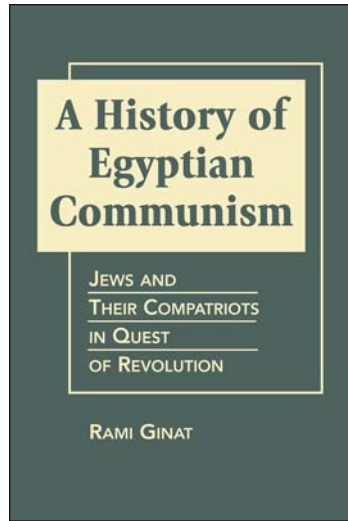


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**A History of
Egyptian Communism:
Jews and Their Compatriots
in Quest of Revolution**

Rami Ginat

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1

Introduction

This book provides a revised narrative of the history of Egyptian communism, with special reference to the role of Egyptian Jews in both its development and its impact on Egypt and the wider Middle East. The history of Egypt's Jewish population has of course been the subject of several studies.¹ But those dealing with the first half of the twentieth century, the period under discussion here, with very few exceptions² refer only marginally to the substantial role played by Egyptian Jews in the emergence and development of communism in Egypt. Likewise, contemporary Middle Eastern scholars have given considerable attention to the subject of communism and socialism in the Arab Middle East in general, and in Egypt in particular, but with little attention to the role of Jews in the development of the movements.

Generally speaking, the literature on communism and socialism in the Arab Middle East can be divided into four main categories. The first category includes scholarly works written shortly after the events that they address.³ The second includes research offering a deeper historical perspective. These studies rely to a large extent on Western archival material, both British and US, while also drawing considerably on the source material found in the private archives of key communist figures. The authors conducted interviews with prominent communist activists connected to the heterogeneous Arab communist camp and made use of Arabic literature on the subject.⁴ The third category of literature includes books in Arabic written by former communist activists. This literature enables us to broaden our knowledge of the ideological roots and origins of the communist movements in Egypt; their patterns of action; their contribution to social and political developments in Egypt; their processes of integration, as well

as internal quarrels and splits; and the complex challenges and issues that they had to face from their early days until recent years.⁵ The fourth category of literature includes biographies, memoirs, and autobiographies written by or about former Jewish communist activists who went into exile.⁶ In the present study, I endeavor to complete the picture by systematically describing and analyzing the central stages in the history of the communist movements in Egypt.

Scope and Methods

I begin the story in the late 1910s—the initial phase of organized communism—and conclude in the early 1950s, a period that marked the decisive decline of the influential position of Jews in Egyptian communism. The deportation of Henri Curiel, Hillel Schwartz, and Marcel Israel, as well as many other prominent and rank-and-file Jewish communist activists in the early 1950s, marked a major break in the history of Egyptian communism. Nevertheless, Jews—in particular Henri Curiel and his inner circle—continued to be actively involved in Egyptian communism in the pre- and postrevolution eras. Indeed, organized communism continued to exist after the July 1952 Revolution, despite the new regime's attempts to root it out.

My investigation proceeds in four stages. First, I present the major developments chronologically to pinpoint the beginning and end of each phase in the history of Egyptian communism. Then, I turn to the initiators of the communist movements in Egypt, seeking to discern their motives for involvement and tracing the factors responsible for the failure of each phase of organized communism. The achievements, successes, and failures of participants in the communist movements are discussed systematically and thoroughly. In the third stage, I closely review the general social and political state of affairs that prevailed in Egypt during each historical phase of organized communism, assessing the implications of the sociopolitical context for the development of communism and communist activities. This discussion is extended, as well, to the interrelations between communist and noncommunist political groups in Egypt in an exploration of the significance and contribution of communists to the advancement of the political and social national goals that were of the utmost importance: the struggle for liberation and the introduction of a socialist platform.

I do not include in the study the history of the Egyptian working class or the labor movement, which are satisfactorily dealt with in excellent studies by Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, Elias Goldberg, Taha Sa'd

‘Uthman, and others.⁷ Relying on these works and other sources, I make references to workers and labor affairs only within the broader context of the communist movements.

