

▀ Tying the Past with the Present

Migrant flows have always been a part of human history, but the perception of these flows has changed. The international AGYA workshop 'Refugee Transfers in the Euro-Arab Mediterranean Zone' explored how host communities viewed and dealt with migration throughout the centuries.

Over 65.6 million people worldwide are refugees or internally displaced.¹ This, arguably, is the largest migrant flow in the history of mankind, surpassing even World War II. AGYA members Tamirace Fakhoury and Jenny Oesterle organised an international AGYA workshop to put current events into a transhistorical perspective. Jenny Oesterle explained: 'Flight, displacement, persecution, and protection of refugees are not only currently relevant but have a historical dimension which reaches far back to the premodern era'. From 10 to 12 April 2017, the workshop brought together researchers specialised in different time periods and disciplines in Byblos, Lebanon to discuss how societies received refugees and how migration might enrich communities both of arrival and origin.

■ FROM THE FIRST MUSLIM REFUGEES TO THE FIRST MODERN MIGRANT CODE

The contributions of the workshop participants showed how host communities dealt with the frequent population transfers between major ethnic and religious groups within the Mediterranean. Jenny Oesterle focused on the first Hijrah in the seventh century, when early Muslims fled religious persecution in Mecca and crossed the Red Sea to the Kingdom of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Recognizing their similarities as worshippers of a monotheistic faith, the Christian king welcomed the refugees and granted them protection. Another example are the aftermaths of the Ottoman-Russian wars of the nineteenth century, which pushed over two million ethnic Muslims from Russian into Ottoman territory. The Ottoman Empire reacted by setting up refugee camps, even opening the imperial mosque Hagia Sophia as a reception camp. In 1857, the Ottomans created one of the first modern migrant codes that allowed refugees to build homes and exempting them from taxation and conscription to ease their settling and integration.

■ REFUGEES' CULTURAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Another aim of the workshop was to look at refugees as 'agents and transmitters of cultural, political, economic and societal norms', as Tamirace Fakhoury highlighted. The works of Iraqi-German writer Hussein al-Mozany, for example, demonstrate how immigrants culturally enrich their host communities and foster

a shared identity. His novels, written in German, not only speak of identity and integration but also open windows to foreign worlds for his readers. In the Middle Ages, the flight of Europe's Jewish and Muslim populations from the Christian Reconquista of Spain and the Inquisition illustrates knowledge transfers through migration. They were re-integrated in the Eastern Mediterranean, bringing Andalusian achievements, for example in the field of Arabic grammar, with them.

The workshop's findings will be published in an edited volume. Transnational Migration is one of AGYA's cross-cutting topics, which started with the AGYA Conference on Migration in 2016. The goal is to address issues of migration from an Arab-German perspective.



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¹UNHCR 2017: <https://goo.gl/27Mbxw>