

# Coming to Terms with Forced Migration

This study explores the attitudes of those who were refugees in the past towards refugees in the present. Are these people more sympathetic or hostile to subsequent waves of migrants? This article will guide you through this question, briefly overviewing the historical context, the conceptual and the methodological tools, and the main findings of this research.

In 2015, during Europe's migration crisis, the Greek island of Lesbos became a symbol of hospitality worldwide, hosting vast numbers of displaced people. At the same time, the island's residents were emphasising their own refugee identity, explaining that their parents were refugees from Turkey and that this is why they feel sympathy towards the newcomers. What is so striking about Lesbos is that it hosts significant contemporary migration, while at the same time, a large part of its population descends from refugees from Asia Minor. In Greece, the case of Lesbos is far from rare. In 1923 Greece and Turkey agreed to the compulsory exchange of populations of their religious minorities, a story central to the Greek identity that poses international interest since it was the first compulsory population exchange in history.

In this context, it comes into question: How have memories and identities of the 1922-24 forced displacement changed over time from one generation to the next? How do people with these memories and identities think about subsequent migration?

Tracing refugee memories and identities, I collected archival evidence (5000 oral testimonies) and conducted over 260 interviews. The oral history approach enabled me to provide a diverse account of Asia Minor refugee memory, talking to people and tracing voices. I also followed a regional history approach, focusing on three geographic areas across Greece, namely the borderland island of Lesbos, Central Macedonia in northern Greece, and Greece's most populous and cosmopolitan region, Attica.

The conceptual tools of this research are memory and identity. This study looks at individual, collective, and public memories of forced displacement. However, given that trauma is both the event and the memory of the event, it also examines refugee memory as experienced through its transfer from the first generation -with the direct experience- to the following generations (their children and grandchildren). Memory and identity

construct each other. From silence, to latency, and ultimately to a reawakening, intergenerational refugee memory and identity pass through the different stages of trauma and change throughout historical periods. For example, Vasos Vogiatzoglou, born in 1935 in Nea Ionia, noted, 'when I was a kid at school, I used to mutter my last name. I was ashamed to say -oglou. I'm proud of it now'.<sup>[1]</sup> Overall, for the first two generations, Asia Minor refugee identity becomes a 'refugee' being isolated in the private sphere and it is gradually transformed into a 'citizen', entering public life for the third and the fourth generation.

How do people with memories and identities of forced displacement think about subsequent migration? Are they becoming empathisers, antagonists, or rivals? Without ignoring the multiplicity of variables in-play, I argue that Asia Minor refugee history, memory, and identity acquire various meanings and interpretations, influencing descendants' attitudes in often conflicting ways. Refugee identity is a capacious and dynamic platform of ongoing understanding as well as a limited space of domination and competition. This contention is situated at the heart of this research, leading both to the building of bridges and parallels with histories of others and to their demolition through hierarchies of acceptability and antagonistic comparisons. These emerging complexities remind us that it is unwise to overgeneralise about attitudes towards migration that can be quite volatile and contradictory. Describing this complexity, one of my interviewees confessed, 'I don't know which are the opposing sides because sometimes I don't know what side I'm on [...] In the morning I sympathise, I am with them. At 10:00 I detest them. At 12:00 I save them. At 15:00 I hate them. At 19:00 I have to do something for them and I do it. At 22:00 I can't stand them'.<sup>[2]</sup>

Elucidating the attitudes of refugee descendants, I bring together time (generations), place (geographies), and subsequent migration (waves of other migrations). I argue that the intersection of these three elements allows an understanding of the continuities and discontinuities that characterise the Janus-faced attitudes of refugee descendants, leading to empathy, hostility, and competition. Geography matters as regional and historical particularities inform elements such as the existence of different senses of refugee identity and varying degrees of exposure to subsequent migrations. Generation matters as different generations express different attitudes based on their varying levels of integration and the diverse intensities of their refugee identity.

Overall, Lesvians are presented as gate openers, Macedonians as gatekeepers, and

Athenians as pragmatists being in-between of the Janus-faced reactions. Using Janus, the God of gates and transitions, beginning and endings, to parallel each generation, the second generation sees into the refugee past with one face and the fourth generation into the future with the other face, leaving the third generation in the middle of this fluid duality.

Many facets of the compulsory population exchange have become central to various studies. Unlike most accounts, this work offers an intergenerational, interregional, comparative, and in-depth perspective, illuminating memories and identities of forced displacement among Asia Minor refugees and their descendants in the context of subsequent migration.

2023 is the centenary from the Asia Minor forced displacement that marked the establishment of population transfers and displacements throughout the world. Many examples compose the unsettling of the modern world throughout different historical periods and regions such as Central and Southeastern Europe, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. This circularity that migration history entails can be expressed with various similar and opposite patterns, connected and disconnected stories of migration. One of these stories is the history of migration in Greece and the historical parallel between the Greek-Turkish population exchange (1923) and the contemporary migration and refugee flows (2015). Today, in light of the current migration and refugee crises, the critical understanding of past displacements echoes with new relevance.

[1] Interview with Vasos Vogiatzoglou, conducted by Marilena Anastasopoulou, Attica, 24 Jan. 2020

[2] Interview with Stratis Balaskas, conducted by Marilena Anastasopoulou, Lesbos, 4 Oct. 2019.

*\*The Hellenic Observatory hosted a research seminar on the topic on 14 November 2023. For more information please visit the [event page](#).*

**Note:** This article gives the views of the author, not the position of [Greece@LSE](#),

*the [Hellenic Observatory](#) or the [London School of Economics](#).*