A series of questions inform the analysis throughout. What were the motives behind the Egyptian Jews’ decisions to embrace communist ideas and to play a leading role in organizing communist groups? What were the nature and quality of the interrelations between the communist and the nationalist groups in Egypt? Did Jewish communists see themselves first and foremost as committed to the internationalist revolutionary ideas derived from Marxist-Leninist philosophy, or were they mainly motivated by an Egyptian-nationalist revolutionary urge: the advancement of nationalist ideas (such as Egypt’s complete liberation from foreign influence and rule) and the resolution of the enormous problems of the socially cloven and polarized Egyptian society? Why did Jews play such a central role in the high tide of organized communism of the 1940s? What were the main factors that made this development possible? In my attempt to answer these questions, I pay careful attention to the mutual feedback between political and social history and the history of ideas. The emergence of communism and communist activity in Egypt was a result of both international and national political, social, and intellectual developments. Each phase of organized communism had its own character. The complex issue of ideology vs. realpolitik is thoroughly examined, and I consider whether Egyptian communism was first built on a cohesive ideology and then translated into political and social action, or vice versa. In this context, I analyze the content and the evolutionary dynamic of communist ideas throughout the period under investigation.

My analysis of the splits and rivalries within the various communist organizations, as well as the rivalries between them, relies heavily on the sociological study of “organizational dynamics.”⁸ According to that approach, each organization should be closely scrutinized in terms of the role of individuals, interpersonal relations and internal conflicts, challenging behaviors, methods of communication, and group dynamics, as well as leadership and team issues interfering with individual productivity and work goals. Gareth Morgan went further, stating that conflict will always be present in organizations: “Conflict may be personal, interpersonal, or between rival groups or coalitions. It may be built into organizational structures, roles, attitudes, and stereotypes or arise over a scarcity of resources. It may be explicit or covert. Whatever the reason, and whatever the form it takes, its source rests in some perceived or real divergence of interests.”⁹

One of my underlying assumptions is that the statements made by communist theoreticians were formulated in response to the current so-

ciopolitical context, yet at the same time also had a part in shaping that context. Pursuing the logic of this concatenation, I draw on the insights offered by John Higham, Quentin Skinner, and Rush Welter. These help to clarify my combined application of “internal” and “external” frameworks to the intellectual’s emplacement, borrowed from the “history of ideas.” I also investigate the nature of the intellectual activities of Jewish communists in Egypt, examining whether their intellectual activities fall in line with the paradigm of “dissident intellectual,” as suggested by J. P. Nettl and Edgar Morin.

Another line of inquiry involves what might be another particularity of Jewish communists in Egypt. It seemed that, in their identity search as part of a tiny minority group, many of these Jews embraced the most radical nationalist view that prevailed at the time—an extreme mode of the secular version of Egyptian territorial nationalism. In the immediate context in which they operated, they deemed themselves first and foremost to be Egyptian nationalists, but in their long-term visions, their commitment to internationalism was unmistakable. In this regard, they fall into the paradigm of Marxist theories, later modified by Emile Durkheim’s non-Marxist sociological approach, explaining the motivation behind the actions of minority groups within a movement for national liberation.

Moreover, the implications of the minority’s involvement for the society as a whole are important. Durkheim’s conception hinges on a modernization approach that is in line with Clifford Geertz’s analysis.¹⁰ Early versions of modernization approaches, as for example formulated by Geertz, suggest that the establishment of new (collective) identities would eventually create new states, which in turn would overcome premodern identities. Following that line of thought, my analysis suggests that Jewish communists in Egypt, as a minority group, may fit in with Richard Martin’s argument that “minorities often play a role in the social change of the larger society. For instance, they may serve as an irritant that provokes social change, and they may provoke or may be provoked into clashes with the dominant culture, causing social dissatisfaction and unrest.”¹¹

Drawing on the insights offered by the recently emerging research trends in transnational history, I aim to avoid the essentializing views of a history written from a national(ist) perspective. Rather, I wish to examine the relationship that exists between nation and those factors that go beyond the nation.¹² To quote Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, “transnational history seeks to understand ideas, things, people, and practices which have crossed national boundaries.”¹³ In line with the transnational perspective, for purposes of this study I consider anyone who was of Jewish origin to

be Jewish, and anyone who lived in Egypt and regarded it as his/her homeland to be Egyptian.

