed towards Anastassi Street “firing revolvers at any native they chanced to meet.” The police eventually convinced them to return to the Governorate, but it was too late, “the mischief being done,” news spread all over town that “Europeans are again shooting down Muslimin,” and violence spread across the city.¹⁷³ This telling of events is used to reinforce the police report’s desired narrative: that lower-class Europeans were responsible for instigating much of the violence and the police were being assailed from all sides.

“The peaceful execution of their ordinary duty”

The police report does not provide specifics on the behavior of Egyptian army and police officers who were accused of firing on Europeans, but it does offer a defense. This defense turns out to be the ultimate goal of the report; according to the military logic by which police forces are organized, a commanding officer must always stand up for his men. The narrative of the shootings starts with the same event as the Military Court: when Ingram Bey came to the *ghafir* pickets and the men complained that they were sniped at from the windows. Soon thereafter one of the *ghufara*’ was shot in the neck, and the report “naturally went round” the police and army lines that “their comrades were being killed by the Europeans.” This moment, says the report, directly led to later events: “the outbreak of fanaticism later in the day, when several men of the Guard Coy and the 3rd Battalion shot down innocent Europeans, was undoubtedly the direct outcome of this indiscriminate and hysterical firing, by Europeans on native civilians and police alike.

¹⁷⁴This firing was totally unwarranted in the eyes of the police report:

It is beyond any doubt that Europeans (i.e. non-Moslems) did, in many cases, without any provocation, fire from behind closed and shuttered windows at any native seen passing in the street; this firing moreover continued, when the streets were cleared of natives and only police remained – in many case the usual traffic and *qism* beat policemen, absolutely unarmed. What the intentions of the persons firing were, it is impossible to say; but the impression inevitably left on the minds of the native policemen (many of whom, as has

¹⁷³ FO 141/517/4.

¹⁷⁴ FO 141/517/4

been said, were unarmed) was that the Europeans were deliberately and without provocation sniping to kill them, while in the peaceful execution of their ordinary duty.¹⁷⁵

This is very different from the description of the situation and behavior of officers in the street which we find in the Military Court report. The Military Court presents a narrative in which some fifty policemen and Egyptian soldiers were roaming the streets around Anastassi Street firing at the windows and robbing any Europeans they came across. The police report gives the impression of a police company in a highly stressful situation. People were shooting at them from windows. Their officers commanded them to contain angry crowds of their countrymen and then retreated to their barracks. In this narrative it is understandable why some of these men may have snapped and fired back at the windows. The report does not address reports of the police and army robbing and beating people.

The report ends its analysis of the conduct the police and army soldiers by going further:

The commandant i[s] of the opinion that under these circumstances the temper of any police force would be disturbed. While much has been said against these men of the Guard Coy who retaliated by firing on Europeans, nothing has been said in favor of the men who performed their duty loyally under these trying conditions. The commandant considers the conduct of beat policeman and ghaffirs who remained on duty almost without complaint, except to report that they were being fired at, is worthy of some commendation.¹⁷⁶

It is this passage which fully reveals the primary aim of this report: to absolve the Alexandria City Police of accusations of misconduct. The Commandant is sticking up for his men.

Conclusion

Once we understand the goals of both reports, it becomes less surprising that their narratives are so drastically different. What is interesting is the way in which they constructed those narratives. The Military Court relies heavily on legal procedure. It makes a point of explaining this procedure, presenting itself as exhaustive, and citing

¹⁷⁵ FO 141/517/4.

¹⁷⁶ FO 141/517/4

specific testimony, with page numbers, as evidence of claims. It also relies on logical statements. At a number of points the report analyzes the action of individuals and crowds and makes a logical conclusion regarding what must have happened. The police report, on the other hand, makes use of the concept of record itself. It presents the police diaries, complete with timestamps, to bolster its authority in making truth claims. It also utilizes the authoritative voice of the police, giving the reader the impression of an expert witness to events.

In presenting their narratives, the reports reveal different conceptions of class, society, and violence. For the military court, the violence was the fault of Egyptians, directed by elites and carried out by the lower-classes. Lower-class Europeans are presented as hapless victims. The police report blames low-class Egyptians and Europeans alike, although it does lay some responsibility on the elite for not preventing the violence. The differences here are the result of each institution's relationship to society. The police had long experience dealing with violence and crime committed by both Europeans and Egyptians in lower-class neighborhoods of Alexandria. The military court was beholden to the foreign consuls and thus did not affix blame to any of their citizens. Neither body engages with the complicated role of the British administration in this society.

Ultimately neither report succeeds as a convincing analysis. The military court's procedure was faulty and its logical statements fail logic tests. Furthermore, its claims to justice are hollow, as it is only interested in the deaths of eighteen Europeans. The sixty-five dead Egyptians are barely mentioned in the report, aside from a reference to the fact that many of them were killed by the ammunition used by the British army.¹⁷⁷ The police report fails to be convincing because it is too transparently a defense of the police officers on the ground. The court, despite its many flaws, does convincingly provide many examples of their wrong-doing.

The British administration was well-attuned to the political power of narrative. A note from one administrator named McNaughton to an Interior Ministry official

¹⁷⁷ *MCE*, 264.

named G.F. Clayton outlines concerns within the administration about the disparity between the two reports. According to McNaughton, the police report was not “exactly what is required” because it was “too general and many important points are admitted.” Most importantly, it “appears to indicate that Europeans were largely responsible for the trouble,” which “may, or may not, be the case, but in view of the protestations made by the Italian and other foreign communities,” the report should “in my opinion be rewritten on the lines which I have indicated.”¹⁷⁸ I did not find any evidence of a revised report in the archives.

This last quote clearly shows us how British administrators sought to revise the narrative of recent history in order to preserve the layered colonial regime of Alexandria. Reading these reports—and the gaps between them—allow us to understand the relationship of the colonial regime to Alexandrian society. Both reports present British authorities as neutral arbitrators, apart from society, only interfering when the troublesome locals got out of hand. For the military court, the troublesome locals were Egyptians; for the police they were lower class Europeans and Egyptians. This image is of course false. The British administration was anything but neutral and as the top tier of a layered colonial regime, it was very involved in the daily affairs of the city. The narratives which it constructed about the social categories within the city both reflected existing dynamics and helped shape future ones.

In the following chapter I will explore issues of social identity in Alexandria, arguing that they were, to a certain limit, fluid. Often scholars view the rise of the nationalist identity as the antithesis of this fluidity. In this chapter we have seen a different force of modernity which constrained this fluidity of identity: legal procedure. One aspect of the legal procedure which the court followed in order to stake its truth claims was the categorization of witnesses. The first pages of the published proceedings are a list of all of the witnesses to the court grouped by nationality. For some witnesses this was difficult, as in the case of the local subject Tewfiq Suleiman Daher who has the helpful tag “(Syrian)” next to his name.¹⁷⁹ Semira Esmeir argues that modern legal

¹⁷⁸ FO 141/517/4.

¹⁷⁹ *MCE*, 8.

procedure was constitutive of our very understandings of humanity; here I suggest something simpler: that the legal procedures followed by the military court as well as the regular courts of Alexandria helped constitute more rigid understandings of identity.¹⁸⁰ This rigid understanding is a direct contrast to the understandings and performances of identity that we find in the next chapter.

¹⁸⁰ Esmeir, *Juridical Humanity*.

Chapter Three

Hats and Tarbooshes: Social Identity and Cosmopolitanism

Once more Alexandria can be defined as *a cosmopolitan city*. Nearly 70,000 foreigners can be counted amongst her inhabitants, of whom 30,000 are Greeks, more than 20,000 Italians, and several thousand French, English and other British subjects[,] ... Austrians, Germans, Syrians, and Armenians ... Alexandrian ... is proof that much prejudice and racial hatred, much chauvinism, much religious fanaticism may grow milder, may even disappear, when a race or a nationality has occasion to live in daily contact with other races and other nationalities, and can learn that each one of them has qualities that cannot but be appreciated and faults that may be tolerated.¹⁸¹

-Evaristo Breccia, director of the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, writing in 1922 of the effects of 1917 census.

Around 11 pm on 20 April, 1921 a tobacconist named Abd Ghani Mohamed Fathalla, his brother, a house-painter called Mahmoud Mohamed Fathalla, and a man named Said Zaghlul were walking down Anastasi Street in Alexandria when they encountered a woman named Sayeda bint ‘Ali ‘Ata.¹⁸² Sayeda and Mahmoud had a history. They had been lovers, but Sayeda had left him because he neglected to visit her in the hospital while she was ill. The two parties exchanged words, and according to Sayeda, a self-designated prostitute, Zaghlul was trying to “arrange matters” with her when the Fathallas insulted her and she insulted them back. The encounter turned physical: Mahmoud slapped Sayeda and Sayeda in turn beat him with her slipper.¹⁸³

After a few minutes of public bickering, a “European” who was “wearing trousers” ran up to them and stabbed the two brothers with a small blade before escaping into a storefront and barricading the door. Several of the Fathallas’ friends followed the

¹⁸¹ Breccia, *Alexandria Ad Aegyptum*, vii, viii; as quoted in Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive*, 25.

