

Haris Exertzoglou, University of the Aegean

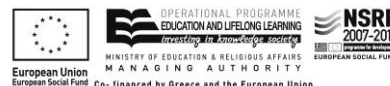
“Memory, folklore and forms of refugee sociality in interwar Greece”

The Great Catastrophe signaled a major turning point in relation to the major Greek irredentist scheme of the 19th century aspiring to the enlargement of the Greek state. Being the outcome of the bitter Greek- Turkish war of 1919-1922 the Catastrophe was not simply a humiliating military defeat for Greece but also the cause of one of the largest forced migration movements of the 20th century, namely the exchange of population between Greece and Turkey which involved over 1.5 million Christian Greeks living in the former Ottoman dominions of Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace and almost 500.00 Muslims living in Macedonia, another Ottoman province annexed a few years earlier by the Greek state.

Historical scholarship has long debated various issues of the refugee problem in Greece, although for the period of the interwar years discussion is limited to political and economic aspects and rarely have touched the issue of refugee memory. The purpose of this presentation is to inquire the relations between refugee memory and refugee sociality in interwar Greece, limiting my discussion to a very short period and searching the cultural affinities related with a specific form of sociality, the scientific society.

The relation between refugee memory and sociality was not paradoxical given that soon after their arrival in Greece the refugees realized that returning to their homelands was no longer possible and staying in Greece was the main alternative. However, there is no linear link between memory and sociality; on the contrary this link should have been reworked in a period when other pressing issues, employment, housing, property rights etc dominated public discussion. One should take into account that the term refugee memory is rather a euphemism used to lump together an agglomeration of individual memories, some traumatic others not, of the war and the final exodus.

It is difficult to qualify the mental and cultural framework with which the refugees made sense of these experiences. The bulk of the refugees were illiterate and many had poor or no knowledge of Greek, their mother tongue being Turkish. Besides, what the



refugees actually remembered was their individual experience which could not explain or illuminate the reasons of their misfortunes. I do not suggest that they were incapable of telling their stories simply that these stories were limited in scope. There is also the interesting question of whether individual refugee memories cast a raw narrative model shaped by the outlines of similar individual sufferings which were told and retold within families and among friends. But even if this narrative model did exist it fell short of explaining the big picture in which individual experiences were framed.

On the other hand the social life of the refugees in the new country was equally complicated although for different reasons. The integration of the refugees in the host society was slow and uncertain given the financial inability of the Greek state to provide a well-designed plan to meet refugee demands. In fact there were many sources of tension between the refugees and elements of the host society, or the refugees and the state, some of them of political and economic others of cultural nature. It was within this framework that calls were made in favor of establishing associations, clubs, societies and other forms of collective action as means of empowering the refugees both in terms of political leverage but also in terms of cultural, educational and physical improvement. During the interwar period a large number of refugee associations were established. It is crucial to mention that most of these were locally based in the sense that they addressed individual refugees from the same town or locality in Asia Minor. In fact locality proved one of the major sources of cultural affinity among refugees both in the sense that it accommodated a recognizable identity with which individuals could associate themselves and in the sense that it provided the basis of the refugee policies of the Greek state. In fact the number of refugee societies raised criticism even among the refugees because as, it was argued many associations simply served personal strategies and divisive agendas. Until today there is not even a rough estimate of the number of these associations considering that they were spread throughout the country with quite uneven results as some of them proved still borne while others prospered.

I will focus on the small number of scientific societies which were programmatically involved with the study of Asia Minor. At a more profound level Asia Minor was not simply an object of knowledge but also a field of memory. At the time this kind of scientific interest might sound superfluous. Most refugees were struggling to gain a life in

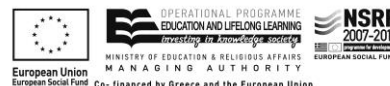


the squalid quarters of Athens, Salonica and elsewhere, and in all likelihood they wouldn't care less for such an enterprise. Probably these scientific societies could not be popular and this not only because they represented elitist circles. The point is less about the reach of these societies and more about how they invented a way to combine two different registers of memory: On one hand the memory of specific localities preserved in folklore material which was recognizable as such and on the other the memory of Asia Minor as a source of transcendental refugee identity. The collection of folklore and historical material was believed to be by many a promising project because it provided stable ground for establishing the Greek historical presence in Asia Minor without denying the individuality of the different Christian Orthodox communities. It was there for everyone to see or hear, its chronic presence and unchangeable qualities being the measure of its value.

There is a short history behind these scientific societies which I find interesting. It was just a few years after the signing of the Lausanne Treaty that the first calls were made for the gathering of folklore material from Anatolia. In 1926 Konstantinos Lameris, Chairman of the Association Anatolē, founded in 1891, announced the establishment of a special scientific committee for collecting folklore material. Lameris was in cooperation with George Hatzidakis, Professor of linguistics in Athens University, who had already expressed interest in the immediate collection of linguistic material from the refugees because he feared that it would soon be lost if the pace of linguistic integration of the refugees was rapid, as Hatzidakis believed it was. Yanis Sykoutris, Phaidon Koukoules, and other professors with Athens University also participated in the committee which however, after the initial enthusiasm did not live up to the task set. If we believe George Askitopoulos, a former inspector of the Greek schools in Izmir who wrote extensively on this issue similar initiatives followed but without result. A call was announced in the press, many people gathered in a public theatre, some university professors addressed the public pontificating on the need to collect folklore material lest time takes its toll, a committee was selected, promises were given and all that to no avail. I wonder how we can deal with this kind of failure to work on a subject which raised so much hope but did not materialize. Probably cultural affinity/relatedness could not work at this level despite the stated importance of the cause.

