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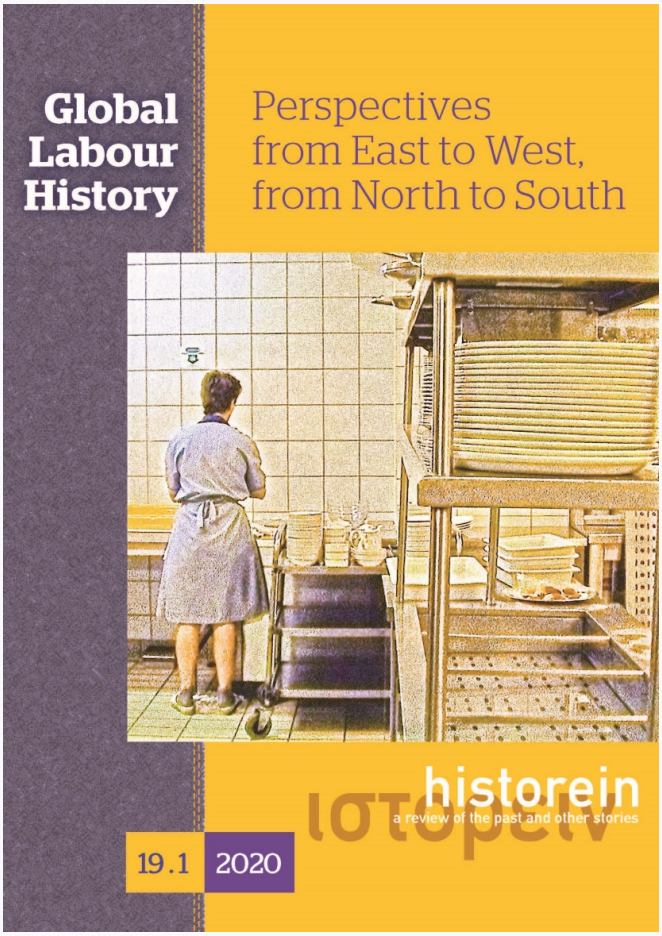
Global Labour History: Perspectives from East to West, from North to South



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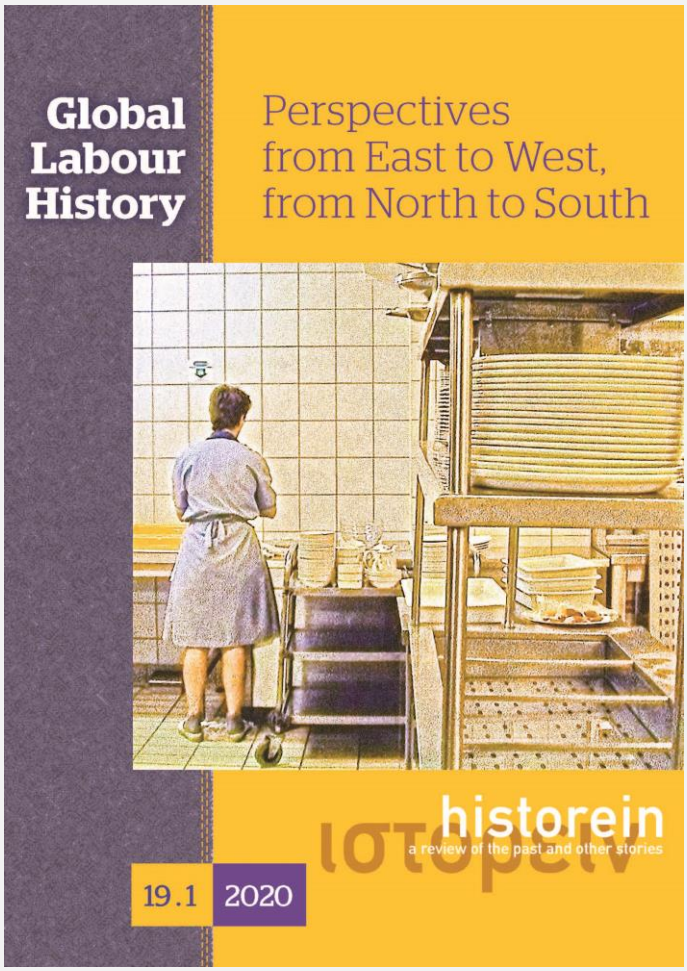

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Emilia Salvanou

Η συγκρότηση της προσφυγικής μνήμης: Το παρελθόν ως ιστορία και πρακτική

[The making of refugee memory: the past as history and practice]

Athens: Nefeli, 2018. 251 pp.