¹⁸² The name is listed in the consular court records as “Sayeda Bint Ali Ata” which seems to be a transliteration of “سيدة بنت علي عطا”.

¹⁸³ FO 847/73/21 (Rex V. Ernesto Barbara).

man, trying to force their way into the storefront, only to have their fingers slashed by a razor wielded by someone inside. A *ghafir* (guard) who saw the incident came over and sealed the door until an investigator from the nearby Labban Caracol arrived. Eventually the police arrested a British subject of Maltese origin named Ernesto Barbara and charged him with attempted murder. Witnesses claimed that after leaving Mahmoud, Sayeda took up with Ernesto, and that he had given her a ring and a chain. Both Ernesto and Sayeda denied this, with Sayeda saying “I became nobody’s mistress when I left Mahmoud. It is not true that I was Ernesto’s mistress. I am a prostitute.”¹⁸⁴

This case, from the British Consular court records, occurred a month before the start of the communal violence of 20-23 May, 1921, and on Anastasi Street, exactly the street which saw the worst of the violence. The crime itself may have been exceptional, but the relationships and testimony of the witnesses here provide us a fleeting glimpse of the daily interactions and altercations occurring in neighborhoods of Alexandria at the time. Will Hanley, writing in his dissertation titled “Foreignness and localness in Alexandria, 1880-1914,” uses similar incidents from the consular court records to argue for the existence of a “vulgar cosmopolitanism” in this area of Alexandria.¹⁸⁵

This neighborhood, located around Anastasi Street in the Labban district, was a lower-class area of mixed nationality where people publicly engaged in activities of varying degrees of moral and legal standing. Sayeda was an Egyptian prostitute, with a storefront, a detail which implies a certain stability in her business, who worked four doors down from Ernesto, a Maltese gambling proprietor.¹⁸⁶ The witnesses who testified in this case were of the following professions: tobacconist, housepainter, prostitute, policeman, *ghafir* (guard), carter, waiter, mechanic, fitter, and electrical mechanic. The Egyptian witnesses worked mostly in the service industry (tobacconist, prostitute, carter, waiter), while the Europeans tended towards the building trades (mechanic, fitter, electrical mechanic). Many of the witnesses had some sort of criminal record (arrest for

¹⁸⁴ FO 847/73/21.

¹⁸⁵ Hanley, “Foreignness and Localness.”

¹⁸⁶ FO 847/73/21. Several witnesses make note of Sayeda’s storefront.

quarrelling, hashish possession, theft) and they all seem to have some degree of familiarity with one another.

This case also shows us some of the ways in which identity and social categories operated in Alexandria during this period. According to his testimony, Ernesto ran a gambling shop which operated as follows:

There are two benches in the shop for playing with balls – wooden balls. There are four skittles of wood and I give them (the customers) a ball and collect a piaster, if they knock down 4 skittles they take as a prize a packet of cigarettes the value of 6 small piasters. Between 11 and 12 (P.M. on the night of the crime) play was going on all the time. There were 15 or 16 persons when I was going to close up. 7 or 8 closed in the shop (after he ran back in and barricaded the door). They were Arabs and Europeans.¹⁸⁷

Here we find a space where Egyptians and non-Egyptians freely mingled and on seemingly equal terms. Ernesto divides them into two categories: Arab and European. It is not clear from his testimony how these categories were defined: were Arabs Egyptians only, or might a Syrian also qualify as Arab? Were Europeans only those from the continent of Europe, or did people such as Armenians or Palestinian Jews also fit into this category? It is clear from the testimony of many witnesses that dress was a clear signifier, at least of the European category: Ernesto is repeatedly identified as a European because he is wearing pants. While identity may not have mattered much while gambling, it clearly mattered when the stakes were higher, as in legal matters or threat of imprisonment. Of the people locked in the shop with Ernesto, only Europeans testified in his defense, claiming that he had never left the shop and therefore could not have stabbed anybody in the street.¹⁸⁸

Will Hanley identifies another binary categorization of identity which, while unspoken, is relevant to this case: foreign and local. He describes an incident in the same area some thirty-five years earlier, in which several Maltese men stabbed some British sailors in a bar. He argues that in this case the British seamen would have been the outsiders set against the knowing “insiders,” the inhabitants of the district, a category which included the Maltese assailants, but also other residents of other nationalities who

¹⁸⁷ FO 847/73/21.

¹⁸⁸ FO 847/73/21.

lived in the area. In that case, the dominant categories would have been “foreign” and “local.”¹⁸⁹ The local category is significant in the Barbara case, mostly because all witnesses seem unquestionably members of it. That Sayeda, an Egyptian, went from an Egyptian lover to a Maltese lover seems to have garnered no ill-will beyond lovers’ jealousy. As I noted before, everyone involved in the incident, whether Arab or European, seem to have had some acquaintance with each other and viewed the others’ existence in this neighborhood as a fact of life.

In both Egyptian and non-Egyptian historiography, Alexandria of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is often depicted as a place where people of many nationalities lived together in relative harmony, doing business, mingling socially, and exchanging cultural practices. This society has been romanticized by literary authors from Forster to Durrell, and academics such as Robert Ilbert, Sami Zubaida, and Michael Haag.¹⁹⁰ The adjective used to describe this society generally is “cosmopolitan” and it is usually cast against the specter of Egyptian nationalism. In the past decade this narrative has been critiqued on many fronts, most notably in the Alexandrian case by Will Hanley, Hala Halim, John Rodenbeck, and Khaled Fahmy.¹⁹¹ The broad outline of their critiques is that this cosmopolitan framework is inherently elitist, racist, and colonial and that it ignores the majority of the population of the city which it seeks to describe. One aspect of cosmopolitanism in Alexandria that these critiques leave under-explored is the role of identity, both its conception and performance, in constructing this narrative.

The cosmopolitanism so mourned in much of Alexandrian historiography depends on a paradox which is well described by Khaled Fahmy: “first, that Alexandria was an open, tolerant city where different ethnic groups were allowed to flourish and to coexist peacefully; and, secondly, that these ethnic groups were separate from each other, with

¹⁸⁹ Hanley, “Foreignness and Localness,” 30–31.

¹⁹⁰ Forster and Durrell, *Alexandria: A History and a Guide*; Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet*; Ilbert, *Alexandrie, 1830-1930 : Histoire D'une Communauté Citadine*; Zubaida, “Middle Eastern Experiences of Cosmopolitanism”; Haag, *Alexandria, City of Memory*. I do not mean to suggest that the work of these authors are without merit. Ilbert is an exceptional historian who ends up reproducing parts of the cosmopolitan narrative largely by virtue of his sources and focus on the elite of the city. Haag, on the other hand, seems to set out to deliberately reproduce this narrative and in this he succeeds marvelously.

¹⁹¹ Hanley, “Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies”; *ibid.*; Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive*; Rodenbeck, “Alexandria in Cavafy, Durrell, and Tsirkas”; Fahmy, “Towards a Social History of Modern Alexandria.”

little or no interaction between them.”¹⁹² Inherent to each aspect of this paradox is a certain understanding of identity. In the former aspect, it is the view that the cosmopolitan, or international identity, subordinates the communal or national. Sami Zubaida provides a good example of this in his chapter “Middle Eastern Experiences of Cosmopolitanism” when he writes that cosmopolitanism consists of “ways of living and thinking,” which are “deracinated from communities and cultures of origin, from conventional living, from family and homecenteredness.”¹⁹³ Simultaneously, the opposing truth privileges communal or national identity above all; here, Alexandria becomes a place where people of different nationalities happened to live near one another, but ultimately pursue their lives separately. As Hanley points out, this latter formulation wipes out class as a relevant distinction, “so Jewish dock-workers belong to the same category as Jewish bankers, and in a different section from lower class worker of other communities.”¹⁹⁴ Neither of these formulations of identity, one which subordinates and one which privileges the national or communal aspect, bear much resemblance to the practices, performances, and understandings of identity which we find when we examine actual evidence from the period in question.

In this chapter I use testimony to the Military Court of Inquiry to explore the contemporary understandings and performances of identity in Alexandria during the communal violence of 20-23 May, 1921. While the focus is on an exceptional moment, the actions on display represent conceptions developed over the course of lifetimes. For sociologists, the term social identity refers to a person’s self-identification with a specific social group.¹⁹⁵ The first important point we can take from the testimony is that for Alexandrians social categories were fluid, overlapping, and as we will see, difficult to define. An Alexandrian merchant of Greek origin would likely identify as belonging to the categories of Greek, Christian, European, middle-class (depending on his success), and Alexandrian. A wealthy aristocrat of Turco-Circassian origin with a long family history in Egypt might identify as Egyptian, Muslim, Ottoman, and Alexandrian. A

¹⁹² Fahmy, “For Cavafy, with Love and Squalor: Some Critical Notes on the History and Historiography of Modern Alexandria,” 272.

¹⁹³ Zubaida, “Middle Eastern Experiences of Cosmopolitanism,” 15.

¹⁹⁴ Hanley, “Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies,” 1351.

¹⁹⁵ Stets and Burke, “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory,” 225.

migrant laborer from Minya might consider himself Muslim, Egyptian, Minyan, and Alexandrian. Place of origin mattered, but so did a number of other factors and life choices.

