

**The Persecuted:
Flight and Displacement in Twentieth-Century Europe**

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1. Must we smash the fine china in order to eat from some other kind of dishware?

In an address given on June 30th, 1933, at the University of Heidelberg, Martin Heidegger exclaimed that “if the fine china gets smashed in two, we can always eat and drink from some other kind of tableware.” This speech is certainly less well-known than the one given in Freiburg, but it is at least as interesting as that more infamous address. As was the case for the majority of Germans at the time, he too had no real idea what Hitler’s ascent to power would bring. Fascinated as he was in the early days of National Socialism, as so many intellectuals were, the German philosopher had lost sight of just how complicated structures of civilization are, especially in terms of how they harbour sublimated primal instincts such as inclinations toward violence and murder. Once unleashed, it is very difficult to regain control of these elements. And when one finally does manage to contain them within a new “cage” of civilization, they will nonetheless often continue to make their presence felt as a latent danger. There is never any shortage of people prepared to seize on and follow one form of megalomania or another.

In the Europe of the eighteenth century, the state had a monopoly on violence and actually became the sole authority in this arena. State violence, which historians and philosophers had already justified earlier *post factum*, was for the most part generally tolerated in almost all its expressions. The state call to arms and even to crimes freed an increasingly secularized European population from further questions with respect to their role in conflicts and their individual responsibility, even more so because of the ways in which the state put euphemistic language to use: One spoke in such situations of historical necessities, of the struggle for a better future, of sacrifice for the Fatherland, etc. As was the case with Thomas Hobbes, the author of the *Leviathan* from the seventeenth century, it was generally assumed that state activities derived their authority from nature, which is often how they were justified and legitimated. When looking to the past, we can certainly appreciate how captivated people could be by instruments of violence, even the guillotine, when these were put to use by state powers. Opposing voices from the

same time-period, like those of Hugo Grotius or John Locke, although well-known, were taken less and less seriously from the eighteenth century onward.

So, it seems as if we willingly descended into hell, or at least into grave error, which is where our future seemed to lie.

2. The century of wars, murder, forced migration and human rights

The twentieth century is known as the century of war, murder, expulsion, and, at the same time, it is also known as the century of human rights. And that is no coincidence:

It is not at all paradoxical that the century in which human rights were most often violated is also the century when minority protection and human rights became pressing political issues. We often respond to reality by means of law and legislation. Historians know that regulations and laws always illustrate realities against the grain, or negatively, as it were. When expulsion is made illegal, for example, this means that expulsion has already become an aspect of political reality. I don't intend to cite too many figures, not least because they tend to be very approximate when they extend into the millions. In any case, throughout the twentieth century, an estimated eighty million people are believed to have been persecuted, whether this was through being forced to flee or evacuate, being expelled, deported, banished, or being made to do long years of forced labour. The estimated numbers of persecuted Europeans range from between six and ten million people during the First World War, and rise to as high as sixty million throughout the Second World War. This amounts to ten per cent of Europe's total population. In Poland and Germany, where huge resettlements were still taking place several years after the war, the persecuted made up more than twenty per cent of the respective populations. It is estimated that, during the last huge wave of Poles returning to Poland from the Soviet Union between the years 1939 and 1959, a full third of Poles changed their place of residency.

The number of dead in the Second World War is estimated to be a further fifty to sixty million, less than half of whom were soldiers. This high number of civilian casualties starkly differentiates the First World War from the Second, especially in Eastern Europe where World War Two turned into a veritable inferno, especially (but by no means exclusively) for the Jews. We now know a great deal about the fate of Soviet soldiers who died by the millions in German prisons from starvation and malnutrition. But we still know too little about the fate of the civilian population in occupied Poland, White Russia, the Ukraine, Yugoslavia, and Greece,

where thousands of villages along with their inhabitants were burned and millions more were transported to Germany where they were used as slaves. The civilian costs of World War Two in Germany were, by comparison, not as devastating, but here too one seldom spoke about them, as if civilians were only incidental costs of war. During the Cold War, the attempt was made to account for the high numbers of refugees largely by explaining them in terms of experiences of flight and forced migration out of the East, but this explanation is now understood to be stylized propaganda. Incidentally, in Poland as well, for a long time following the war, nothing was said about Polish victims of flight and displacement from the East, though there are different reasons for that silence.

