

BOOK REVIEW

Poulos, Margarite. *Refugee to Revolutionary. A Transnational History of Greek Communist Women in Interwar Europe*. Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville (TN) 2024. x, 265 pp. Ill. Maps. \$99.95. (Paper: \$34.95; E-book: \$19.99.)

Margarite Poulos's most recent work examines the transnational experience of Greek communist female cadres during the Bolshevikization period. Poulos, who has previously focused, *inter alia*, on women's participation in the Greek Revolution (1821) and the Greek Resistance (1941–1944), addresses an important historiographical void in the twentieth-century history of women in Greece. Indeed, her previous works do not extensively examine women's involvement in the communist struggle in the 1920s and 1930s – an important period, however, for the communist women who would later become involved in the resistance struggle in the context of World War II.

The title *Refugee to Revolutionary*, probably inspired by Rosemary Sayigh's pivotal work *The Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries*,¹ demonstrates how the refugee experience and identification influenced women's becoming involved in the communist struggle. Several other studies have examined the intersection of refugee experiences and politicization since the harsh material conditions of refugee experiences seemed to push and pull these subjects to become involved in revolutionary politics.² Poulos's study specifically examines how the Anatolian refugee identity and the momentum of Bolshevikization of the Kommounistiko Komma Ellados (KKE, Communist Party of Greece) after 1924 allowed the broader participation of women, particularly refugee women, within the Party.

Here, I should add that refugee identity does not necessarily lead to radicalization; it is necessary to examine the specific material conditions of the refugees to better understand their involvement, as the refugees were a heterogeneous population under the common determinant of displacement. Indeed, the refugees were not a unified homogeneous group. Solely foregrounding refugee identity does not help us explain why certain refugee areas and their inhabitants – such as those in Kokkinia and Kaisariani that later became strongholds of Ethniko Apeleutherotiko Metopo's (EAM – National Liberation Front) resistance in Athens – became a breeding ground for the communist movement. For instance, some refugees who settled in Athens after the Greek-Turkish population exchange in 1923 and therefore managed to bring with them a small part of their possessions, were able to start their lives in the motherland under more favourable

¹ Rosemary Sayigh, *The Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London [etc.], 1979).

² For instance: Από τη Σπίθα στη Φλόγα, *Η Εθνική Αντίσταση στις γειτονιές της προσφυγιάς 8ος τομέας ΕΑΜ-ΕΛΑΣ-ΕΠΙΟΝ-ΟΠΛΑ Νέα Ιωνία – Νέα Φιλαδέλφεια Νέο Ηράκλειο – Καλογρέζα* (Athens, 2021); Anne Irfan, *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System* (New York, 2023).

conditions. In contrast, refugees who arrived in Athens as a result of abandoning their homes *in the midst of the war*, in a climate of persecution, were unable to do the same (refugees in Vyronas compared with those in Kaisariani in Athens).³ With the exception of the small minority of refugees who were able to bring some of their assets to Greece, the majority had to live in dire conditions, first in rooms initially confiscated by the government and later in the refugee settlements built by the Refugee Rehabilitation Committee; some even had to be temporarily sheltered in makeshift shacks.⁴ The inhumane living conditions, the economic marginalization, the psychological effects of being uprooted, along with the hatred and racism they faced from “native” Greeks arriving from Turkey provided fertile ground for their engagement with revolutionary politics in the ranks of the Communist Party, especially after 1929–1930.

The book consists of five chapters, plus the introduction and conclusion. The first chapter examines the “radicalization” after the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which determined the borders of the newly established Republic of Turkey, the successor to the Ottoman Empire, and required the compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey. Following the war, around 1.3 million refugees arrived on Greece’s shores, mostly women and children as many men died at the front or became prisoners of war and were never seen again. Poulos examines the harsh material conditions that characterized the lives of these refugees, adopting a gender-sensitive lens. This gender-focused approach makes sense given both the composition of the refugee population *and* the mass incorporation of refugee women in the workforce following the war. These refugee women, who would later travel to the Soviet Union to become “professional revolutionaries”, first became involved in the struggle through their workplace, for instance through the tobacco union. By elaborating how the first steps in the struggle arose from their involvement in union politics, Poulos demonstrates the link between poverty and radicalization in the refugee population in 1920s/1930s Greece.