The second point is that Alexandrians reflexively judged and identified the social categories of others, and that to do so they used a variety of signifiers. These signifiers were not necessarily reliable and people often made errors when attempting to identify someone. In the Barbara case, we saw that Ernesto was identified because of the way he was dressed, but the witnesses do not address who else might have been wearing pants in the neighborhood on that night.

The last point is that the details of the events which I provide below challenge the paradoxical notions of identity on which the myth of cosmopolitanism relies. People neither abandoned their communal identities for a cosmopolitan identity nor lived their lives secluded from people different from themselves. They lived and worked together, had friendships, love affairs and feuds, but they also held deep prejudices which in times of strife could result in terrible violence.

European-ness

The two most important sets of distinctions made by Alexandrians during the violence were between Egyptian (native) and European, and Muslim and Christian. Frequently, crowds attacked anybody who was dressed in the European style but they often identified this style as a marker of a Christian identity, not using the word European. An Italian employee of the Gas Company named Giuseppe Casaro went to Attarine Street on 23 May for lunch and found the street “devastated.” At first, “there was nobody in the street,” but soon a “crowd ran out of a side street” and attacked him with sticks, shouting “Kill all the Christians.” The crowd beat and robbed him, leaving him lying in the street. Eventually an Egyptian employee of the Gas Company came and brought him inside.¹⁹⁶ Casaro was targeted as a Christian because his appearance told the crowd that he was European and therefore Christian.

¹⁹⁶ MCE, 98.

In another instance, a City Port Policeman named Michael Cachia testified that on 22 May he saw crowds in Labban shouting in Arabic “We will kill all of these cursed Christians.” They then caught a “European,” searched him, and beat him with sticks, before someone shouted “Bring petroleum.” Cachia fled before seeing what happened to the man.¹⁹⁷ In Cachia’s account, the people of the crowd are using the term “Christian,” while he himself introduces the term “European.” It is rare to find testimony which points to crowds shouting against Europeans generally; far more common were chants targeting either Christians or specifically Greeks.¹⁹⁸

The immediate and oft-stated reason for the targeting of Greeks and Christians was the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922), which in the spring of 1921 was entering a crucial phase. The war began in the aftermath of World War I when Greece, encouraged by the Allied powers, occupied Smyrna on the pretext of protecting Greek-speaking populations. In 1920, Greek forces entered Asia Minor on the same pretext, sparking popular resistance from much of the Turkish-speaking population, which came to be led by nationalist leader Mustafa Kemal. There was fierce fighting throughout 1920 and early 1921, and in March of 1921 the Greek forces suffered their first reversal at the hands of Turkish nationalists at the Second Battle of İnönü. There were intense battles later that summer and Turkish forces won significant victories in the fall. The war ended with the Greeks losing all of the territory they had gained in their initial offensive and massive population transfers of Greek and Turkish speaking peoples into the new borders of their respective countries.¹⁹⁹ The event associated with the end of the war is the burning of Smyrna, now Izmir. Soon after Turkish forces took control of the city in September 1922, a massive fire started in a Christian quarter which eventually burned some 14,004 houses and destroyed most of the Greek and Armenian districts. Roughly 300,000 non-Turkish residents evacuated the city, and estimates of the dead—from both fire and massacre—range from 80,000 to 180,000.²⁰⁰ Philip Mansel writes that “in two weeks, the city

¹⁹⁷ *MCE*, 33. It is not clear what Arabic terms the crowds were using for foreigner and Christian. There are several different words in Egyptian Arabic for foreigner (*khawaga*, and *agnabi*, for example) and Christian (*misih* and *nusri* for example) each with different connotations and levels of offense. The court records are, unfortunately, translated into English and are not specific in the language.

¹⁹⁸ *MCE*.

¹⁹⁹ Jensen, “The Greco-Turkish War, 1920-1922.”

²⁰⁰ Mansel, *Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean*, 216–220.

changed identity from Greek-cosmopolitan to Turkish, as it changed its name from Smyrna to Izmir.”²⁰¹ Thus the event is cast as the death of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism.

This conflict did not occur in a vacuum. Foreign powers were picking sides, and both the Greeks and the Turks sought to curry favor with powerful countries who could supply them with arms and diplomatic backing. Significantly, the British government strongly backed the Greeks, while the French and Italian governments withdrew support from the Greeks and in 1921 pledged to support the Turkish nationalists in a peace conference.²⁰² The antagonism between the Italians and French on the one hand, and the Greeks on the other does not seem to have had enormous effect on communal relations in Alexandria, but Anglo-Turkish antagonism certainly did. Continuing to see the British government as an enemy, Ottoman/Turkish²⁰³ officials continued their wartime policy of trying to destabilize British colonial possessions, including Egypt, through propaganda. Archival evidence shows that British administrators were quite concerned about this. A British political intelligence report notes that certain persons in Tanta were soliciting Red Crescent donations, using inflammatory rhetoric which told Egyptian Muslims that their “brothers are being shot down by Greeks. Your brother Moslems are fighting for existence against Christian Powers.” The report goes on to say that this rhetoric

“play[ed] upon the religious feelings of the fellaheen – one of the surest ways of rousing him. It also tends to increase xenophobia. It is reported from the Delta, and more particularly from Tanta, that anti-foreign feeling is growing rapidly, and not merely anti-Greek, but anti-European. This feeling is fanned by the action of certain foreign companies towards their men and towards the public.”²⁰⁴

Turkish propaganda targeted three different yet overlapping social categories: Christian, Greek, and European. It focused primarily on the religious feelings of Egyptian Muslims, but not entirely; the Ottoman Empire, while fighting for its life in 1921, still remained an important political entity in the historical memory of Egyptians. The Ottomans had controlled Egypt for hundreds of years, and the ties between the two

²⁰¹ Ibid., 220.

²⁰² Jensen, “The Greco-Turkish War, 1920-1922,” 561.

²⁰³ The Ottoman government still technically existed at this point and was engaged in a complex power struggle with Turkish nationalists.

²⁰⁴ FO 407/189, “Further Correspondence, Egypt and Soudan, April to June 1921,” 71.

countries were strong. Muhammad Ali made Egypt independent in everything but name, but he was himself Albanian and the product of the Ottoman system. Elites in Egypt often spoke Turkish and received political training in Istanbul. After the outbreak of World War I in 1914 the British administration formally deposed Khedive Abbas Helmi II (Muhammad Ali's grandson) because they doubted his loyalty. He fled to Istanbul and his reinstatement became a central demand for certain factions of Egyptian nationalists.²⁰⁵

The last sentence of this analysis hints at another reason for Egyptian resentment of Europeans and particularly Greeks: legal advantage and economic exploitation. The foreign population of Alexandria increased dramatically over the last half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. By the time of the 1917 census there were, as Evaristo Breccia eagerly noted in the quote that opens this chapter, nearly seventy thousand foreigners lived in Alexandria. What he leaves out, of course, is the eighty-five percent of the population that fit into the "native" category.²⁰⁶ These foreigners, while a minority of the population, enjoyed legal and financial privileges which gave them a distinct advantages over local subjects. Capitulatory agreements gave the subjects of Great Britain, France, America, Italy, Russia, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, and Greece various tax advantages over locals. A court case involving the subject of one of these powers was heard either in the Mixed or Consular Courts instead of the native courts, a fact which made local subjects feel that they could not get a fair hearing.²⁰⁷ The system, while incredibly complex, was inherently colonial and left local subjects with a distinct disadvantage.

With their competitive advantages, foreigners were present in all sectors of the economy. Marius Deeb argues that foreign domination of the financial sector "was

²⁰⁵ Badrawi, *Political Violence in Egypt*, 116.

²⁰⁶ Breccia, *Alexandria Ad Aegyptum*, vii, viii; For full statistics see Mabro, "Alexandria 1860-1960: The Cosmopolitan Identity"; Ilbert, *Alexandrie, 1830-1930 : Histoire D'une Communauté Citadine*.

²⁰⁷ Throughout these period there were intensive negotiations between the British administration, the Egyptian government, and the other capitulatory powers focused on legal reform. In the British archives countless documents deal with these negotiations and it is clear that they were of great importance and major headache to the administration. Interestingly, one of Zaghlul's demands was the *rentention* of capitulations because he did not want more legal power to be transferred to the British administration. FO 407/189, 22.

complete” by 1870.²⁰⁸ Juan Cole writes of the late nineteenth century that, in addition to control of the financial sector, which was dominated by Northern Europeans, large numbers of workers came from Southern Europe, largely Greece and Italy. The result was that “Europeans were ... present everywhere the Egyptian worker, artisan or merchant looked, whether as competitors for work, or as owners acquiring workshops, or as creditors.”²⁰⁹ These workers earned more and paid fewer taxes than Egyptian workers. Egyptians were certainly aware of the disparities in the system. Cole found that “textile and cotton merchants in Alexandria complained bitterly in 1873 that weighers and measurers, who used to constitute a public guild, had all now gone to work as individuals for private European concerns, so that Egyptians could no longer expect fair weighing.”²¹⁰

The largest foreign community in Alexandria was Greek, with 25,293 appearing in 1917 census. While the Greeks were found at all strata of Alexandria society, the majority of them worked in lower-class professions such as the building trades. Thus while the majority of Egyptians in Alexandria were aware that Egypt was politically controlled by the British, their daily interactions with Europeans were likely to be with Greeks. Greek identity therefore became the most tangible manifestation of both European and Christian identity. Anti-Greek propaganda, while ostensibly focused on the Greco-Turkish War, certainly played on these longer-standing economic and social resentments.