In any case, modern wars are strongly associated with an ever increasing number of refugees, because modern armies are no longer dependent upon civilian populations. Earlier, civilian populations were certainly subject to violence—people were robbed, women were raped—but at the same time, civilians were spared because the military needed them to provide housing and sustenance. Today's soldiers eat better than civilian populations in areas of conflict because their provisions are constantly being replenished by means of goods delivered by ground or air. They are also housed in protected facilities that are in many ways reminiscent of medieval castles or US-American forts in aboriginal territories. And in general, military personnel have very little contact with the surrounding population. As a consequence, anxiety and fear prevail on both sides.

3. The Stateless

I want to avoid misunderstanding: Despite such large numbers of persecuted people during the twentieth century, it is *not* the numbers themselves that define what is so specific about the history of migration processes. Rather, we need to draw attention to three other characteristic elements: the relations to ethnic and racial minorities and also the nationalization of civil liberties. The first two factors are not entirely new, especially in the colonial context, while the third element, the nationalization of civil liberties, is thoroughly “modern.” A related phenomenon is the emergence of the hitherto unknown category of “stateless persons,” people who are expelled from their own country or who must flee their own country but who are refused entry by any other country.

What is characteristic of the twentieth century is the dramatic increase in the numbers of refugees in the wake of military conflicts. The Second World War

produced ten times more refugees than the First World War. This supports the suggestion that, in the event of another Europe-wide war (even of a conventional sort), different forms of forced migration would affect the majority of the continent's population. One can look to the present-day example of the Middle East, and here I am referring to Syria, to find strong support for this argument: At this point, it is estimated that at least every second Syrian is currently being forced to flee their home.

[4. Photography Supplement: The Everyday Context of Persecuted Peoples]

5. The European Community of Forced Migrants and Present-day Refugees

Even in light of the multiple perspectives, the nuances, and the critical inclusion of individuals' contemporary memories, the picture I have painted here of war, flight, and forced migration in twentieth-century Europe makes it tempting to speak of a "European community of forced migrants." I understand this community to be, above all, a warning. All too often, we tend to speak about historical victims without having in mind the victims who are in very similar situations in the present. And we are again living through a period of war, flight, and forced migration. So our responsibility does not stop at "remembering" victims, and in any case it does not stop at participating in ritualized commemorative days relating to past events; rather, we must also keep it in mind that our own directives, our own actions or even our own crimes from today—and I cite here from Erich Maria Remarque—"could become the grounds for shame tomorrow."

6. Europe between the wars and the question of changing attitudes

Going from a state of peace to one of war is a much simpler transition to make than most people think during times of peace. A prime example of this is the short period of time that elapsed between the two world wars. The Europe that had emerged out of the experiences of First World War could be described as largely pacifist. For illustration of this sensibility, we need only recall works by Erich Maria Remarque, Romain Rolland, David Herbert Lawrence, Jaroslave Hašek or Andrzej Strug. Everyone was hoping for perpetual peace, and this is true even amongst Germans who were the most dissatisfied. Despite this general desire for peace, we

know all too well what happened instead: The increasingly bloody revolution in the Soviet Union and the long and horrible Second World War, coupled with the mass murder of the Jews and a politics of extermination, particularly in the Soviet Union, which had cooperated with Hitler's Germany for two years. By comparison, the First World War seemed almost idyllic to the populations of Central and Eastern Europe from 1939 onward, a perspective that is powerfully illustrated by Siegfried Lenz's *The Heritage* [orig.: *Heimatmuseum*, 1978] and Czesław Miłosz's *The Issy Valley* [orig.: *Dolina Issy*, 1955].