The second chapter moves further in history and explores how these politically active women, who had already been involved in militant action and had organized and demonstrated their commitment to the Party, were provided with opportunities for advancement throughout the 1930s. As Poulos argues, “the restructuring and mobilizational practices of the KKE in line with the Comintern’s agenda presented new and concrete opportunities for greater political involvement, integration and advancement well into the 1930s” (p. 56), which was unprecedented for Greek communist women due to the patriarchal culture that predominated in Greece in the 1920s/1930s. These women travelled to Moscow to become “professional revolutionaries [and] acquire[d] a Marxist-Leninist education”. Poulos examines the various institutions that welcomed international cadres, such as the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV), the International Lenin School, and the Communist University of the National Minorities of the West (KUNMZ), their curriculum, and differences. Having abandoned their previous employment, these cadres were ready to dedicate their life to the struggle and serve the revolution in their respective countries.

³ Μενέλαος Χαραλαμπίδης, *Η Εμπειρία της Κατοχής και της Αντίστασης στην Αθήνα* (Athens, 2012), pp. 36–37.

⁴ Γεώργιος Τζεδόπουλος, ‘Εισαγωγικό Σημείωμα’ σε *Πέρα από την καταστροφή: Μικρασιάτες Πρόσφυγες στην Ελλάδα του Μεσοπολέμου* (Athens, 2003), p. 36.

Chapter Three delves into more detail regarding the Greek sectors of the various universities aimed at international revolutionary cadres. Poulos specifically examines women's representation in these universities, providing information regarding their ethnic composition and class (Greek nationals of refugee origin or Soviet Greek). Through this careful consideration of class and ethnic composition along with their gender, Poulos offers a more intersectional analysis, engaging critically with the identity markers of class and ethnic origin and how these markers interplay with the identity of the revolutionary women examined, instead of solely reducing their identity to gender.

Chapter Four focuses on the lives of these communist women as narrated by them in their *anketa* (personal biographical files) or autobiographies. Poulos examines the personal (and interpersonal) narratives and how these narratives are constructed at the intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity. Through this close reading of the *anketa* and the available autobiographies, we are able to delve into the emotions of these women and see how they engaged with their past selves, showing their reflective interactions with their own past lives and experiences.⁵ Regarding the autobiographies examined in the book and in this chapter specifically, I should add that a double reading of how women engage with their past experience based on the exigencies of the present⁶ – given that most women write their memoirs later on in life, following years of exile and prosecution – would have been particularly interesting and could further enhance our understanding of gender memory.⁷

Chapter Five is specifically dedicated to Chrysa Chatzivasileiou. Despite being one of the most important women in the Greek communist movement of the 1930s and 1940s, she has fallen into oblivion, especially compared to her comrade and communist martyr Electra Apostolou, whose actions continue to inspire the communist movement even today. Chatzivasileiou's story remains forgotten, partly due to her stance towards the end of the Civil War (1946–1949) and partly because she died in exile in 1950 without being able to tell her story herself – hers remained an unfinished story, unlike those of others who returned to write their memoirs and autobiographies.⁸ Poulos's chapter tries to address the issue of Chatzivasileiou's absence from the sources, exploring her life and trajectory up until her death, including her essay/booklet *The KKE and the Woman Question in Greece*, probably written in early 1946.

In sum, the book is an important contribution to the history of Greek communism, gender history, and refugee history. It provides interesting insights into the interplay of identities that influenced the trajectories of these refugee women who became involved in the communist struggle in Greece during the 1920s and 1930s. Poulos demonstrates

⁵ Nefissa Naguib, *Women, Water and Memory: Recasting Lives in Palestine* (Leiden [etc.], 2008), p. 22.

⁶ Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration* (Cambridge [etc.], 2007), p. 5.

⁷ I followed this double-reading approach, where I examine the memoir both as an "object" of the past and the present, in one of the chapters of my Ph.D. thesis ("Women in Left-wing Resistance Movements in Occupied France, Italy and Greece: Between Resistance, Gender, and Memory (1940–1945)", University of Glasgow, 2025). I specifically examine personal memoirs by women resisters in occupied Greece, Italy, and France (1940–1945) during World War II.

⁸ Apostolou was equally unable to write her own story, but her martyrdom in the struggle for liberation turned her into a heroine of the Greek communist memory.

how the global influenced the local, and vice versa. The use of the sources included and used to write the stories of these women is equally impressive given that some are previously unexplored Russian sources located in Moscow. Formerly unavailable to the wider public, these Soviet archives offer important insights into the creative agency of these women and their revolutionary subjectivity.

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