During the violence, these economic, political, and religious resentments translated into the specific targeting of Greeks by Egyptian crowds. On 23 May, a twelve-year old Greek student of St. Catherine’s College named Katsikaris went out with his older brother to find information about their other brother, who had not returned home the previous night. Walking down a small street, they were met by a crowd which demanded to know their nationality. Katsikaris replied that they were Greek and the crowd started to attack them. The elder brother then produced a revolver and scared the crowd off. Further down the road, the brothers met another crowd which poured petrol on

²⁰⁸ Deeb, “The Socio-Economic Role of Local Foreign Minorities in Modern Egypt, 1805-1961.,” 15.

²⁰⁹ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution*, 193.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the younger brother and “endeavored to put him on a small fire that was burning in the road.” He was only saved by a passing party of British soldiers.²¹¹

European-looking passersby knew that the crowds were specifically targeting Greeks and tried to save themselves by arguing that they were not in fact Greek, with mixed success. An Italian bank clerk named Casello Speridion testified that around 10:30 am on 23 May he left his house in a carriage. A “crowd of Arabs” were running down the street and shouted “Are you Greek?” Seridion replied “No, I am Italian,” and the crowd told him to “cheer for Kemal Pasha (the Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal).” Some of them attacked him, but he escaped.²¹² Members of the crowd were thus trying to identify Greeks by way of shibboleth.

In another case a Maltese man named Angelo Zara tried to save himself by falsely blaming Greeks for his injuries. He testified that he was walking down Sisters Street at around 9:30 pm on 22 May when he was pursued by a crowd which knocked him down and beat him. Eventually somebody said “Leave him; he is dead,” and the crowd moved on. Zara tried to get up, but his thigh was fractured and he could not. Two Egyptians came along and asked him what happened. He told them that “the Greeks had shot me,” and the two men started shouting at the windows “asking the Greeks if they were not ashamed of having shot a fellow-Christian.” They then put Zara into a carriage which took him to the hospital.²¹³ Here we see the conflation of religious and communal identity, Greek and Christian.

The category of European was, therefore, layered and fluid. People we might consider decidedly non-European, such as Armenians, Palestinian Jews, and some Syrians also fit into the category of European. A Syrian named Panayotti Sarhan clearly felt in danger of being identified as European and so entered a tarboosh shop to exchange his hat for a tarboosh.²¹⁴ For a certain strata of society at least, “European” identity was more about dressing and acting a certain way (and not being Egyptian), than it was about actual national origin. As we saw in the Barbara case which opened this chapter,

²¹¹ *MCE*, 35. From the testimony of Frere Absalon, Director of St. Catherine’s College.

²¹² *MCE*, 93.

²¹³ *MCE*, 98.

²¹⁴ *MCE*, 87.

Europeans were identified more by their style of dress than by anything else (more on this below).

The example of a Syrian pharmacist named Youssef Bassbouss provides an interesting example of the fluidity of identity. Bassbouss was in Galetti's pharmacy, where he worked, on the morning of 23 May when he saw a crowd "attacking everybody who passed by." At some point "an effendi" came along and said that he had seen three shots fired from a building opposite the pharmacy, and a police officer agreed. Bassbouss was sure that no shots were fired from the building, and that what the *effendi* and officer had seen was merely a girl with opera glasses watching the fighting, and said so. The *bawwab*²¹⁵ of the building in question agreed with him, and even went up and retrieved the opera glasses from the girl. This did not convince the effendi, who said "No, it was not that. I saw shots fired from that house. We must set fire to it."²¹⁶

The crowd then came to Bassbouss' shop for gas with which to burn the building. Bassbouss stepped out and addressed the crowd, saying that he was keeping the shop open "so that first aid might be given to people who were wounded or shot." According to Bassbouss, "the attitude of the crowd changed towards me. They shouted "Bravo!" and clapped their hands, and after that two or three of them guarded my shop."²¹⁷ Later, Bassbouss saw two *ghufara*' walking by. When they saw a man on the fourth floor of a nearby house, they pointed their rifles at him and asked if he was Greek. The crowd shouted that he was, but Bassbouss said, "No. He is a Turk," and the soldiers lowered their rifles and moved on.²¹⁸

Bassbouss seems to have occupied some category between European and native. As the representative of a clearly European pharmacy he was initially the object of hostility for the members of the crowd. He ameliorated this hostility by deftly telling the people that he was only staying open to serve them. Despite this, he clearly felt little sympathy with the people who were targeting Greeks and did his best to stop them from harming people. This may be because he felt that he fit the category of European, or it

²¹⁵ Doorman or guard.

²¹⁶ *MCE*, 77.

²¹⁷ *MCE*, 77.

²¹⁸ *MCE*, 77.

may have been simple common decency towards the people who he lived and worked near. This was almost certainly the case with the *bawwab* who sought to protect the residents of his building.

Witnesses, the police, and newspapers clearly distinguished between economic classes of Europeans. The lower-class and largely Greek, Italian, and Maltese residents of neighborhoods such Labban and Attarine were set in contrast to the more nationally diverse higher class people who held high positions in government and the private sector. A police report referred to the area around Anastasi Street in Labban as “chiefly known to the police as the haunt of criminal classes, both European and native; European prostitutes, pimps, souteneurs, and roughs of every kind.”²¹⁹ The first shot fired at the crowds on Sunday, 22 May was rumored to come from a brothel.²²⁰ A report on the violence in *Al Ahram* states that many European stores were looted and set alight, and that not even the ones in upscale neighborhood survived.²²¹

The testimony of Alfred Bonnard, a French subject and Engineer-in-Chief of the Ports and Lights Administration, gives us one example of the experience of higher-class Europeans during the violence. According to his testimony, he was in his office at 9 am on 23 May when he received a phone call from one of his engineers urging him to leave his office because of disturbances. He instructed his employees to go home and then “left with three others (a Maltese, a Frenchman, and an Armenian), going in the direction of Ramleh Station – all of us wearing tarbooshes (fez). For security sake, I took with me two farrashes²²² (natives).” They soon encountered a group of small boys shouting “Christians!” at them. Bonnard told their driver to speed up, but

then saw large crowds coming out from all the side streets, armed with naboots, knives, &c. The bands of the natives attacked us and we were surrounded. The farrashes explained that we were not Greeks and told them who we were. Then I heard blows on the carriage. The farrashes attempted to protect me and one of them was struck by a naboot on the arm... A man in a tarboosh came to me and told me to follow him and took me into the

²¹⁹ FO 141/517/4.

²²⁰ *MCE*, 229.

²²¹ *Al Ahram*, May 25, 1921, 2.

²²² The word *farrash* referred to a person who performed small tasks in an office such as cleaning. A glossary accompanying internal British reports incorrectly translates the term as “sweeper.” FO 141/517/4.

post of the Ambulance. As we were not armed, we could not defend ourselves. The name of the effendi who saved us was Abdel Hamid Ahmed Goneid, a tailor.²²³

Bonnard's testimony was corroborated to the court by his French companion, Emile Riffart. It is revealing in several ways. It gives us a glimpse of the stratification of Bonnard's workplace into two categories: non-Egyptians and Egyptians. Maltese, French, and Armenians are put in a clearly separate group (and sentence) from the Egyptian helpers who are included only for security sake. This likely reflects the hierarchy of many companies in Alexandria at the time, but it shows a more socially-segregated lifestyle than other examples, such as the Barbara case in which there was no clear hierarchy between Egyptians and non-Egyptians. Bonnard's group was immediately understood to be Greeks, despite the fact that they were wearing tarbooshes. It is possible that the fact that they were riding in a carriage signified something to the crowd about their class which made them a target. It is also possible that the rest of their clothing gave them away as non-Egyptian. We have little evidence of how angry demonstrators treated upper-class Egyptians.

All of these examples demonstrate that European-ness was more intuited than it was something with a concrete definition. There were also many ways of inhabiting the category marked as European in Alexandria in this period. Both Italian laborers and elite British officials fit the category, but they had little else in common, and very likely a good deal of disdain for one another. In some ways it seems that the members of the angry crowds during the violence were attacking the idea of being Greek or European, and the people who happened to momentarily fit into this category paid the price.

Egyptian-ness

Like the category of European, the construct of Egyptian-ness relied less on pure nationality but on a difficult-to-define mixture of religion, place, and class. The category of Egyptian was clearly easy for people to recognize, although difficult to define precisely. . Holding Egyptian nationality was important, but also was clearly not enough.

²²³ MCE, 37.

