

JOSEPH JOHN VISCOMI, *Migration at the End of Empire: Time and the Politics of Departure between Italy and Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024). Pp. x + 318. \$120.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781009473392.

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Joseph John Viscomi's rich and stimulating monograph, *Migration at the End of Empire*, is the result of extensive research conducted largely between 2009 and 2016. Divided into five chapters along with an introduction and an epilogue, the book richly accomplishes two related goals: first, it presents a history of the "Italians of Egypt" from 1861 to the 1960s with an emphasis on the period during and after World War II; second, it uses this history as a case study to reflect upon the nature of temporality and its relation to historical experience and agency. In the author's own words, the book "puts a microhistorical lens to the departure of 40,000 Italians from Egypt after the Second World War as a starting point to understand how historical temporalities and political membership are connected" (3).

These two categories—"historical temporality" and "political membership"—are presented clearly in the introduction. Viscomi employs "political membership" as an overarching term which encompasses the various regimes of belonging experienced by the Italiani d'Egitto: community, collectivity, colony, *communauté*, *al-galliya*, *al-italiyya* (6). Inspired by the work of Ulbe Bosma, Gijs Kessler, and Leo Lucassen, this perspective is essential for understanding the multifaceted lived experience of the Italians present in Egyptian territory over several centuries. By "historical temporalities" the author intends the various temporal strata underlying historical processes, each with its own character and rhythms. Intersecting and mutually influential, these temporalities are experienced, interpreted, and remembered both by individuals and by communities.

In basing his interpretation upon an idea of temporality thus conceived, the author is building upon the theoretical framework elaborated by Reinhart Koselleck, especially the latter's notions "space of experience" (*erfahrungsraum*) and "horizon of expectations" (*erwartungshorizont*).¹ Viscomi fruitfully answers Koselleck's call to conceive of history as situated at "the tension between experience and expectation,"² and his telling of the story of the Italians of Egypt is permeated by constant attention to, on the one hand, what the Italians had experienced and committed to memory (and through which they interpreted their present) and, on the other hand, their expectations for the future (often shaped by precisely those past experiences).

In chapter 1, the author addresses an issue familiar to scholars working on the Mediterranean world: the privileges accorded to European subjects (and to protégés of European consulates) in the Ottoman Empire thanks to the capitulations (medieval-era concessions which evolved into bilateral treaties). Among the numerous privileges enjoyed by the Italians and other Europeans living in Egypt was exemption from local jurisdiction (extraterritoriality). Viscomi, however, does not consider the phenomenon of extraterritoriality merely as an aspect of legal pluralism (with implications regarding the relationship between Italians and local institutions) but also as "a stage for informal Empire" which permitted an alternative form of imperial expansion (36).

When Italy entered World War II in 1940, the British and Egyptian authorities began to view the Italians of Egypt as a threat. In chapter 2, Viscomi analyzes the experience of the over 5,000 Italians (mostly men of working age) who were interned in prisoner camps in Egypt in this period. Working with a rich collection of "personal letters, diaries, sketches, and fragmented reports written by diplomats and aid workers" (91), Viscomi reconstructs the harsh realities of life experienced by the men imprisoned at the main camp in Fayed, along the Suez Canal. He shows how isolation, separation from the rest of the community, and limited contact with the outside world all combined to make the "temporal trajectories" of the Italians of Egypt more uncertain and precarious (129). The experience of internment profoundly redefined their sense of identity (both individual and collective) and had lasting changes upon their perceptions of belonging in the period during and immediately following the war.

The increasingly uncertain situation of the Italians of Egypt became ever more intolerable in the post-war years, analyzed in chapter 3. In the decade between 1943 (fall of Fascism in Italy) and 1952 (creation of the Egyptian republic) Italians began more and more to

consider departing from Egypt for good. Viscomi shows how the prior experience of internment had not only divided many Italian families but had also damaged the social and economic networks of the Italian community. Many of their companies and institutions were compelled to close; their bank accounts were frozen; and many Italian workers went unemployed as local businesses declined to hire them. When tensions then arose with the Egyptian authorities—kindled by rumors of mass expulsion and modifications to the residence laws—many Italians came to see migration as the only option available to them.

