Post-WWI Exiles in Transregional Context. Microglobal and Biographical Perspectives

**Veranstalter:** Nazan Maksudyan, Freie Universität Berlin; Centre Marc Bloch Berlin  
**Bericht von:** Lara Wankel/ David Bell/ Nagihan Mutlu, Freie Universität Berlin

The workshop brought together researchers to explore the population movements after the First World War in the conceptual framework of exile. A distinctly transnational and multidisciplinary approach was taken during the workshop, bringing together scholars of history, political science, philosophy, ethnomusicology and literature. This was also a move against the intellectual bias inherent in the study of exile and towards an examination of the social conditions of exile and the production of „mundane“ knowledge within it.

The opening talk by organizer NAZAN MAKSUDYAN introduced the term „exile“ and pointed out the historical limits of its use. In disciplinary terms she argued for exile studies, which have heretofore concentrated on the 1930s and beyond, to include the first decades of the 20th century, and particularly the period after the First World War. Drawing back the periodization even further she highlighted the shift from the patterns of exile in early modern empires, for which return was often possible, to the movements of the 20th century where return was, for many, an impossibility. She then questioned the periodization of the First World War, highlighting the lack of an end to conflict in 1918, particularly outside Western Europe. Finally, she offered three approaches to the concept of exile – as a person, as a place, and as a shared condition.

CATHERINE BRÉGIANNI (Athens) offered a narrative of exile that moves away from the intellectual bias. She introduced a novel approach to the resettlement of Asia Minor refugees in the Greek state after 1923. She pointed out that Greek scholarship has focused primarily on the experience and cultural impact of urban settlement, with less focus on the settlement in rural areas. Her microregional research approach, focusing on Aegean Macedonia, combines ego-documents by refugees with research work from the field, alongside macro-level sources from the agencies and states involved.

PINAR ÜRE (Ankara) described the experience and impact of the so-called White Russian exiles in Turkey. She began by clarifying that this group, though ethnically diverse, excludes Turkic Muslims from Russia whose patterns of exile and integration had different dynamics. Üre described the lives and work of these exiles, with special emphasis on the ways in which their cultural capital helped them thrive. She provided insight into the dynamics of the statesmen of the early Turkish republic, describing how they looked not only to Europe but to the USSR for inspiration on modernization.

A particular point of interest in the discussion that followed was the expulsion and destruction of non-Muslim expertise in the Turkish case. In some cases, White Russian experts were not the first to introduce a trend, but rather filled a void left by the murder, expulsion, and discriminatory laws restricting existing Greek and Armenian experts. The point was raised that narratives which exclude the reason for the shortage in labour and expertise risk supporting a positive Kemalist narrative of Turkish development. The discussion highlighted possible comparative cases, interestingly including the resettlement of ethnic Germans in Germany after the Second World War. Brégiani pointed out that the Academy of Athens is preparing a conference in just such a comparison in the coming months.

The second panel hosted two (ethno)musicologists, thereby strengthening the interdisciplinary focus on the workshop’s topic. SYLVIA A. ALAJAJI (Lancaster, PA) centred on music in Armenian exile communities. She talked about the concept of beginnings, referencing Said, and showed how beginnings frame subsequent blemings as propulsive forces. Alajaji described her research, primarily on Armenian exiles in Lebanon, where by 1924, 40,000 had been given French citizenship in an attempt to „Christianise“ the country. The confessional parliamentary system in Lebanon allowed a distinct Armenian identity to form with organizations, churches, publications and schools. The interesting three-part nature of home for
these exiles consists of the past home being the Ottoman villages they had left behind and the names of which still played an essential role in community organization, the present home being Lebanon, and the spiritual home being the land inside the borders of present-day Armenia. Alajaji described how Armenian nation-builders in Beirut consciously began the propagation of Armenian language over Armeno-Turkish. The phrase „before the youth spoke Armenian they sang Armenian“ emphasizes the importance of patriotic songs which are central to her research. Reading one such song aloud, she explained how this music moved Armenians away from the Ottoman past, distinguished them from the Lebanese present, and fought against the disappearance of their culture and identity.