A woman named Rosa Levantal testified in front of the court as a “local subject,” yet it is clear from her testimony that she was identified as more European than Egyptian.²²⁴ For Egyptians, being Arab was also a component, yet Syrians, Palestinians, and Maghribis were clearly excluded, while Nubians could be included. Islam could also be a part of the Egyptian identity, but non-Egyptian Muslims were again generally excluded, while Coptic Christians were included. Indeed, Muslim-Coptic unity was a crucial component of some threads of Egyptian nationalism. In March 1921 a group of Egyptian nationalist Muslims led a march from the Aboul el Abbas Mosque in Alexandria to the Coptic Patriarchate, calling on the students there to join them in supporting Zaghlul.²²⁵ On April 15, an imam gave a rousing speech at the Aboul el Abbas Mosque praising Muslim-Coptic unity.²²⁶ The Military court seemed to agree with this construct of Egyptian-ness. A man named Fahim Wasili Girgis (a recognizably Coptic name) gave testimony that he saw Greeks firing from buildings and was treated with the same derision as his Muslim compatriots.²²⁷ It is, therefore, perhaps best to say that Egyptian identity was something intangible yet easily recognizable.

Non-Egyptians could have different and perhaps blurrier ideas about who fit into the category of Egyptian, which was usually signified by the term “native.” A Greek man named Anastassi Nicolas testified that a “Turk named Rageb, who is chief of a gang of roughs” collected his “band of natives” on Sunday, telling them that “To-day we must decide as to whether the Cross or the Crescent is to be supreme.” According to Nicolas, Ragab “spoke Turkish – I have been in Istanbul and understand Turkish. The crowd he assembled on this occasion were all Turks.”²²⁸ It is interesting that Nicolas refers to the Turks as natives, saying that Ragab collected his “band of natives” who “were all Turks.” This signifies that for Nicolas at least, the category of native was likely tied to the category of Muslim. I found little other evidence in either the British Archives or the

²²⁴ *MCE*, 72.

²²⁵ FO 141/748/2

²²⁶ FO 407/189, 77

²²⁷ *MCE*, 223-224. It is worth noting again that I do know exactly what Arabic term was being used for Christians, Coptic or otherwise.

²²⁸ *MCE*, 122.

Military Court records of direct Turkish involvement in the violence, and it is not clear who exactly was behind the Turkish propaganda in the country.

As with European-ness, class was an important sub-component of the Egyptian identity. From the court records we can identify three classes of Egyptians: lower class, *effendi*, and elite. The broad outlines of the lower class are fairly clear: it would have comprised artisans, workers, merchants, drivers, street sellers, entertainers, the unemployed and others employed in similar trades. While these occupations represent a wide segment of society with diverse interests, testimony to the court seems to relegate them to the same class. The Military Court itself lamented the fact that it heard no testimony from Egyptians of “a good position;” the occupations above are taken from the witness list.²²⁹ In the testimony, the lower-classes are regularly blamed for the violence. An Italian banker named Andrea Spagnoletti testified that he saw a crowd of about 200 people shouting that “Christians have only one hour to live. Kill the Christians.” In his view the crowd consisted of “all low-class people armed with sticks and knives.”²³⁰ None of the witnesses who identify the members of the crowd as low class gave any reason for doing so, and the court did not ask.

Effendi (plural: *effendiyya*) is a term which was once used to refer to Ottoman officials, but in Egypt by the late nineteenth, in the words of Wilson Jacob, “came to designate groups of men who approximated a cultural bourgeoisie, to the extent that they could not be considered peasants, workers, or aristocrats.”²³¹ Across the Middle East the image of the *effendiya* symbolized modernity, change, and progress. The reformist Young Turk movement in the Ottoman Empire was comprised of *effendiya*, and many of Egypt’s nationalist leaders also fit the term. It is difficult to know exactly what *effendi* meant to the people of Alexandria, but they clearly knew one when they saw one. An Italian merchant named Vitali Pontremoli testified that on the morning of 23 May he saw “an effendi dressed in a gallabiah and black coat and wearing a tarboosh” who “had a browning pistol in his hand” which he fired at an injured young man fleeing a crowd.²³²

²²⁹ *MCE*, 264.

²³⁰ *MCE*, 77-78.

²³¹ Jacob, *Working out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870-1940*, 4.

²³² *MCE*, 74.

Yousseff Bassbouss, the Syrian pharmacist, identified an *effendi* who was urging a crowd to burn down a building because he thought somebody had fired from it.²³³ The French Engineer Alfred Bonnard identified the person who helped him as an *effendi*. Bonnard gives the man's profession as tailor.²³⁴

It is interesting that that in the first example, Pontremoli identifies the *effendi* as wearing a *galabeya*, as the traditional image of an *effendi* is of a man with a suit and a tarboosh; several of my readers have pointed out that this image seemed odd to them. Pontremoli's use of the term suggests several possibilities. The first is that our current conceptions of the term *effendi* are more rigid than its actual contemporary usages. This rigidity would likely be reinforced by cultural images of *effendiya* such as old pictures and films. The second possibility is that Pontremoli—a non-Arabic speaking Italian—had a vague understanding of the term and applied it loosely to middle and upper-class Egyptians regardless of dress. This vagueness in the application of terms of category reflects the vagueness of the understandings of social category in the period.

The term “elite” seems to represent the landed aristocracy of Egypt. As I note in the chapter “Narratives of Violence,” the Military Court placed a good deal of blame on this class for instigating the violence. The one member of this class who testified was a man named Gaafar Fakhry Bey. We have no testimony about elites such as Fakhry Bey participating in the violence. Fakhry Bey himself testified that on 23 May he was headed into town, but heard word of the violence and turned around. We do, however, know something of his biography from a file on him found in the British archives. Fakhry Bey was an elite of Circassian origin who served the Ottoman Administration in Turkey (his term) and in 1915 was made sub-governor of Alexandria. He spoke English, Italian, French, Arabic, Turkish, and Greek. It is unclear where he was from, but apparently he had only been in Alexandria for around three years when he wrote to the High Commissioner in 1917 to nominate himself for the position of governor of Alexandria. In this letter he has high praise for the British Administration, saying “Your Excellency is, I

²³³ MCE, 77.

²³⁴ MCE, 37.

believe, aware of my sincere feelings towards the present regime and the British [unclear] this country, which your excellency so highly and wisely represent.”²³⁵

By 1921 his loyalty had apparently shifted. He spoke at Zaghlulist meetings and organized mourning marches to commemorate the death of the protesters in Alexandria on the occasion of the Eid Feast.²³⁶ He was also very well connected in Egyptian political circles. He knew Zaghlul personally and claimed to have had members of the cabinet to his house on a number of occasions. In December of 1921, High Commissioner Edmund Allenby directly ordered him and seven other pro-Zaghlul notables to go to their country homes and refrain from all political activity, warning that they would be under police supervision. Fakhry Bey protested that he had no country estate, but did have rheumatism would be healthier staying at a hospital in Helwan. The High Commissioner’s office assented and he stayed in Helwan. Later Fakhry Bey requested permission to travel to Europe where the climate would improve his health, arguing that being of Circassian origin, he was not well suited to Egypt.²³⁷

Like the category of European, the Egyptian category did not comprise one monolithic identity. It was composed of a variety of class-based and religious identities and it was never entirely clear where the line of exclusion should be drawn. Both Fakhry Bey and a poor laborer from Upper Egypt were included in this category, but the laborer would probably have had more in common with a Maltese pipe-fitter than Fakhry Bey.

Signifiers

In normal circumstances, humans use a variety of signifiers to judge the social standing and category of others: clothing, speech, physical appearance, and body language, to name a few. Based on the testimony given to the Military Court, we can say that participants in the violence used primarily visual signifiers to make quick decisions about the people they encountered on the street. It seems the easiest way to tell if someone was European or Egyptian was by headgear: if they were wearing a hat, the

²³⁵ FO 141/668/8 “Gaafar Fakhry Bey”.

²³⁶ FO 407/191; FO 407/189, 221

²³⁷ FO 141/668/8

assumption was that they were European; if they were wearing a tarboosh, they were Egyptian. Thus we find a number of instances in the court records of people being identified as European because they were wearing hats. Raymond Brisset, French subject, aged 20, testified that on a small street which led to Sisters Street, he saw “crowds of natives” attacking and robbing “everyone wearing a hat who passed” in full view of the police.²³⁸ An Egyptian railway fitter named Aly Khalifa testified that at around 7:15 pm on 23 May he saw a “shot come from a motor a car” in which there “were some Greeks... and a Greek lady, and some people wearing khaki like the British soldiers.” When the court asked him how he knew that these people were Greeks he said “they were dressed in black and had on hats.”²³⁹

Many individuals tried to disguise their identity by exchanging hats for tarbooshes. George Rozatis, a Greek bartender, testified that he was walking down Sisters Street on the night of 22 May when someone shouted “Here is a Christian!” He was attacked by a crowd of 100-150, “beaten senseless,” and robbed of thirty Egyptian pounds and a ring, which comprised “all of [his] fortune after twelve years of work.” According to Rozatis, the person who identified him as Christian “must have been someone who knew me, as I was wearing a tarboosh.”²⁴⁰ A tarboosh-seller named Ibrahim Ismail Naggar apparently distinguished himself by providing tarbooshes with which Europeans in distress could disguise themselves. The aforementioned Syrian tobacco seller named Panayotti Sarhan was going to buy tobacco on Sisters Street at around 9:30 on 23 May when a “crowd of Arabs” came and tried to beat him. He ran away and entered a tarboosh shop. The owner, Ibrahim, told him to sit down and then took off his hat and gave him a tarboosh. Sarhan remained in the shop until 2 pm when things quieted down.²⁴¹

Naggar seems to have wanted the court to know about his good deeds. Sarhan testified that one of Naggar’s brothers asked him to go to court to give evidence.²⁴² A Palestinian Jew named Jacques E. Harcovitz also gave very similar evidence to Sarhan’s,

²³⁸ *MCE*, 36.

