

# The Reception of Refugees

Interview with Aline Angoustures and Dzovinar Kevonian

*By Ivan Jablonka*

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**At a time when the refugee issue is highly topical, a collection of essays offers a history of asylum administration and its actors and practices. A first step towards a European history of asylum in the twentieth century.**

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Aline Angoustures, Dzovinar Kevonian and Claire Mouradian have just published an edited volume with the Presses universitaires de Rennes entitled *Réfugiés et apatrides. Administrer l'asile en France (1920-1960)*.

Based on unprecedented analysis of French asylum archives, this book reveals the construction of processes for categorising refugees and stateless persons and highlights the power relations and socio-political stakes that framed them. The authors analyse a reality that is rarely foregrounded: how population outflows have been managed and 'administrated'. Rather than broaching refugees as an anonymous 'flow' or as iconic figures of persecution, they are understood here from the perspective of a social history of asylum administration between the 1920s and the Cold War.

**Books and Ideas: How did States differentiate between refugees and immigrants in the 20th century?**

*A. A. and D. K.:* A key question in our book is how this distinction emerged and was legally implemented in the twentieth century. From the 1920s onwards this took place at an international level, to resolve the question of the personal status of exiled stateless persons defined as having lost the protection of their State of origin. This was less a question of distinguishing them from immigrants than of allowing them to become migrants who could emigrate to States other than the initial state of asylum, thanks to an identity and travel

certificate (the 'Nansen passport'). This certificate replaced the national passport they either did not have or could not obtain.

The Second World War opened up a new era in the construction of this difference between refugees and immigrants. The criterion of persecution and its motives (race, nationality, political opinion, belonging to a particular social group) appeared, while legal texts created a status giving access to rights or specific types of provision. Some of these developments were written into the Geneva Convention adopted in July 1951.

### **Books and Ideas: What was the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s?**

*A. A. and D. K.:* The period between WWI and the end of WWII was marked by an unprecedented level of forced displacement and exile. The main causes were the intensity of the conflict, the extension of the Nation-State model and the collapse of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, along with the January 1923 Lausanne Convention which made provision for the forced exchange of Greek and Turkish populations. Between 1921 and 1923, for the first time, people were forcibly stripped of their nationality on a large-scale – the Russians fleeing the Bolshevik regime and the Armenian genocide survivors who were excluded from new Kemalist Turkey.

However, during the post-war period the passport and visa system became broadly established making it necessary to find a solution providing documents for all these exiles. The rise of fascist regimes and the Nazi persecution of the Jews, along with the Anschluss in 1938, generated a crisis in the reception of refugees that can be explained by the economic depression, but also by the general xenophobic climate and the fear of another war. At the end of the Spanish civil war, in February 1939, 500,000 people crossed the border into France, an exodus of as yet unprecedented proportions.

Finally, WWII left 7 million people in displaced persons' camps, most of whom ultimately became refugees as returning to their country of origin would have put both their lives and freedom in jeopardy. The extension of Soviet power along with the advent of popular democracies in Eastern Europe gave rise to new flows of refugees from 1945 onwards and for several decades thereafter.

### **Books and Ideas: How were refugees protected and by whom?**

*A. A. and D. K.:* From the 1920s onwards, refugees were protected by an international legal status recognised by States, including France, which created special administrative divisions in charge of delivering documents allowing residence and the exercising of civic rights, as well as welfare. This general outline is well known, but what we tried to do in our book was to show how complex this protection actually proves when examined closely and with careful focus on the actors and practices involved.

First of all, refugees are not just the objects of this history; they were also actors in their own rights and often prominent ones, within networks involving legal specialists, diplomats, and community leaders, on an international, national and local level. Second, the

first institutions set up in France to provide this protection were consular offices, which had to combine the work of international organisations with that of an administrative body within which entry into the country was a key sovereign issue. The creation of the OFPRA [French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons] in 1952 seemed to nationalise asylum, however the OFPRA nevertheless remained a hybrid organisation, not least due to the continuity in both actors and practices.

Finally, the practical aspects of legal protection developed in a more pragmatic manner than one might think, through a series of responses to specific problems. A range of ad hoc solutions won out at the end of the 1930s and continued thereafter to some extent. The shift from collective eligibility to individual eligibility, along with newly-devised techniques for interviews and for examining requests for protection, took place progressively in the wake of WW2. It is important to underscore how differently one group could be treated from another, such that it could be said that there was not one refugee status but several.

### **Books and Ideas: What comparisons can we draw with the current situation?**

*A. A. and D. K.:* From as early as the 1920s, the protection of refugees was a European and international issue, particularly due to the restrictions put in place by the United States and then, after 1947-1948, due to the polarisation of the continent. The same is true today, despite difficulties and divisions within the European Union.

We can also note that the reception of refugees both creates and reveals political and social divides, as well as the ways in which actors are mobilised. The policies implemented are the result of power struggles and compromises between different configurations (fraternity, indifference, otherness) and the different projected notions that refugees come to represent (war, poverty) or for which they are scapegoats (the need to protect employment).

Another constant factor is the central element of expertise about the situation of the countries of origin. This has simply changed form: originally, it was based on the refugees themselves, whereas today it is the remit of specialist departments. However, the geopolitical and historical context has created substantial differences over time: the international refugee status emerged in a context of nationalism excluding groups on the basis of race, ethnicity or class; it then developed in the context of reparation and the struggle against the totalitarian regimes that clashed during WW2 and then during the Cold War.

The historical nature of processes of categorisation and rationales of protection contributes to new contexts being taken into account. This is the case for persecution carried out by multiple and non-State actors (mafias, armed groups), for threats due to long civil wars in weakened States and for the emergence of radical Islam in the world. Legal changes have also brought out new 'societal' reasons for protection, namely gender and sexual orientation.

As for displacement due to environmental disasters, the question of how it should be categorised has been a topic of debate for several years. The multifactorial nature of migration phenomena remains a long-standing issue, which extends beyond the constantly renewed efforts that are made to create categorical distinctions.

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