In this context, the cosmopolitan nature of large sections of Egyptian society during the period under review should be recalled. Indeed, many Egyptian communists were quintessential cosmopolitans. Alongside Jews in the Egyptian communist movements there were Egyptian Muslims, Armenians, Greeks, the occasional Briton and Russian, and others, as well as the offspring of “mixed marriages.” Egyptian Jews were sophisticated and mobile. Many of them attended the French lycées and other foreign schools and moved in international circles. Particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jews were geographically mobile, and thousands of them looked to Egypt as a land of opportunity (e.g., Joseph Rosenthal, the father of Egyptian communism). Unlike the “homegrown” Karaite and Mizrahi/Sephardic Jews, who had lived for centuries in Egypt, the first Jewish communists migrated to Egypt from Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It should also be mentioned that some Jewish communist activists were Ottoman subjects who had settled in Egypt prior to World War I. The nationality laws (including that of 1929) granted Egyptian citizenship to them and their children. Some were foreign nationals who were permanent residents (*mutamassirun*) protected by the capitulation arrangements; when the capitulation privileges were abolished, following the Montreux Convention in 1937, they either claimed Egyptian nationality or remained European nationals. Some were emigrants who adhered to internationalist ideas and found in Egypt under the British a temporary place of refuge. Individual cases are discussed throughout the book.¹⁴

The story of Egyptian communism is a story of several communist movements. Ever since its appearance in the 1910s, Egyptian communism has been characterized by the presence of rival organizations vying for hegemony over the communist camp; one united communist movement remained solidly within the bounds of wishful thinking. The phrase “Egyptian communist movement” has often been used in the literature in reference to organized communism (i.e., one movement comprising various rival organizations), but I employ that phrase only in citations from and references to that literature.

With regard to the literature more broadly, this study is based on a large variety of sources in Arabic, English, French, Hebrew, Russian, and Yiddish. I have drawn on primary sources, studied in the Arabic original, including books, essays, and articles by former communist activists and Arab intellectuals, in order to clarify the internal discourse on ideological concerns in each phase of Egyptian communism. For the description and

analysis of the evolution of organized communism and the role and place of Jews in it—from the inarticulate and inconsistent ideology of the early days to the elaborate and more systematic ideology and policy practice of the 1940s and 1950s—much of the source material is gleaned from archives in Amsterdam (the International Institute of Social History), Egypt, Israel, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Interviews with former communist and noncommunist Egyptian Jews, as well as with Egyptian former left-wingers, constitute an additional layer of source material.

Structure of the Book

The book is divided into fourteen chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 examines the gradual development of socialist thought in Egypt prior to the formation of formal socialist organizations. Its focus is on the conceptual ideas developed by the pioneers of socialism in Egypt during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Chapters 3 through 10 examine chronologically the historical phases in the history of the communist movements from the early days in the 1910s to the early 1950s. Throughout this period, Jews and their Egyptian compatriots worked shoulder to shoulder in the various factions to advance their revolutionary platform. The failures and achievements of each historical phase are discussed in depth. More specifically, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 cover the late 1910s and early 1920s, shedding new light on the origins of organized communism and its working relations with the Comintern in 1920 and 1921. Special emphasis is placed on the unique role played by Joseph Rosenthal and his inner circle in the formation of the Alexandrian communist faction. (Chapter 4 offers a solution to one of the most mysterious and hitherto unresolved questions related to the early history of the Egyptian Communist Party: was the Comintern behind Rosenthal's expulsion from the party?) Chapters 6 and 7 cover the period from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, a period that witnessed a growing involvement of the Comintern in Egypt and the Middle East. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 discuss the new phase in the development of Egyptian communism that set in after the disengagement from the Comintern. That phase was characterized by the appearance of homemade organized communism—less internationalist in its essence and more nationalist in its main features.

Chapters 11, 12, and 13 present thematic analyses of the communist stand on the national question with special reference to Sudan; views on the issue of Palestine and attitudes toward Zionism; and theoretical and practi-

cal views on social and economic ideological concerns. These chapters show that the communist movements swam against the national current on key issues—and paid a heavy price for it—although their positions were later adopted in part by Egyptian policymakers. Chapter 14 is a brief conclusion.

In sum, my intention in the chapters that follow is to shed new light on some of the heretofore obscure aspects related to the history of Egyptian communism and, by highlighting the role of Jewish communists, to present a more comprehensive account.

Notes

1. See for instance, Goitein, *Jews and Arabs*; Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*; Landau, *Jews in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*; Husni, *Al-Yahud fi Misr*; Kramer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt*; al-Ghar, *Yahud Misr*; Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt*; Shamir, *The Jews of Egypt*; Beinín, *The Dispersion*; Meital, *Jewish Sites*; Kimchi, *Zionism*.

2. Both Joel Beinín and Muhammad Abu al-Ghar dedicate a chapter to Jewish communists in their books (see note 1). Irmgard Schrand's book, *Jews in Egypt: Communists and Citizens*, is perhaps by far the most profound research on Jewish Egyptian communists. Schrand analyzes the motives and factors behind the involvement of Jews in the communist movements, particularly since the late 1930s. The study provides a critical account of the discourse within Egypt on the role played by Egyptian Jews in the communist movements in the period 1937–1964, while it does not aim at a systematic study of the history of the communist movements.