²³⁹ *MCE*, 169.

²⁴⁰ *MCE*, 115.

²⁴¹ *MCE*, 87.

²⁴² *MCE*, 87.

and a Syrian customs agent named Selim Fakhury, apparently a friend of Ibrahim, testified that when he went to Ibrahim's shop on the morning of Tuesday, 24 May, he saw several hats. When he asked about their provenance, Ibrahim told him that "certain people had come there for refuge and he had taken their hats and given them tarbooshes to go home in."²⁴³ Similarly, an Egyptian named Ahmed El Ghazawi of 22 Sisters Street testified that he saw Ibrahim taking in "Europeans" and giving them tarbooshes on Monday morning.²⁴⁴

Other clothing could also signify identity. The *galabeya*, an Egyptian robe-like garment, was a sign that someone was Egyptian. We have already seen an example of someone being identified an *effendi* because of his *galabeya*, but Europeans also tried to disguise their identity by wearing the garment. An Egyptian clerk named Ayub Effendi Essawi testified that on the evening of 22 May he was on Hammamil Street near a "mob" which was enraged because shots were being fired "from nearly all the houses in Sharia (street) Hammamil and Sharia Anastassi." Essawi entered No. 14 Hammamil Street seeking shelter where he found three "European women and one man" who pulled him inside. Soon, "another European came downstairs dressed in a gallabiah." When this man saw Essawi's tarboosh he said "Bara, Bara," meaning "outside," and pushed him out the door.²⁴⁵ This man was likely wearing the *galabeya* to conceal his European identity, but Essawi was not fooled. Interestingly, Essawi identifies the tarboosh as the item which clearly marked him as Egyptian.

Security forces tried to determine the category of individual by inspecting their identity papers. Often they did this seemingly because they had joined the groups of people searching for Greeks. An Italian subject named Leota Giuseppe testified that at 10:30 am on 23 May he was stopped by a party of "one policeman and fifty natives." According to Giuseppe, the policeman

Then asked me if I was a Greek or an Italian. I took out my pocketbook to show him my certificate that I was an Italian. The policeman took my pocketbook, and while he was looking at it, a native came up and hit him with a stick. The policeman then returned my

²⁴³ *MCE*, 88. Harcovitz appears to be an Ashkenazi name but the court records categorize him as a "Palestinian Jew." It is unclear if he was a recent settler to Palestine or if he had longer ties in the area.

²⁴⁴ *MCE*, 88.

²⁴⁵ *MCE*, 173.

pocketbook and I ran away, but was pursued by the crowd. One of them managed to strike me as I was running, but I made my escape.²⁴⁶

Here the police officer, while at the head of an angry crowd, is still trying to enforce a certain code. In this moment, the code was that Italians should be left alone and Greeks punished. The way to judge was by inspection of papers, although clearly the people in the crowd were not interested in this judgment.

In all of these cases we see that judgments about social category were made very quickly. Clothing was far from a perfect measure of category because clothes are so easily changed. Identity papers, while perhaps more reliable, were also not foolproof. Very often Alexandrians obtained protection from the consulate of a certain power because they had dealings with a company registered to that consul. A Greek-speaking Alexandrian might therefore be registered as a British subject. The (hypothetical) problem facing the participants in the violence was whether such a person was “Greek” enough to warrant violence. Of course members of such crowds are rarely interested in such nuance, and most often resolved the issue with the blow of a blunt object.

Conclusion

In the previous pages I have described a number of terrible incidents. The details of these cases upend the foundational concept of identity on which the narrative of Alexandria cosmopolitanism is built. A reconsideration of cosmopolitanism requires a reconsideration of identity itself: we must understand what it actually meant, how it was created, and how it was perceived. The incidents described in the testimony to the military court show us that rather than being a rigid construct created by place of birth, identity in Alexandria was vague, overlapping, and subject to error. One person might be perceived as “European” while legally being an Egyptian subject, while another might be perceived as “local” or “native” because of their professed religion or dress, as was the case with Ragab the Turk and his “band of natives” who were “all Turks.” Native and Local, European, and Egyptian were constantly shifting based both on circumstance and

²⁴⁶ *MCE*, 64

who was perceiving. Social signifiers played an important part in this, particularly in times of strife. To wear a hat was to be European, but it was easy enough to change identity by switching to a tarboosh. The tarboosh seller Ibrahim Ismail Naggar aided Europeans in need of escaping their European-ness, by providing a space to transform themselves through the simpler performance of appearance, by donning a tarboosh.

As I argued in the beginning of this chapter, the cosmopolitan narrative is constructed on two understandings of identity in Alexandria: one in which communal identity is subordinate to a universal identity, and one in which communal identity is privileged above all. The evidence in this chapter shows us that identity in Alexandria was more complicated than of these understandings. Alexandrians clearly did not subordinate their communal identity to some universal Alexandrian identity. The examples above show us a moment in which communal affiliation became temporarily crucial. On the other hand, people did not always privilege communal identity. The Barbara case presented at the beginning of the chapter shows us how people from different social categories interacted daily: gambling with, falling in love with, and stabbing one another. During the violence we find many instances of people helping one another across communal lines. Whether the Syrian pharmacist Youssef Bassbouss, who saved a man from being shot by telling a *ghaffir* that the man was Turkish and not Greek, or an Egyptian woman who stopped a crowd from burning the house of an Italian named Sergio Storelli, arguing that the occupants were “good people,” the bonds created through daily interaction were stronger than the prejudices of communal identity.²⁴⁷

The case of an Italian consulate employee named Chevalier Giuseppe Cosma neatly encompasses all of these points. Cosma was walking on Sharia’ Nubar Pasha at around 1:30 pm on 23 May when he encountered some Egyptians arguing. As he tried to distance himself from the commotion, “an Arab” came and slapped him. Cosma retreated towards a baker’s shop which “seemed to be guarded by three natives.” These men offered to take him home, but Cosma refused, saying that he lived nearby. The men insisted that he remove his hat and hide it, and Cosma continued on his way. Soon after he was approached by some *ghuffara*’ who asked him if he was Greek. Cosma told him

²⁴⁷ MCE, 80.

he was Syrian, but the *ghuffara*’ disputed this, saying “No. You are Greek.” They searched him and then told him to leave. Cosma walked on a bit until he came across another policeman, who he told that he was Italian. Somebody then struck him on the head with a rock, at which point “some of the natives” said “Leave him alone; he is an invalid.” He asked a soldier to accompany him home, but the soldier threatened him with his bayonet, so Cosma staggered home alone, his clothes soaked in blood.²⁴⁸

Cosma’s identity was vague and subject to negotiation. The hat he was wearing initially gave him away as European, but something about his appearance still marked him as European and therefore possibly Greek. He tried to negotiate by claiming he was Syrian, thinking that this was perhaps more acceptable than being Italian, but he failed. His perceptions of identity too, are marked by the vague associations. He is accosted first by an “Arab,” then potentially aided by “three natives;” a few moments later is accosted by “some natives.” Cosma existed in a city which was not exactly open and tolerant, but was also not populated by ethnic groups which lived segregated from one another. He was badly beaten by some Egyptians because of his perceived communal affiliation, but he was also offered help and safe passage by others. What precisely distinguished “Arab” from “native,” or sympathetic native from a threat was unclear, but these terms clearly held meaning. Although we may never know the exact definition of such terms, it is clear that every resident of Alexandria understood them in their own way.

Perhaps a better way of understanding life in the “cosmopolitan” cities of the early twentieth century Mediterranean and the many social identities that existed within them is to point out that coexistence of communities and classes always involved both cooperation and conflict. This was certainly the case before, during, and after the violence in Alexandria in 1921. The daily interactions which led to conflict and cooperation were informed by understandings and performances of identity far more complicated—and interesting—than those suggested by the discourse of cosmopolitanism.

²⁴⁸ *MCE*, 76.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have used a specific incident—the communal violence which occurred from 20-23 May, 1921—and the narratives constructed around it to re-examine Alexandrian society in the supposed golden age of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism is traditionally a word used to describe a society where citizens are governed by universally accepted norms, and national, ethnic, or communal affiliations have little bearing on daily life. In Middle Eastern historiography, the term is often used romantically to describe social mixing in cities such as Alexandria, Beirut, and Smyrna in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The vision of the cosmopolitan narrative in the Middle East is of societies where well-educated, multi-national, polyglot populations lived side-by-side and interacted on a daily basis. This narrative, often expressed in both literature and historical writing, rose to prominence in the mid-late twentieth century as a kind of antithesis to the nationalist anti-colonial discourse which dominated political and social life in Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s.

