

The Historical Foundations of the Greek Working Class Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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Introduction

In 2015, the Syrian Civil War prompted over 487,000 refugees to seek asylum along Europe's Mediterranean coast.¹ Greece has been heavily impacted by this crisis, receiving over fifty percent of all refugees entering Europe.² However, this is not the first time Greece has faced an immense amount of incoming refugees. In 1923, after the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, Greek minorities were forced out of Turkey and into Greece.³ Although the Greek government was successful in politically and economically incorporating these Anatolian refugees into the population, the refugees faced discrimination within Greek society.^{4 5} The 1920s refugee dilemma parallels the contemporary refugee crisis, both resulting in an increase in anti-immigrant sentiments within Greek working class (GWC) communities. Native response to the modern Syrian refugee crisis can be evaluated from a historical lens to evaluate the extent to which the influx of Syrian refugees into Greece has impacted the native Greek working class.

Native Response

The advent of Syrian refugees into Greece has cultivated anti-refugee behavior within GWC communities. A 2015 study, detailed by Dominik Hangartner, co-director of the Immigration Policy Lab, contends that natives who encountered Syrian refugees often resisted accepting refugees into communities.⁶ This is supported by a 2016 article from the newspaper *Dimokratis*, which describes the concern natives had over the prospect of their children attending school with refugees.⁷ Syrian refugees are not the only immigrant group to face nativist discrimination, as many have experienced unsupportive behavior since the early 20th century.

After migrating to Greece as prescribed by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, Anatolian refugees faced resentment from Greek citizens on various sides of the political spectrum. Anna Koumandaraki, sociologist at the University of Crete in Greece, states that conservatives attacked immigrants with the justification of nationalism, while leftists viewed immigrants as threats to the economic prosperity of the native GWC.⁸ Although Koumandaraki generalizes the views of the political Right and Left, the presence of nativist ideology within Greek society during the 1920s exemplifies the existence of resentment towards Anatolian refugees. While the unsupportive nature of the GWC has been evident, it is important to recognize that some natives have aided incoming refugees. A 1926 article by Charles Howland, Chairman of the Greek Refugee Settlement Commission, describes the supportive actions of Greeks. While the article is dated, it serves as a documentation of the Greek response to the Treaty of Lausanne, which was enacted three years prior. To aid refugees, the GWC established philanthropic organizations and emergency services. However, these efforts were not enough to support the population of Anatolian refugees.⁹ Nonetheless, the benevolent actions of the GWC during the 1920s illustrate that while some refugees faced resentment when entering Greece, others were supported by its natives.

Members of the modern GWC have also taken the initiative to aid Syrian refugees entering Greece. Anglos Evangelinidis, a researcher at the University of Graz's Institute for Southeast European History and Anthropology, argues that despite the Greek government's inability to support native populations, the refugee crisis has prompted an altruistic response from the GWC.¹⁰ Stefania Kalogeraki, associate professor of sociology at the University of Crete,

confirms Evangelinidis' statements, noting that Greece sports a greater amount of refugee crisis volunteers than other European countries.¹¹ Kalogeraki fails to mention that Greece's proximity to Syria influences the country's refugee intake, which naturally lends itself to more volunteering opportunities. Although an unsupportive climate exists in Greek communities, there are individuals willing to assist incoming refugees.

The Implications of Greek Nationalism

The recent inundation of Syrian refugees into Greece has evoked increased nationalism among the GWC. According to University of Crete lecturer, Anna Koumandaraki, Greek nationalism has elicited the social exclusion of incoming refugees since the 1990s.¹² Although nationalism has amplified exclusion, the potential benefits must also be acknowledged. In his 1956 novel, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*, Thomas Hodgkin, researcher of African history, indicates the political efficacy of nationalism by highlighting the ongoing endeavor for independence in African nations during the 1950s. Hodgkin claims that nationalism will serve as a major factor in revoking imperialism from African nations.¹³ While the article focuses on African colonization, its description of nationalism as a method of achieving political goals is rhetoric exhibited throughout Greece's history. Nationalism's benefits are further discussed in a 2009 article by Gustavo de Las Casas, a doctoral candidate at Columbia University. By presenting data from the International Social Survey Program, a transnational program that conducts annual social science surveys, Las Casas concludes that nationalism improves a country's economy.¹⁴ Although both Hodgkin and Las Casas fail to offer specificity to Greek nationalism, they provide context as to why significant action has not been taken to suppress nationalism within GWC communities throughout history.