3. See, for instance, Laqueur, *Communism and Nationalism*; Agwani, *Communism in the Arab East*.

4. See, for instance, Botman, *The Rise*; Bashear, *Communism in the Arab East*; Mursi, *Al-'Alaqa*; see also Mursi, *Tatawwur*; Beinín, *Was the Red Flag*; Beinín, *The Dispersion*; Amitay, *Egypt-Israel*; Beinín and Lockman, *Workers*. In recent years, Russian scholars have published some works on communism in the Arab East. See for instance, Kosach, *Krasnyy Flag*; Kosach, "Pervye Kommunisty Yegipta"; Stanislavovich, *Evoliutsiia Politiki SSSR*.

5. Rif'at al-Sa'id may be regarded as the most prominent and productive communist writer (see the bibliography), producing extensive studies on the Egyptian Left and the communist movements in Egypt throughout the twentieth century. His works are largely based on primary communist sources, interviews with many former communist activists (Jews included), official Egyptian documents, British archival material, a wide range of communist and noncommunist publications, and secondary sources in several languages. Ra'uf 'Abbas's book, *Awraq Henri Curiel* (1988), was the Arabic edition of Curiel's unpublished autobiography (1978) and other important documents written by Curiel, with a long introduction by 'Abbas. His analysis and interpretation of Curiel's papers provoked a stormy debate, most of which appeared on the pages of the venerable cultural journal *al-Hilal* (1988). It also led to the publication of Ibrahim Fathi's book, *Henri Curiel didda al-Haraka al-Shuyu'iyya al-'Arabiyya: al-qadiyya al-filastiniyya* (Henri Curiel against the Arab communist movement: the Palestinian question). Shortly after the

publication of Fathi's book, Mustafa Tiba published his *Al-Haraka al-Shuyu'iyya al-Misriyya 1945–1965*, recollections of the communist movement. Among the books belonging to the third group, one should also mention Yusuf al-Jindi's *Masirat Hayati* (his memoirs) and his other books; Taha Sa'd 'Uthman, *Wahdat al-Haraka al-'Ummaliyya fi Misr wa-al-'Alam* (four volumes of recollections and documents of the history of the Egyptian labor movement with some references to communism); Sharif Hatata's *Al-Nawafidhu al-maftuha* (his memoirs) and his other books; Yusuf Darwish's unpublished recollections; Ahmad Sadiq Sa'd's books and articles; as well as many other books that are cited in this study.

6. See, for instance, Henri Curiel's unpublished *Pages autobiographiques: Une contribution à l'histoire de la naissance du Parti Communiste Égyptien de 1940 à 1950*; and Curiel, *Min Ajil Salam 'Adil fi al-Sharq al-Awsat*, a collection of documents on his views regarding the Palestine question and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Gilles Perrault's *A Man Apart* tells in extraordinary detail the story of Curiel's life and work, including many references to the Egyptian communist movements. See also, Marsil Shirizi (Marcel Israel), *Awraq Munadil Itali fi Misr*; and Didar Fawzi-Rossano's recollections, *Rasa'il ila' Haba'ibi—Misr*.

7. Goldberg, *Tinker, Tailor, and Textile Worker*; Beinín and Lockman, *Workers*; 'Uthman, *Wahdat al-Haraka* (see his other works in the bibliography).

8. See, for instance, "Interests, Conflict and Power: Organizations as Political Systems," in Morgan, *Images*, pp. 149–206.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

10. On Durkheim's theory, see, for instance, Driedger, *The Ethnic Factor*, pp. 17–22. On Geertz's analysis, see Geertz, "The Integrative Revolution," pp. 255–310. A well-presented analysis of the approaches of Marx, Durkheim, and Geertz in the context of minorities in the Middle East may be found in Ben-Dor, "Minorities in the Middle-East," pp. 1–30.

11. Martin, "From *Dhimmis* to Minorities," p. 14.

12. See, for instance, Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation*.

13. Curthoys and Lake, *Connected Worlds*, p. 5. "Lives Beyond Borders: Toward a Social History of Cosmopolitans and Globalization, 1880–1960" was the topic of a conference held in February 2010 at the University of Heidelberg. See <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=3087>.

14. On the legal status of the various Jewish groups living in Egypt, see Shamir, "The Evolution of the Egyptian Nationality Laws and Their Application to the Jews in the Monarchy Period," in Shamir, *The Jews of Egypt*, pp. 33–67.