Both the cosmopolitan discourse and the anti-colonial discourse are problematic and exclusionary, but in this thesis I have focused more on a critique of cosmopolitanism, in part because it has become the dominant narrative of early twentieth century Alexandria, in academia, literature, and popular culture. The starting point for my discussion of cosmopolitan discourse is with Will Hanley's article "Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies," in which he argues that the use of cosmopolitanism in Middle East studies is marked by three problematic features: one, unabashed elitism; two, an expression of grief for a more tolerant past which may be largely imagined; and three, that it privileges labels over content. Ultimately he offers specificity as one solution for scholars, both in terms of using specific labels and discussing specific events. One of my aims in writing this thesis was to produce a study which examined a specific event in 1920s Alexandria and using that to move beyond the romantic generalizations of cosmopolitanism. In Chapter One I discuss the very specific political-social conditions which created the society which is often identified as cosmopolitan; in Chapter Two I examine the ways in which the various layers of the

colonial regime attempted to deal with and control the aftermath of the violence, sometime in conflict with one another; in Chapter Three I use court records to examine how residents of Alexandria interacted and addressed each other in a very particular moment, in an effort to move away from the vagueness associated with current cosmopolitan perspectives and to describe the contours of society in greater depth.

Another critique Hanley raises but does not explore in detail is that Middle Eastern cosmopolitanism existed, and perhaps could only exist, within the confines of oppressive social and political structures. A major contention of the present work is that Alexandria and Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were ruled by a “layered colonialism.” Using Jürgen Osterhammel’s definition of colonialism as a relationship in which “the fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by colonial rulers,” I identify two broad layers of colonialism at work in Alexandria.²⁴⁹ The top layer was, of course, the British administration of Egypt which after 1882 exercised direct control over the politics of Egypt in order to further the economic and geo-political goals of the British Empire. The British government occupied Egypt on the pretext of ending the 1882 riots in Alexandria and continued the occupation, exercising increasing control over the government of Egypt until 1914, when it officially declared Egypt a protectorate of the British Empire. During this period British nationals held influential positions in most governmental departments, and the most important decisions of state were made by the British High Commissioner. In Chapter Two, in which I present two different reports on the 1921 riots from two different colonial institutions, we saw how within the British administration there were often conflicted and competing interests.

The other main layer of colonialism in Alexandria was the foreign communities of the city, who exercised great control over social, political and economic life. Perhaps the most important institution of control for the foreign communities was the system of capitulations. Capitulations were series of legal agreements which granted the subjects of various European countries economic and legal privileges above those of local residents. By the late nineteenth century, the Mixed Courts system created a complex legal system

²⁴⁹ Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, 16.

in which the nationality of those involved in a specific case determined the court in which the case was tried, usually at a disadvantage to local subjects. European subjects also used the advantages granted them by capitulations to consolidate control over the economy of the city. By the early twentieth century Egyptians faced unfair competition from Europeans in virtually every sector of economic life.²⁵⁰ The majority of Alexandrians were local subjects, but it is no exaggeration to say that the majority of its elite citizens were foreign subjects. It is in this stratified social and economic system that writers situate Alexandria's cosmopolitan Golden Age.

It is important to note that the foreign communities of Alexandria were never under the control of the British administration and often created major problems for it.²⁵¹ We see this more clearly in Chapter Two, through the examination of the records of the military court of inquiry tasked with investigating the violence and a report from the Alexandria City Police on the episode. This chapter raises a number of questions and issues, both about the colonial apparatuses which the British Administration used to control Alexandria and Egypt, and Alexandrian society itself, but the overarching theme which I use to tie them together is narrative. Both reports sought to present narratives about the violence that would further the respective interests of their authors. In the military court's narrative formulation, Egyptians were child-like and brutal, non-British foreigners were helpless but well-meaning, and the British authorities were brave and just. For the court, the violence could be explained as primarily the result of nationalist agitation. For the court, the violence in Alexandria was just one incident in a series of violent confrontations between protesters and the police. The court report pointed specifically to the "Tanta Incident" of April 29, 1921 in which police opened fire on a crowd, killing protesters. The court argued—without providing evidence—that nationalist leaders had incited and financed the crowd at Tanta with the aim discrediting the government by provoking the police to fire. The court utilized both the power of the logical statement and modern legal language to make its justice claims, but by examining the procedures and testimony on which the report is based, I show that these formal

²⁵⁰ Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution*, 193; See Reimer, *Colonial Bridgehead*, 107–137 for a detailed exploration of how this system developed.

²⁵¹ Reimer, *Colonial Bridgehead*, 145.

rhetorical devices conceal a judicial project whose goals were more about winning political points than delivering justice.

One issue that the court focuses on is the conduct of Egyptian policemen and soldiers during the violence, and particularly claims that Egyptian forces had fired on Europeans rather than protect them. While seemingly a straightforward issue of military discipline, these reports were actually central to the political goals of the court. Immediately after the violence ended, the various European consulates in Alexandria made complaints to the British authorities, arguing for perpetual British military presence in Egypt and requesting the right to privately arm their consulates. The request for perpetual British presence in Egypt was in line with the administration's political goals, but it considered the latter request extremely distasteful, in part because it made the colonial administration look ineffectual. The argument made by the consuls and repeated by the military court was that Egyptian security forces could never be trusted to protect foreign residents and therefore the British needed to stay. This was the argument made before the invasion of 1882, and the French Consul made a direct reference to the similarities between 1882 and 1921 in his testimony, saying that "exactly the same thing that happened on the 11th June, 1882, has happened on the 22nd May, 1921."²⁵² Rather than being a peripheral issue, the protection of foreigners turns out to be central to the entire colonial project in Egypt. Indeed, point 3c of the 1922 British declaration of Egyptian independence stated that the protection of foreign interests and minorities in Egypt would be "absolutely reserved to the discretion of His Majesty's Government" until further notice.²⁵³

That one of the primary goals of the court was relieving the pressure from the foreign consuls is also clear from the procedures that the court followed in calling witnesses. It had each foreign consul submit a list of witnesses, most of whom subsequently testified. There was no mechanism for hearing the testimony of Egyptians, even though the court expressed an eagerness to do so. Eventually a delegation of Egyptian lawyers complained about this and recommended witnesses to the court, but

²⁵² *MCE*, 267.

²⁵³ Blaustein, Sigler, and Beede, *Independence Documents of the World*, 1:204.

their testimonies were generally much shorter than those of Europeans, at least in the surviving records. This disparity represents both the logic behind the court (appealing the foreign consuls) and the structure of Alexandrian society in the period. Egyptians were clearly second-class citizens with no immediately recognized institution available to represent them to the court. Most of the eighty-eight people killed during the violence were Egyptian yet the court charged with investigating the incident took little interest in how they died. The romanticized cosmopolitanism of Alexandria was situated amongst the elite, particularly the foreign elite; most of the Egyptians who eventually testified to the court did not have access to that society except in service roles.

The report of the Alexandria City Police tells a rather different story from the narrative presented by the military court. The differences between the two narratives can largely be explained by the differing bureaucratic interests of the two institutions, but the differences themselves are revealing of both Alexandrian society and the varying roles that colonial institutions played within that society. The report, written by the British leaders of the Alexandria City Police differs from the military court report in two important ways. First, it largely absolves Egyptian policemen of wrong-doing during the violence, arguing that Europeans were firing on them continuously, which the military court strenuously denied. The difference here can be attributed to political and bureaucratic necessity—the police commandant would obviously look incompetent if his underlings were found firing on innocent civilians without orders—but it also casts doubt on the truth of claims made by the military court. The court in fact used segments of the police report as evidence, but never grappled with the parts of the report which contradicted its narrative.

The second difference is in the way in which the two reports viewed Alexandrian society. The military court absolved Europeans generally of all wrong-doing, while blaming Egyptians from all segments of society for the violence. In particular, it blamed elite Egyptians such as Ghafar Fakhry Bey for fomenting and directing the violence. In the view of the court, lower-class Egyptians were incapable of action without inspiration, guidance, and often payment from their social betters. The police report, on the other hand, placed the blame for the violence largely on the lower-classes of the society, both

Egyptian and European. This view may have resulted from longer hands-on experience with Alexandrian society, or it may have been a narrative necessity to absolve the police of wrong-doing. Either way it quite strikingly reveals how the layered colonialism of Alexandria was a deeply stratified system.

A third narrative of the violence was that of Egyptian nationalists, most prominently Sa'ad Zaghlul. This narrative was put forth repeatedly in Egyptian newspapers following the violence, but was most succinctly expressed in Zaghlul's reaction to publication of the military court report. Here he expressed outrage at the fact that Egyptian voices were essentially silenced in front of the court and blamed the police and government for killing so many people. Finally, he stated that there was no xenophobia present in Egypt, claiming that reports of xenophobia were slander designed to defame the Egyptian people. Here we see how crucial the protection of foreign subjects in Egypt and most particularly Alexandria was to the whole enterprise of colonialism in Egypt. Together these narratives help complicate the vagueness of the cosmopolitan discourse and provide the more nuanced vision of societal structures during this period.