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The Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922 and the ensuing exchange of populations are cataclysmic events in modern Greek history. In contemporary culture, they have become *lieux de mémoire*, sites or topoi of collective memory, to use the term coined by Pierre Nora, meaning that the experience of forced exile finds itself at the centre of national identity. “Today we are all refugees” (216). As Emilia Salvanou reminds us, this was far from always the case. The refugees that came to present-day Greece, beginning in the period of the Balkan Wars and culminating in the aftermath of the Greco-Turkish War, entered an often hostile political and social environment, marked by the bitter legacy of the wartime National Schism between royalists and their Venizelist foes. Many of the former, indigenous to the lands now hosting well over a million destitute newcomers, initially refused to acknowledge the refugees – in many cases native Turkish speakers – as fellow Greeks, blaming them for their misfortunes. From this inauspicious beginning, in the strained relations of an impoverished and war-weary society, ensued a multifaceted process of integration which eventually turned the shattered Orthodox communities from the East into undisputed members of the Greek nation.

Salvanou’s contribution to the body of scholarship concerning the various aspects of this process is a study of the role played by memories – or rather the formation of collective memory pertaining to the “lost homelands” and the experience of refugeehood. Departing from the notion that the relation between traumatic events, collective memory and identity is never a given but a process of construction – meaning that it is not any inherent qualities of the experiences suffered by people that constitutes a national trauma, but rather ongoing negotiations and conscious efforts to construct and attribute meaning to them – the author sets out to uncover how this process came about. The main focus of her research is the

Thracian Centre in Athens, a semiofficial body set up in 1927 which catered to the practical needs of refugees from Eastern Thrace, but the analysis pertains to the communities of expelled Orthodox Christians from the former Ottoman Empire as a whole, as the various associations of what were (or would become) Ionian, Pontian Greeks, etc., followed a similar path towards identity and a place in the canon of national memory. Such associations strove to convince state and society in the new country that the refugees really were Greeks since time immemorial, who had made valuable contributions to the preservation of Hellenism as well as services to the Greek fatherland after their uprooting. This enterprise of writing the newcomers into the grand historical narrative of the nation in turn entailed a parallel effort to convince the refugees themselves to embrace Greek identity, which was far from self-evident for people who tended to think of their belonging merely in religious terms (Orthodox Christian) or membership of specific local communities, towns or villages in the Ottoman Empire. The road to an overarching national identity as Greeks, therefore, went through the construction of supplemental regional identities, each with its particular historical narrative modelled on the tripartite schema of Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos' national historiography, that is, the thesis of unbroken Hellenic continuity from antiquity through Byzantium to the present time. In other words, in order for the refugees from the various places in Eastern Thrace to become proper Greeks, they had first (or simultaneously) to become Thracians; descendants of Greek settlers in the region since classical times.

This is a theoretically meticulous study, grounded in a broad reading of international scholarship on historical culture and collective memory, yet written in an admirably clear and accessible style (that is, to those who read modern Greek). Salvanou does not merely study the historiography of the "refugee question". Drawing on a useful distinction between the historical and the practical pasts, she argues that history is not only written; it is something that people "do", meaning that the past, apart from being the object of scholarly study also, is a particular "practice" of everyday life. While the former mainly concerns scholars acting on their intellectual curiosity and seeking to uncover new aspects of the past, the latter involves the general public and the quest for usable pasts, historical narratives that imbue the present with meaning and offer guidance to the future. The very founding of associations such as the Thracian Centre and the activities it engaged in, attempting to fill the void caused by the expulsion and to forge the communal lives of the refugees anew, constitute practices devoted to providing its members (and others) with orientation, meaning a sense of place in time.

Salvanou's book is organised into five chapters, apart from an introduction and a conclusion summarising the findings of the study. The first two chapters put the mass experience of forced exile into a broader European perspective, in line with the historical scholarship of recent decades which seeks to salvage the study of the First World War from

the narrow interpretative framework of national historiographies. The Great War saw the rise of numerous new nation-states, and with that also the “image of the modern refugee”, in the wake of the massive scale migrations set in motion by the ethnic cleansing and carving-up of the crumbling empires. The bulk of these chapters, however, are assigned to the repercussions of the First World War period in Greece, meaning the decade of more or less continuous warfare from 1912 to 1922, and the ensuing interwar years. Particular attention is paid to the role the refugee disaster played as a catalyst for the modernisation of Greece, bringing about necessary reforms in agriculture, public health and social security to cope with the massive influx of impoverished newcomers. The second chapter provides an overview of the Greek historiography on the Great War and the Asia Minor Catastrophe, for long dominated by the partisan perspectives emanating from the wartime National Schism, but which, after the turmoil of the 1940s, was transformed to include a greater emphasis on the trauma of the refugees, which had thitherto been largely absent in the official historical narrative.

