

Women, gender and exile in Europe during the modern period

19th-20th centuries

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ABSTRACT

During the modern period, exiles were for a long time essentially masculine figures in representations. Yet the study of forced migration, whether of a political, religious, or sexual nature, shows that from the early nineteenth century onwards, women were also part of the phenomenon of exile, which we understand here in a broad manner as all forms of forced expatriation. While feminine exile figures were rare during the nineteenth century, the widespread nature of such mobility beginning in the early twentieth century also involved women, who little by little demanded access to functions of representation within exile groups, thereby upsetting the gendered norms of political commitment. After the adoption of the Geneva Convention in 1951, the first legal text to provide an international definition for refugees, women won recognition for their particular role in the phenomenon of exile and asylum. It was only in 1985 that the High Commissioner for Refugees held the first forum on women refugees, thereby emphasizing their uniqueness.



Spanish refugees at the Cerbère frontier post, January 1939.

The role of women was long neglected in research that attempted to quantify and analyze exile, which can be defined as an international migration completed under compulsion. Exiles were first and foremost masculine figures in both representations and historical research on migrations. Similarly, the family and feminine aspect of exile has long been neglected, to understand the welcoming arrangements and asylum policies that were gradually developed in Europe to receive exiles. Including a gender perspective also helps understand how exile could upset

the gendered division of roles traditionally attributed to the men and women engaged in these specific migrations.

Starting in the late eighteenth century, a mass exodus drove men and women to go abroad: the Emigration during the French Revolution, which led to the expatriation of more than 140,000 individuals, had a considerable female composition, since entire families left France at the time. After crossing the English Channel in the summer of 1791, Madame de Genlis (1746-1830) travelled a long route through Belgium, Austria, Switzerland, Holland, and Prussia, before taking the road back to Paris at the very beginning of the nineteenth century. Among these women, those who were married to foreigners were particularly harassed, as in 1798 the Bureau des lois formally forbade them from following their spouses, at the risk of being personally accused of emigration. However, two years later, the partial amnesty of émigrés granted by Napoléon Bonaparte on 28 vendémiaire An IX (October 20, 1800) concerned all of the women who had left France under the authority of their husbands, as well as those who had emigrated on their own initiative.

During the nineteenth century, exile became a genuine “institution,” an obligatory step for political opponents in the Europe of the Congress of Vienna. Women, who could choose to remain in their country, follow their spouses abroad, or sometimes fully assume the posture of the exile by emigrating as a single woman, nevertheless represented a minority of these mass movements which prompted liberals, democrats, but also legitimists to leave their countries in the defense of their ideals. If one is to believe the statistics of the French Ministry of the Interior, in 1831 women and children represented approximately 10% of the primary groups of refugees who were welcomed and aided by the July Monarchy (Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian liberals, for a total of over 5,000 individuals helped at that date). However in France, only men were considered authentic refugees, and thus able to hold an individual certificate in their name and enjoy allowances from the government. Among these Italian patriots welcomed in France at the time was the Lombard princess Cristina di Belgiojoso (1808-1871), who in 1831 settled in Paris, where she established a salon four years later. She stood out by virtue of her emancipation and political activities, and became involved in the publication of political newspapers of exile (the *Gazzetta italiana*, the *Ausonio*), before returning to a Lombardy in revolt in 1848, where she did not hesitate to take up arms.

The repression of the People’s Spring concerned revolutionaries of both sexes equally. In the German states, Amalia Struve (1824-1862), the wife of Gustav Struve, went into exile with him in 1851 in New York, where she taught German to support her family. Mathilde Franziska Anneke (1817-1884) also fled to the United States after fighting in the Palatinate and the Grand Duchy of Baden. In a sign of the importance of forced migration in the transnational diffusion of first-wave feminism, shortly after her arrival in Wisconsin in March 1852, Mathilde Franziska Anneke published the newspaper *Deutsche Frauen-Zeitung*, the first feminist press organ founded by a woman in the United States. Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte’s coup in 1851 also led to the mass departure of approximately 10,000 “banned” republicans, including women and children; it was initially without her husband or children that the feminist Jeanne Deroin (1805-1894) went to London in 1852, which welcomed a number of communard women after the spring of 1871.

With the intensification of forced migration in the late nineteenth and especially the early twentieth century (Armenians, Russians, Ukrainians), the question of women’s place in exile continued to be raised. The Spanish “Reds” fleeing Francoism were interned in France in single-gender camps. During the Second World War, a number of them joined the Resistance and were deported. At a time when elsewhere in Europe supervisory organizations (García Lorca clubs of Brussels and Liège) wanted to confine refugee women to nurturing and maternal duties, the communist Dolores Ibárruri (1895-1989), the “*Pasionaria*,” continued her political struggle, and served as an activist during her exile in the USSR from May 1939.

After the Second World War, the discussions that had begun during the 1920s within the League of Nations regarding the development of a status for refugees came to a successful conclusion. The Geneva Conventions, adopted in 1951, defined the refugee in an abstract manner through the criterion of individual persecution. In France, the application of the convention, which has been overseen by l’Office français de protection des réfugiés et des apatrides (OFPRA) since 1952, has allowed the granting of “refugee” status to women from Latin America or Southeast Asia who sought asylum in the country in large numbers. These women have engaged in politics, founding women’s associations and sometimes feminist ones. The “Latin American Women’s Group,” formed in Paris in 1972, published a Spanish and Portuguese language monthly news bulletin (*Nosotras*, 1974-1976), while Cambodian women who fled the Khmer Rouge regime created an Association for the aid of Khmer women in 1977.

During the ensuing decade, international organizations took the situation and legal status of women in exile more into account. In 1985, the High Commissioner for Refugees (HCR), which since 1950 has been answerable to the United Nations (UN), held the first forum on women in Geneva: it demanded that women persecuted “solely because they are women” be granted refugee status as defined by the Geneva Conventions more easily. In France, OFPRA provided the first gender-based statistics for asylum seekers only in 1992, with only one third being women at the time. Sometimes tragedies have abruptly given greater visibility to those seeking refugee status in Europe, as in 1998 when the Nigerian woman Sémira Adamu refused a forced marriage and sought asylum in Belgium, but saw her request rejected, and was strangled to death by officers after being deported. During the twenty-first century, the flow of migrants and asylum seekers from Africa and the Near East towards Europe, a migratory movement that initially was primarily masculine according to HCR numbers (approximately 70% men in spring 2015), is slowly tending towards feminization (40% men only a year later). The arrival of women, pregnant or accompanied by children, highlights the greater vulnerability of female migrants, as well as the specific nature of the problems and violence, particularly sexual violence, that they encounter because they are women, both during the journey into exile, and during their asylum experience in Europe.

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