Although the first waves of repatriation had begun immediately after World War II, migration to Italy became ever more frequent in 1952–53 and reached a peak during the Suez Crisis in 1956. In chapter 4 Viscomi discusses how Italy was not adequately prepared to welcome these citizens returning from Egypt: the government offered limited support and even feared that, if it created a community of “refugees,” the political and economic equilibrium of the post-war era might be destabilized. Analyzing the return of the Italians of Egypt in the light of conflicting temporalities, Viscomi shows how their expectations of being reintegrated—which had strong roots in their sentimental and political ties to an earlier idea of Italy—collided with a harsh present in which resources and political support were all too lacking.

The final chapter, entitled “‘Leave Us Our Memories!': Nostalgia, Community, and the Politics of Departure,” contains the most explicit and extensive discussion of how memory and nostalgia shaped the identity of the Italians of Egypt and their experience of departure from Egypt and arrival in Italy. Viscomi’s analysis is based upon eighty-five interviews he conducted in numerous Italian cities with repatriates who had undergone the return to Italy and integration in a profoundly changed homeland. Nostalgia, which Viscomi interprets as “an object and a process in historical time” (224), emerges as a key factor for understanding the connections between past and present, between individual and collective memory. Through the responses of the interviewees the chapter addresses crucial questions such as: How did the Italians of Egypt experience their return? To what extent had Fascism influenced their identity? In what way did their colonial past continue to shape the lives of the Italians returned from Egypt?

The publication of *Migration at the End of Empire* comes at a particularly fertile moment for research on the Italians of Egypt. Viscomi’s monograph is the latest of a series of works which have renewed our understanding of this community. Viscomi’s contribution

stands out, however, for two reasons: for its rich attention to a period that has been less explored (the post-war years and the experience of repatriation) and for its analytical framework inspired by the conception of time as formulated by Reinhart Koselleck.

In his introduction Viscomi explains that he has adopted Koselleck's temporal perspective with the explicit goal of dismantling numerous myths of rupture that have characterized historical narratives of the Mediterranean area. One particular myth regards the so-called "long 1950s" (23), which have often been interpreted as a decisive break, determined by the rise of Arabic nationalism and the end of utopian cosmopolitanism. But Viscomi brings to light the numerous elements of continuity and change—rather than radical rupture—at work in this period. It is no surprise, then, that the Suez Crisis of 1956 (often considered a disastrous event for the Italians of Egypt) comes precisely at the middle of Viscomi's own narrative. Similarly, the end of the extraterritorial privileges associated with the capitulations in 1937 acquires a new light in Viscomi's analysis and accordingly occupies a prominent place at the beginning of the volume. Although the Italians of Egypt after 1937 were effectively immigrants in a foreign country—another traditional "rupture"—Viscomi demonstrates how their identity in many ways remained tied to their former status. This perspective seems particularly convincing to my mind, because it acknowledges the central role played by the capitulatory privileges in the experience of the Italians of Egypt over the many years of their presence there—an element which has long been known to scholars but less explored in terms of its effects, whether practical or identitarian. In short, by adopting temporality as a category of analysis Viscomi is able to move beyond the narrative of events and write a history of how the Italians of Egypt experienced those events internally, both at the individual and collective level.

Although readers not familiar with the work of Koselleck may find the book's theoretical apparatus challenging at first, Viscomi's *Migration at the End of Empire* is essential reading for anyone interested in understanding the history of the Italians of Egypt. More generally, too, it offers rich materials for reflecting upon the dynamics of identity and political belonging in transnational contexts or upon the relationship between history and memory.

NOTES

¹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (tr. Keith Tribe), 2004, 255ff.; cf. Viscomi, 14–15.

² Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 262.