PETER MCMURRAY (Cambridge) described two groups of interest in the sonic practices of post-Ottoman Yugoslavia, approaching the subject from the perspective of „the poetics of exile“ and being „in exile-at-home“. The first part focused on the lives and poetic practices of some bards, who sang epic and heroic songs and whose lives were documented in the 1920s and 1930s through interviews and ethnographic accounts. The second group were hafızs, the reciters of the Koran, who would memorize and recite the book by heart. He described how Serbian/Christian poets/singers and Bosniak/Muslim hafızs, though not physically expelled from their ancestral lands, nonetheless experienced aspects of the exilic condition, particularly under communism.

In her keynote talk, TALIN SUCIYAN (Munich) spoke about the multiple, ongoing exiles of Armenians. She began her powerful description of the experience of Armenian life in Turkey during the 20th and 21st centuries by pointing out that Armenians in Turkey after 1915 and 1923 are under-researched. She described how the practice of telling the stories of Armenian victims of genocide is an essential means for families to honor and remember the dead and how narratives can act as a tomb. Her research complements this statement as it includes numerous oral testimonies from survivors and from the descendants of survivors from around the world. Perhaps the most surprising revelation for many in the audience was the continued discrimination and oppression Istanbul’s Armenian population is facing since the Genocide. Suciyan described the term kaghtagan, an Armenian word that cannot fully be expressed in English without an understanding of the experience of „perpetual exile.“ Particularly interesting and indicative of the value of oral histories was Suciyan’s discovery that virtually every Armenian survivor had a story about the destruction of Armenian books due to the fear of state reprisal should they be discovered.

During the following discussion, in response to surprise at the continuation of violence, Suciyan further discussed how a clear-cut periodization of the First World War as ending in 1918 falls short of describing the reality in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic. This point resonated with the points made by Maksudyan during her opening statement. Further to this Suciyan emphasized the completely disruptive nature of genocide, a process which allowed no aspect of Armenian life to continue as normal. A further point raised was the usage of the archive of the Armenian hospital in Istanbul, for which Suciyan has played a key role in opening for research.

SEDA ALTUG (Istanbul) talked about Christian, Kurdish, and Armenian Refugees in Syria in the 1920s and 1930s. She pointed out that the stories of Armenian refugees in Syria are often told under the narratives of Armenian identity, agency, minority rights, or their relation to Syria and the French mandate. She argued, however, that their history should not be seen only through their minority or refugee status, but rather as an essential part of Syrian history and the building of Syrian identity. Their history in Syria was not a history of marginalization but one of resistance, agency and negotiation, all of which affected Syria in its relations to France, Turkey, its local population, and border regulations.

TOMAS BALKELIS (Vilnius) presented the case of Lithuanian refugees in Vilnius after the Great War, and their strategies of coping with their exile status. He agreed with the need to situate exile in the historiography of the First World War and focused on the attempt to „build a Lithuanian nation in ex-
ile”, most prominently pursued by the Lithuanian War Relief Committee. The Committee’s aim was to provide moral support to the refugees, to protect their culture and language, and to help them return home. By referring to Benedict Anderson’s „imagined communities“ and John Hutchinson’s cultural nationalism concepts, Balkelis opened the discussion to the meaning of home as a concept. He pointed out that while a large part of the exiled community was able to and did return „home“, this homeland was in a large part imaginary and connected to an idea of „ethnic Lithuanians“.

The following panel focused on intellectuals in exile, therefore those traditionally analyzed in the framework of exile studies.

PASCALE ROURE (Wuppertal) examined the underexplored history of German professors who took refuge in Turkey from Nazi Germany. She argued that academic exiles in Turkey were serving as transferors of knowledge, gravely impacting the academic discipline of philosophy in Turkey. An example of such a heretofore mostly overlooked scholar is Ernst von Anders, a professor of the philosophy of history who went into exile in Istanbul.

CATHERINE GOUSSEFF (Paris) spoke about the case of Russian academics in exile in Prague between 1920 and 1939. The Czech state explicitly supported the Russian academics by providing scholarships and opening a Russian Law Institute, with the expectation of a future alliance between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. Both the government and the Russian academics saw their stay in Prague as temporary, and that indeed was the case, as several academics went to Paris or the U.S. Despite its short duration, the continuity of Russian academic life was possible in Prague, Gousseff concluded.