One underlying theme in all of these narratives is the issue of identity and its role in Alexandria society. Chapter Three is the main site of my discussion of identity, though Chapter Two also speaks to the issue of identity in a less direct, but also important way. Identities are constructed in large part by the stories that people tell about themselves and others, namely through narrative. A person might consider themselves Greek in Alexandria because of the story of their parents moving from Greece and settling in Alexandria, for example. When a large number of people tell themselves the same story, it becomes a crucial component of a significant social identity, as with the Greeks in Alexandria. On the other hand, people also construct the identity of others using narrative. When an Alexandrian saw a person wearing a hat, a quick narrative may have run through their heads: "this person is foreign because only foreigners wear hats; he is probably Greek because most of the foreigners around here are Greeks." This process creates a story of a place and, within that, the place creates a space or identity for each person.

The narratives of the military court and Alexandria City Police can be viewed as constructions of identities, both of self and others. The military court constructed an identity of self (in this case British) as noble, just, and strong. This is personified by Ingram Bey, the Assistant Commandant whose exploits are central to the report. It also constructed identities of the inhabitants of Alexandria: the Europeans were noble, rational, yet terrified of the wild Egyptians; the Egyptians were crude, irrational, and violent. The Alexandria City Police report constructed different identities for both self and other. The report presented the police—Egyptian and foreign—as fair, brave, and under great duress. The others, namely low class Egyptians and Europeans, are constructed as troublesome, violent, and irrational. Both reports are attempts at constructing specific understandings of the various social identities in Alexandria.

In Chapter Three, I use the contemporary testimonies presented in the published records of the military court of inquiry to examine contemporary Alexandrian understandings of identity. My findings directly challenge the basis of the cosmopolitan narrative. As Khaled Fahmy points out, Alexandrian cosmopolitanism is predicated on a paradoxical understanding of identity: “first, that Alexandria was an open, tolerant city where different ethnic groups were allowed to flourish and to coexist peacefully; and, secondly, that these ethnic groups were separate from each other, with little or no interaction between them.”²⁵⁴ The cosmopolitan canon is full of works which emphasize both aspects of this paradox, but leave little room in between them. In the testimony to the court which contains many stories of what Alexandrians actually experienced between 20 and 23 May 1921, we find much more ambiguity. Identity was fluid—up to a point—and people utilized multiple identities simultaneously.

The most widely recognized identity dichotomies were foreign and local, Egyptian and European, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim, but within these categories there were sub-categories and confusions. The city was in fact full of people who did not neatly fit into any of these categories. The Syrian pharmacist Youssef Bassbouss provides a good example of this: as he tended his shop and attempted to protect his neighbors from a

²⁵⁴ Fahmy, “For Cavafy, with Love and Squalor: Some Critical Notes on the History and Historiography of Modern Alexandria,” 272.

crowd seeking Europeans he was clearly never identified as “European,” but he also felt enough warmth towards his European neighbors to defend them. Another Syrian, Panayotti Sarhan, once felt threatened enough by an anti-European crowd that he sought refuge in a tarboosh shop.

Within the category of “European,” the distinction between Greek and non-Greek was crucial. During the events of May 1921, crowds chanted against Greeks and often began their questioning of European-looking people by asking if they were Greek. If they were judged to be Greek, violence usually followed. The oft-stated justification for this was the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1921), which in Alexandria was often painted as a struggle between Christians and Muslims. Muslim residents were told that Christians were massacring Muslims in the war, while the Greek community in Alexandria raised money for the Greek war effort.²⁵⁵ The British government’s support for the Greeks in the war created a link between anti-Greek sentiment and the anti-colonial movement. The immediate rationale of the war may have masked deeper resentments within Alexandrian society: Greeks comprised the largest foreign community in Alexandria and often worked as laborers, craftsmen, and shopkeepers, roles which brought them into direct competition with numerous Egyptian Alexandrians. While the British were the colonial occupiers of Egypt, it was Greeks who likely personified foreign exploitation for many Egyptian Alexandrians.

Dress was an important marker of identity. People wearing hats and pants were immediately identified as European, while *galabiyas* and tarbooshes signified Egyptian-ness. The Maltese gambling-shop proprietor Ernesto Barbara was identified as European because of his trousers. There were numerous instances of Europeans or people dressed in the European style begging tarboosh shop owners to give them a tarboosh so that they might escape a crowd attacking people with hats. Changing dress was one important way that people attempted to disguise their identities in order to avoid violence.

Seemingly contradictory identities were not necessarily mutually exclusive: An elite Egyptian with deep connections to Europe and European culture may have held both

²⁵⁵ *The Sphinx*, No. 455, February 5, 1921, 402.

identities simultaneously, dressing as a European but feeling a strong connection to Egyptian nationalism. Conflict and cooperation between different social categories was a fact of daily life in Alexandria, and the factors which led to either conflict or cooperation were often specific and personal. The case of Chevalier Guissepe Cosma, the Italian Consulate Employee who first told would-be assailants that he was Syrian, was beaten after being mis-identified as Greek, and then was helped home by other Egyptians, shows how vague identity could be, and also how it did not always determine the outcome of an encounter. The cosmopolitan understanding of Alexandria and identity relies on generalization and categorization: either people cooperated across communal lines, or they did not. When we examine the particulars we find that the reality was far more complex.

In the major themes of this work, cosmopolitanism, colonialism and identity, I follow Will Hanley's criticism of the cosmopolitan discourse in which he says that cosmopolitanism is vague and does not focus enough on the details of history. We see this in how the cosmopolitan discourse ignores the colonial conditions which made Alexandrian society possible, and we see it in how cosmopolitan understandings of identity fail to contend with the understandings and performances of identity found in the historical records.

Hanley, in his detailed critique of the discourse of cosmopolitanism, still finds something worth saving. He argues that by being very specific about terminology and history and recognizing "multiple cosmopolitanisms," we can resurrect the term as a useful tool of analysis in Alexandria. As he says, "in order to preserve a dream of social mixing, it is important to be precise about its precedents, even if precision makes the past appear less rosy and its cosmopolitanism less widespread."²⁵⁶ His doctoral dissertation and its presentation of a "vulgar cosmopolitanism" represent one attempt at practicing

²⁵⁶ Hanley, "Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies," 1360.

this new sort of cosmopolitan history. There is much to applaud in Hanley's work, but ultimately the reapplication of cosmopolitanism is flawed. In wanting to preserve the dream of social mixing he looks to a past in Alexandria which was dependent on exploitative power structures. For this reason the Alexandrian example should be taken more as a warning than as a positive example and cosmopolitanism, with its positive associations, should not be used as a tool of analysis by historians.

One reason the discourse of cosmopolitanism is so prevalent is that it imagines a past which was happier than the present. This is obviously problematic, for the reasons outlined above, but it does speak to a real sense of loss. There were thousands of foreigners living in Alexandria who were more or less forcibly evicted in the 1950s and 1960s. Many people benefitted greatly from interactions with people from other cultures and have fond memories of this period. That this society was based on exploitative power structures does not diminish or invalidate the importance of these personal experiences.

This raises a question: if the expulsion of the foreigners of Alexandria does not represent the death of cosmopolitanism, does it represent the loss of something else? One way of dealing with this question focuses on identity. In this period nationalist identities became more powerful than all others when dealing with people of different backgrounds. "Egyptian" became something more easily defined than "native" and specific nationalities became more important than a broad "foreign" or "European" category. Identity remained complex and fluid, but national identity with its inherent exclusion of all others became central. The expulsion of the foreigners of Alexandria can therefore be seen as the end of a specific time and place where social identities were more complicated than the simplistic understanding which the nationalist discourse depends on. This is one way of looking at this problem; clearly others are needed.

This thesis has been an attempt to provide a specific and detailed history of a moment in Alexandria which goes beyond cosmopolitanism as a tool of analysis. More work is needed both on the violence which is the focus of this work and the time period generally. In order to provide a more complete look at the violence, we need to explore the Egyptian National Archives, which would likely have more detailed government information in Arabic, which is important if we are to be specific about terminology and

language than the British Archives. The consular records of other foreign communities in Alexandria are of import and would give us important and specific perspectives which we do not presently have. The Greek and Italian records would be particularly illuminating. The Mixed Court records have also not been thoroughly utilized for urban history. One could also do a detailed examination of the multi-lingual press in Alexandria to see how different communities publicly narrated the events. In the course of my research I looked at the *Egyptian Gazette*, an important English language newspaper and found a subtly different narrative of events than the one presented by the British administration. This research did not appear in this work because of space and time constraints.

Moving beyond the violence of 1921, one can imagine interesting work on a variety of topics using the aforementioned sources. A comprehensive urban history of Alexandria from below has not yet been written. In the British archives I came across a number of documents dealing with the policing of prostitution and morality, and the consular and Mixed Courts records likely contain fascinating material on this subject. Using court records and the records in the Egyptian archive, one could write a history of the Alexandrian City Police and their interactions and role in the city. These are but a few ideas; clearly more work needs to be done if we are to move beyond the cosmopolitan discourse and arrive at more clear-eyed and accurate histories.

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