The same can be said regarding young people in Europe. After the First World War, youth across Europe but especially in Western and Southern Europe were guided by a fairly idealistic worldview. They were not nationalistic, but rather internationalist in their viewpoint; they opposed war; their attitudes toward other people were informed by altruism; they searched for ideals and for spiritual leaders and were guided more by the principle of brotherly love than they were by hatred. They wanted to inaugurate a new period, a better period. The idealism of this youth, as well as their radicalism, both of which sprang entirely from their disappointment in the world, can be clearly seen in works by Oscar Hammen and Edward Hartshorne or in Walter M. Kotschnig's work on educational systems. So the youth in no way wanted war; rather, what they were looking for was spiritual leadership and in the end, they found Hitler, Mussolini or Stalin, since these offered them radical solutions.

How could it happen that these same young people and this same culture, including some of the greatest minds in the arts and sciences, could turn from internationalist ideals to hatred? How could they turn from a love of the world to a hatred of others that took on such monstrous proportions during the Second World War? How could it have been so easy to pull a war-averse Europe of the 1920s into another war?

And why was Europe incapable of seeing what was brewing? Even Florian Znaniecki, founder of Polish sociology and co-founder of American sociology, was still speaking positively about the Russian experience of revolution in the early 1930s. He compared post-revolutionary USSR to ancient Greece and Rome, and also with the US, in all of which he saw exemplary models of a people who had been inspired by the spirit of progress. He placed Lenin next to Heraclitus: Both, he argued, had wanted to create a new civilization, one that would destroy the preceding one. In 1934, Znaniecki gave a prognosis regarding the further

development of Europe and the world that turned out to be completely false: He was convinced that the general aspiration was for a more human and humanitarian civilization, in which aggression would be on the continual decline. Conflicts between peoples would be dissolved through increased cooperation and compromise. Harmony, he felt, would gradually come to replace a military spirit. At the very same time, Carl Schmitt was in the process of developing his theories regarding the special rights of states and nations in the grips of a revolutionary spirit. In the name of progress, Schmitt argued, they could legitimately break with international laws and customs.

Since then, one of the most important questions of world history has become how the youth and, more generally, how the entirety of Europe could turn so quickly from international ideals and love to hatred and murder. Unfortunately, we still don't know the answer to this question, which means we cannot yet afford to rest easy. And that is also why, as long as we don't have the answer to this question, we should focus more on cooperation than on division. And why we should develop European structures of memory, including museums, to replace the national structures currently in place. Such European frameworks could offer protection in case of a crisis, and not be a burden. It suffices in this context to cite the wise council of Holm Sundhaussen: "Whoever wants to fight against future forced migrations should not focus on national memories, but rather on causal analyses and the preventative measures that can be derived from them. The current collective memory of forced migration is [...] still freighted with national or folkly connotations and so reproduces precisely that which led to the forced migrations in the first place. Forced migration as a national site of memory is, from that point of view, counterproductive (even when it is framed by references to the forced migration of other national groups). Against this, forced migration as a 'European site of memory' could point the way out of this national trap."

7. "Precautions" as protection from thieves and murderers

Fernand Braudel believed that life only maintains itself because of the balance it can achieve; otherwise, it will get swallowed up. Indeed, all ancient religions and philosophical systems have taught that humans must practice self-control. Thus, almost 2500 years ago, the ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zhou shared the following advice: One has to protect oneself from thieves who open trunks, search bags, ransack tills, and smash plates and heads by, he writes, "securing with cords

and fastening with bolts and locks.” That is what he calls “precaution.” This advice is relevant, above all, to situations in which an evil state – a “strong thief” in Zhuang Zhou’s terminology – is capable of unleashing beasts.

Put otherwise: we must do everything we can to avoid triggering an avalanche. Once set in motion, there is nothing to stop it – unless, like the Titans, we are able to move mountains.

Translated from the German by Sarah Clift.