The last panel of the conference turned to literature studies. BURCU ALKAN (Gießen) explained that her literary-critical approach differs from that of a historian. She presented an analysis of Zabel Yesayan’s My Soul in Exile, a novella about a young Armenian artist who returns to Istanbul in the period after the Young Turk Revolution after having spent time in Paris for her education. On her return, she finds a hostile environment that feels more and more alienating. Alkan argued that the novel can be used as a means to analyze the sense of exile-at-home for the Armenians in Turkey.

ALI BOLCAKAN (Ann Arbor, MI) described what he called a „blind spot“ in Turkish memory, namely literary depictions of the population exchanges comparable to those in the Greek case as well as institutes dealing with the historical memory of pre-exchange life such as the Centre for Asia Minor Studies in Athens. In reference to Maksudyan’s opening talk he represented three pairs of concepts that can serve as a starting point when thinking about exile: nostalgia – oblivion, solidarity – solitude, detachment – attachment. He argued that in the Turkish case a second internal process of exile driven by nationalism destroyed difference, including memory of the plight of Turkish exiles.

HILMI TEZGÖR (Duisburg/Essen) approached the exilic condition through the poems Bertolt Brecht wrote while in exile in Denmark. Tezgör described different forms of isolation that an exile could experience as he charted Brecht’s increasingly dark view of the chances for return to Germany. Brecht’s poetry reflected his relationship with his exile status at different stages. Tezgör brought up the question whether it was possible to return from exile. For Brecht, that did not seem possible. Considering the several cases discussed during the conference, it appears that either the home, or the exiled, in many cases both, change in irreversible ways so that the idea of returning becomes rather elusive, if not impossible.

During a lively discussion Alkan stressed the usefulness of a literary-critical approach to expand on terms such as „home“ and „exile“. Finally, the participants discussed their view of exile and its differing meanings. The point was raised that the exilic state does not necessarily mean a desire to return and that there is not always one home, but many. Maksudyan emphasized the need to overcome intellectual bias in the use of the term „exile“ to include larger segments of society. Discussants frequently stressed the interdisciplinary nature of the conference and the varying approaches of the disciplines represented.
Conference overview:

Nazan Maksudyan (Freie Universität Berlin / Centre Marc Bloch Berlin): Welcome and introductory remarks

Panel 1: Exploitation of Social Capital: The Useful Exiles

Catherine Brégianni (Academy of Athens): Exiles Experienced and Narrated: Refugees’ Rural Establishment and Related Technical Know-how in the 1920s Greece

Pınar Üre (TOBB University of Economics and Technology, Ankara): Conditional Welcome: Russian Exiles as a Source of Skilled Labor in Interwar Turkey

Panel 2: Sounds of Exile

Sylvia A. Alajaji (Franklin & Marshall College, Pennsylvania): Music in the Exilic Condition and the Possibility of Sonic Armenia

Peter McMurray (University of Cambridge): The Poetics of Exile-at-Home: Orality in Post-Ottoman Yugoslavia

Keynote Lecture:

Talin Suciyan (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München): Perpetual Exodus: The Genocide and Multiple Exiles of Armenians

Panel 3: Intellectuals in Exile and Imagining the Nation

Seda Altuğ (Oxford University): Surviving and Reviving in Exile: Armenian and Arab Intellectuals’ Encounters in Syria and Lebanon, 1921–1946

Tomas Balkelis (Lithuanian Institute of History, Vilnius): Making the Nation in Exile: Lithuanian Refugees in Russia, 1915–20

Panel 4: Exiled Scholars, Knowledge in Exile

Pascale Roure (Bergische Universität Wuppertal): Erkenntnistheorie und Philosophiegeschichte im türkischen Exil. Ernst von Asters Wirkung an der Universität Istanbul

Catherine Gousseff (EHESS, Paris): The Reception of Russian Exile Academics in Prague, 1920–1939

Panel 5: Literature in Exile

Burcu Alkan (Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen): The Complex Profundity of the Soul in Exile: Zabel Yesayan’s My Soul in Exile

Ali Bolcakan (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor): Leaving Home for the Homeland: Exile Literature in Greece and Turkey

Hilmi Tezgör (Universität Duisburg-Essen): Gedanken über die Dauer des Exils: Svenborg Poems of Bertolt Brecht


© Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.