The focus of the third chapter, entitled “The Mediators of Memory”, is the memory practices of the refugees themselves, or rather intellectuals of Thracian or Anatolian origin, that is, an emphasis on their agency rather than on them being mere objects in the drama of history. The refugee associations set up in the interwar years come into the foreground in this chapter. The associations were mediators between the refugees and the state, helping the former out in their dealings with bureaucracy and matters relating to housing and employment, but even more in finding a common language to enable their symbolic integration into the Greek nation. But was the cultivation of a regional identity based on common memory of the old homeland a stated objective rather than a side-effect of more pressing concerns about the economic wellbeing of the refugees? Salvanou argues that it was. One of the main concerns of the states involved in the Lausanne Treaty’s population exchange was to disentangle the different nationalities, that is, ethnoreligious groups, of the former Ottoman Balkans and Anatolia from each other, thus removing any future casus belli or threats towards regional stability, by eradicating cultural and linguistic differences, assimilating minorities and forging homogenous nations. The fear of losing the cultural heritage of the lost homelands in this process was a primary concern for the associations from the outset. Early on, their leaders and the intellectuals writing in their periodicals, therefore, set out to recover oral testimonies, folklore, dialects and objects from the refugees’ various places of origin, often aided by state institutions like the universities and individuals of both academic and political prestige. In this, the efforts of refugee “scholars” resembled those of local and regional history producers of the “new lands” won in the Balkan Wars, who sought to inscribe their identity narratives into a national framework, continuing a tradition of irredentist and Patriarchist propaganda targeting local “unredeemed Hellenes” from the late nineteenth century. In some instances, these were partially overlapping projects, as in the case of Stilpon Kyriakides (1887–1964), who, apart from being a prominent member of the Thracian Centre, held the presidency of the Society for

Macedonian Studies (EMS).

The fourth and fifth chapters focus on the practices of writing and "doing" history, using the above-mentioned Thracian Centre as a case study. The empirical material is drawn mainly from its periodical *Thrakika*, which was published from 1928 onwards, but with a long hiatus from 1944 to 1955. The period extending from the first decade after the Second World War to the seven-year dictatorship of the Colonels receives most coverage in Salvanou's overview and analysis, with only brief incursions into the post-1974 era. The author identifies a shift of emphasis in the memory work of the Thracian Centre between the interwar years and the period following the ordeal of the War of 1940, the occupation and the civil war. In the 1950s, the original split between indigenous Greeks and refugees, royalists and Venizelists, had largely disappeared, to be replaced by the ideological chasm between right and left. This was reflected in a more markedly state-ideological discourse in the writings and public pronouncements of the centre's leading members, emphasising anticommunism and the "national-mindedness" (*ethnikofrosyni*) of Thracian Hellenism, as well as in its sponsorship of student awards and dowries for young men and women of Thracian descent as a way of combating the perceived threats of political radicalism and the Beatlemania of 1960s youth culture. Salvanou's focus on this period and what may be described as the Thracian community leaders' cosying up to the dictatorship of the Colonels ought to be viewed against the background of more recent debates, in which advocates of recognising the persecution of Ottoman Greeks as genocide often claim that the refugees faced hostility from the Greek state. As far as the Thracian refugees are concerned, Salvanou argues emphatically that there is no evidence for this being the case. On the contrary, the adoption of the prevailing conservative brand of nationalism rather reinforced the bond between the state and the refugee associations, as did, for example, the practice of dowry sponsorship, which involved the cooperation of local officials with the centre. In fact, the Thracian Centre was one of the few associations that was not dissolved by the military regime from 1967 to 1974.

In her conclusion, the author reflects on the role that intellectuals play in the process of forging shattered individual memories into a shared collective memory, which entails the suppression of elements that do not correspond to the beliefs of the national audience being targeted. In the present case, this merging with the dominant national narrative was done at the expense of the more multifaceted historical experiences of the Greek Orthodox population of Eastern Thrace before the expulsion. Thus, a uniform story of perennial struggle, national heroism and suffering at the hands of Turks – easily recognisable to most Greeks – obscured the social divisions and other differences that had existed among the Orthodox Christians and blotted out the periods of relatively peaceful coexistence with ethnoreligious Others, ambiguous loyalties, resistance or indifference to the Greek national cause at the turn of the century.

At times, Salvanou quotes lengthy passages from her source material that do not always illuminate the formation of Thracian collective memory and identity sufficiently enough to warrant the space that they take, but this is really a minor objection. Her book is a significant contribution to the historiography on the social consequences of the refugee disaster and to scholarship on historical culture in Greece and, in general, Europe in the twentieth century. One can only hope that it will be read widely.