In an attempt to eliminate the cultural diversity that emerged from the Treaty of Lausanne, the Greek government utilized a nationalistic approach, allowing only the Hellenic language to be taught in schools.¹⁵ It should be noted that the Anatolian refugees spoke Turkish, a language spoken within the Ottoman Empire, which during the 15th century, controlled Greece.¹⁶ It is probable that the law was established out of fear of Turkish domination in Greek society. That being said, it instilled the notion that non-Greek culture was inferior, fostering a hostile relationship between natives and refugees. In a historical account, published in 1980 by the Centre for Asia Minor Studies, an institution dedicated to research regarding Asia Minor Greeks, refugee Maria Birbili expressed discomfort when she encountered natives on the Greek island Chios.¹⁷ This parallel between nationalistic and anti-immigration sentiments is comparable to Greece's political climate during the Syrian refugee crisis.

The Golden Dawn party, an extremist nationalist party, gained electoral prominence within Greece during the June 2012 election as a result of the refugee crisis, which other political parties struggled to take a firm stance on.¹⁸ A peer-reviewed article by Chrysovalantis Vasilakis, a specialist in international migration and data science, indicates that a one percent increase in refugees correlates to a five percent increase in votes for the Golden Dawn. The study was performed on refugee-hosting islands, as well as islands that received no refugees, to ensure the ongoing economic crisis did not influence the votes.¹⁹ However, it is significant to note that this study took data from the unannounced September 2015 election, where parties did not have sufficient campaign time, likely impacting the votes. Nevertheless, the data represents the GWC population's votes to some degree, making the correlation between the refugee crisis and the increase in votes for the Golden Dawn well-founded. While nationalism has benefited some, analogous to the beliefs of Las Casas and Hodgkin, the growing Greek nationalism within



working class communities has resulted in an anti-immigrant sentiment among the GWC, a pattern similarly observed in 1920s Greece.

Solution

It is imperative that a method of reducing the harmful nationalism and targeted discrimination that exists within Greek working class communities amidst the Syrian refugee crisis is established. Erik Lundberg, a political science professor at Dalarna University in Sweden, another country impacted by the Syrian refugee crisis, found that Swedish adolescents who participated in volunteer activities expressed fewer anti-immigrant sentiments than those who did not.²⁰ The demographic of Lundberg's study is representative of the GWC population, ages fifteen to sixty four.²¹ GWC communities, particularly those located on refugee-hosting islands, are ideal for this solution as they contain numerous refugee-centered volunteering opportunities. The youth population of the GWC also lends itself to an educational solution. Kai Wei, a PhD candidate at the University of Pittsburgh, proposes the implementation of immigrant-centered history education as a way to reduce anti-immigrant attitudes in the United States.²² While the proposition is designed for American schools, Greece's immigrant-rich history will serve as sufficient curriculum for Greek schools. Without increased involvement and immigration-focused history education, anti-immigrant sentiments will continue to plague communities for decades to come.

Notes

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6. Dominik Hangartner et al., "Does Exposure to the Refugee Crisis Make Natives More Hostile?," *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 2 (December 2018): 444, doi:10.1017/S0003055418000813.
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8. Anna Koumandaraki, "The Evolution of Greek National Identity," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 2, no. 2 (2002): 46, Academia (30647944).
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11. Stefania Kalogeraki, "Volunteering for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Greece," in *Solidarity In Europe: Citizens' Responses in Times of Crisis*, ed. by Christian Lahusen and Maria T. Grasso, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2018), 171.
12. Anna Koumandaraki, "The Evolution of Greek National Identity," 48.
13. Thomas Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa* (London: Frederick Muller, 1956), 71.
14. Gustavo de las Casas, "Is Nationalism Good For You?," *Foreign Policy*, no. 165, 2008, 53-54.



15. Anna Koumandaraki, "The Evolution of Greek National Identity," 45.
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