

Introduction to the Monograph

Transit, a Pivotal but Often Overlooked Phase in Refugees' Trajectories

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Currently, Europe faces a massive refugee crisis. Severe problems arise from overcrowded transit camps, such as Moria on the Greek island of Lesbos, at the external borders of the European Union. Today's refugee transit crisis is often considered as "unprecedented" although transit is not a new phenomenon. The 20th century, often called the century of the refugee, is characterized by a great number of massive refugee crises, caused by diverse conflicts such as World War I, the Partition of India, the Algerian War, World War II, the Soviet-Afghan War or the Indochinese War. All of these crises involved refugee transit in zones in between the country of origin and the country of resettlement. Still, refugee studies' focus is mainly on today's transit refugee crisis. By directing the attention to previous periods in history in which large-scale refugee movements were taking place and in which refugees were temporarily hosted in transit zones, scholarship can provide a very valuable historicizing perspective to a humanitarian challenge Europe is facing today.

This Special Monograph of *Impossibilia* contributes to this historicizing perspective on refugee transit by focusing on the experiences of Spanish Republican refugees who, due to the Spanish War (1936-1939), resided temporarily in transit country France. In the 1930s, over half a million of Spanish Republicans sought refuge in France. France was not prepared for this massive influx of refugees and hastily improvised reception centers and refugee camps, while stimulating the refugees to leave France and go back to their country of origin. Many Spanish Republican refugees stayed for a relatively short period in France and then fled to other destinations, such as the Americas. Other Spanish Republican refugees resettled permanently in France. Several decades later, in the 1960s and 70s, Spanish refugees who had resettled in the Americas, came back to Europe and, in some cases, stayed temporarily in France before returning to their country of origin. Again, France assumed the role of transit country 'in-between' the country of resettlement and the country of origin.

We adopt a transnational perspective on the Spanish Republican women refugees' experiences in France as a transit country. We reflect, specifically, on the processes of self-

construal and agency development. In the early 1990s, migration researchers (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 1994; Schiller, Basch, and Blanc, 1995) proposed to adopt a transnational perspective on refugees' identities and activities. On the basis of their fieldwork, they stressed the processes by which refugees "forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link their societies of origin and settlement [...] into a single social field" (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc, 1992).

This perspective on refugees' experiences differed considerably from the traditional view on refugees as isolated outsiders in the society of resettlement who dream of a swift return to their country of origin and therefore keep postponing the process of integration.

We start from this conceptualization of transnationalism and apply it to the case of 20th-century Spanish refugee women, while adding two key issues: first, the importance of the transit country and second, the focus on refugee women's agency.

First, we consider the refugees' self-construal as a process that involves not only the dynamics between the country of origin and resettlement but also of the transit country. We argue that the transit phase is more than a temporary 'in between' phase: it is an important component of the multiple transnational context in which the refugees embed their activities and forge new identities. We show how the Spanish women refugees foster, during this phase, a sense of a new life. The transit phase is, for the Spanish Republican refugees, not only a period of despair but also a phase in which new social relations are initiated, new life projects are conceived and life changing experiences take place. Some of the Spanish Republican refugees fall in love and thus find a partner with whom they will build a new life, others establish relations which give their (intellectual, political) work a new direction.

Second, we rethink not only the Spanish women refugees' social relations but also their agency in a context beyond national borders. We thus understand the practices developed by these women refugees as agentic strategies to connect several nation states in

one field. Hence, these agentic strategies are instrumental in the creation of cross-border feminism, philosophy, literature, and political ideology.

This Special Monograph makes the case that transit in France was a pivotal phase in the 20th-century Spanish Republican women refugees' self-construal and agency development. Transit in France, we argue, bore fruit with the work by the first and second generation of refugees. Today, it seems unlikely that asylum will become more easily accessible in Europe in the near future or that Europe's restrictive border rules will become more open. Given the continuing flows of refugees, and their accumulation at entrance points, reception centers, ghettos and port cities at the outside borders of the EU, the time spent by refugees in transit spaces will likely increase. It is thus reasonable to assume that refugee transit will continue to play a major role in the future. With this societal trend in mind, the knowledge that transit is not necessarily a phase of hopelessness, passivity and despair is even more vital. Insights in the 20th-century Spanish Republican refugee women's way of transforming the transit phase in a meaningful period of their refugee journey may offer innovatory guidance about how to address the current refugees' struggles with the same challenge.

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