On the other hand Askitopoulos mentioned that other initiatives undertaken by refugee intellectuals and teachers were far more successful. In that same period a number of publications on various cities and provinces where Christian Greeks lived appeared, always the outcome of close cooperation of groups of contributors who spent time and money to achieve these results. Among these initiatives the Society of Pontic Studies deserves special notice. This Society was established in 1927 by the former Metropolitan of Trabzon, Chrysanthos, who gathered a group of refugees in a scientific committee with the purpose of researching on the history and folklore of the area of Pontus. The Society published a scientific review, the *Archive of Pontus* devoted mostly to the study of the linguistic idioms of the Pontus region and secondly to the study of its history. Among the first articles published in this review is the medieval epic poem of Digenes Akritas, collections of fairy tales, demotic poetry and songs, riddles and jokes and other kinds of popular expressions which were already recognized as an important field of folklore studies in Greece since the late 19th century. Of similar interest is the Association of Smyrneans which was founded in 1936 by 35 Smyrneans with the purpose of “preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of the Greek homelands of Asia Minor before 1922.” The annual review of the Association, *Mikrasiatika Chronika*, [Chronicles of Asia Minor] published extensively on the history and folklore of Asia Minor with particular emphasis on Smyrna/Izmir and its adjacent area. The founding of this Union coordinated with a broader project, the establishment of the House of Asia Minor a big construction to host collections of folklore, religious and historical artefacts from Asia Minor, a specialized library with books and periodicals, an auditorium and a research Centre. In this project were involved individuals and associations of refugee origin.

So what we have here is a space or rather spaces of sociality formed in relation to specific purposes of commemoration. These spaces of sociality were rather limited considering the small number of people involved in these organizations but at the same time not so if we take into account the number of other people also involved as informers, contributors to the reviews, participants in the literary prizes, sponsors and last but not least the readers of these publications. On the other hand these individuals most probably were not unknown to each other because they participated in one or more of the literary



and cultural networks which proliferated in the 19th century in the Ottoman lands sustaining a number of literary, philanthropic and educational Greek Orthodox societies.

It seems fair to suggest that locality was the basis of cultural affinity which allowed these societies to act in the first place. Simply these individuals believed that this was their job and their duty to act collectively in order to preserve the knowledge and memory of Asia Minor for future generations. At the same time this emphasis on locality needs some qualification. Although it is true that cultural affinity was associated with locality the relation was quite complicated. Reference of Smyrna, Trabzon, Brusa or any other town or place in Asia Minor which until 1922 hosted Greeks changed considerably after the Great Catastrophe if not for any other reason only because a large part of its inhabitants were not there anymore. Most likely for the refugees their homeland represented a space which remained practically unchanged. They simply remembered with nostalgia their hometowns without being aware or even care of the extensive changes which transformed their former homelands, particularly urban areas like Izmir, to the extent that they became unrecognizable. What mattered for them most was to keep intact in their minds what they were forced to abandon as if their native places would stay forever as they remembered them. Asia Minor was still part of the refugees' own existence for what it was remembered not for what it was becoming. So the spaces commemorated through these scientific networks were only figments of memory, which of course does not make them less real for those who imagined them in the first place. It was a comforting thought but at the same time a call to fit in a new social environment because the old homelands were lost forever. In this sense cultural affinities based on locality did not simply reflect already existing local identities but mediated the making of new future oriented refugee identities. The Mikrasiates were not simply those of Asia Minor origin but refugees in a new country and probably it was within this new framework that the new transcendental refugee identity exceeding all local identifications arose.

Is it possible to suggest that the reason why folklore became a major vehicle of the memory of Asia Minor in the period under discussion was that the refugees themselves were not ready to address the trauma of deprivation and loss associated with their forced migration? This is a very sensitive issue because it involves individual suffering and loss as well as the efforts of the refugees to gain a second life in Greece, which in many cases

proved difficult. Traumatic memories of the years 1915-1922 were recorded but were not overwhelming. We know very little about all these because the refugees were either not prepared or not interested to tell their stories of survival.

Interestingly, many of those involved in the collection of folklore material found reasons to dissociate this process from the trauma of expulsion. For example, Askitopoulos mentions one case in which his interlocutor rejected any reference to the tragic events which ended with the uprooting of the Ottoman Christians from Anatolia. As he put it, “the recent persecutions, torments and atrocities which we suffered [in the last wars] should not occupy our efforts because they were common to all of us and can be reduced to a few narrative forms while the richness of our folklore [λαογραφία] is far more important to record and preserve [in eternity].”¹ The point was that the purpose of folklore collection was to provide the foundation of the Greek presence in Asia Minor by exhibiting all different local traditions and their relation to a common national culture at the same time. Instead, reference to the sufferings of the Christian Orthodox would eventually fit into a common narrative pattern in which the richness of local identities would be erased. I do not know if this argument stands well because testimonies of suffering and folklore material do not belong to the same registry but I understand that at that time there was more reluctance than readiness to address the traumatic aspects of expulsion and inscribe the memory culture of the lost homelands to the suffering and loss of the refugees themselves.

There are two tentative conclusions which I want to offer at the close of this short presentation. First, the close but complicated relation between locality and refugee sociality which took various forms in the period under consideration. Second that the scientific societies which are the focus of my presentation were associated with small groups of intellectuals who wrote and published about Asia Minor following the rhetorical and cognitive models available to them since the 19th century with the explicit purpose of providing a memory framework for future oriented refugee identities.

¹ Προσφυγικός Κόσμος, 3 February 1929.