

“We took over by force what was not given to us civilly”. Refugees claim their right to housing in a 1936 squatting incident

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INTRODUCTION

The present paper aims at providing an insight into the practice of squatting in the context of a refugee housing crisis through a historical perspective. It focuses on a specific episode that illuminates the viewpoint of the squatters and the meanings that they attribute to their action as part of a timeless struggle to proper housing.

Mass and organized occupation of building structures for housing purposes is a phenomenon relatively underexplored by international literature. In Greece specifically, the discussion about squats takes as a starting point the political movements and the respective mobilizations of the late 70s to early 80s. What preceded is quite obscure. Thus, squatting in the context of the Asia Minor refugees' settlement in interwar Greece is an unknown case, historically silenced and socially forgotten. Exploring it in the present framework can help us historicize the practice as an active

contestation towards the state's spatial governance that appears much earlier than it is usually thought.

The episode that is presented here took place in Mytilene, capital town of Lesvos Island, in February 1936. At that time, 85 homeless refugee families organized over a single night and simultaneously took over the houses of two settlements that were being built by the state. They were demanding to permanently settle in the houses as a final resolution to their 14 year old housing adventure. They eventually came to defend the occupation as the authorities repeatedly attempted to evacuate them with violent or devious means. The episode generates various questions, primarily as to the motives of both the squatters and the state. Apart from the standard who, where, when, why of the historical research that can be revealed by examining the context, it is crucial to understand how the squatters perceived and signified their action, how the state interpreted such actions and how the media presented the episode.

The present case study is part of an ongoing research regarding the formation and transformation of the Asia Minor refugee settlements that relies on both archival findings and oral testimonies. The local and national press of the time provides invaluable information on the topic. Articles, letters and reportages gathered from newspapers of different political orientations present the incident from various viewpoints and help in contextualizing it. What I attempt to do here is a “thick description”¹ of a particular episode in the sense that I intend to specify not only facts but also details and conceptual structures in order to extract meaning and reach an interpretation.

LESVOS AS AN EMERGING BORDERLAND AND REFUGEE HOSTING PLACE

The sea route from the East to Europe through the Greek islands that is used by the recent migration flows is not newly established. Crossing the sea stripe between Lesvos and the opposite coast used to be a routine among the vast commercial networks of the Ottoman Empire; and evidently long before that. Since the first years of the establishment of the border between Greece and Turkey in 1912² the movement between the two coasts survived either as a flow of smuggled goods (*kontrampanto*)

or in the form of people crossing over to seek refuge in one country or the other. The island faced at least two major refugee crises in the last century, the greatest being that of 1922.

Between 1913 and 1914, tensions in Greco-Turkish relations resulted in the arrival of about 100,000 Christian refugees from Asia Minor on Lesvos. The events of that period are known as the First Persecution (*Protos Diogmos* in Greek) and turned Mytilene into a refugee city for the first time in its modern era. The existing accounts show that in 1916 almost half of the city's inhabitants were refugees³. Yet, in a couple of years the peace in Asia Minor was restored and the majority of the displaced returned back to their homelands. It wasn't long before a new refugee tide flooded the island once more. In 1922 the defeat of the Greek army by the Kemalist forces incentivized the persecution of the Christian populations that reached a tragic peak with the Great Fire of Smyrna. At that time, the arrival and permanent settlement in Greece of 1.2 million Christian refugees from Asia Minor shook the country in almost every respect - socially, politically and financially. Lesvos was then again at the epicenter of that massive shift of populations.

It is estimated that about 300,000 people docked on the island during the autumn of 1922; 35,000 of which settled there permanently.⁴ Mytilene, the capital town, came to accommodate 13,000 new inhabitants that comprised almost half of its population. During the first five years, temporary settlement took over almost every open space and public building of the city. Churches, schools, parks, warehouses and the former Turkish estates that remained abandoned were flooded with destitute people, while tents and shanties sprung up everywhere. It wasn't until 1927 that the program of permanent rehabilitation for the refugees inaugurated its implementation with the construction of a large refugee settlement at the edge of the city.

THE PERPETUAL ADVENTURE OF REFUGEE HOUSING

The refugee tide brought along an acute socio-economic crisis that the state alone was unable to address. Since the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) introduced an exchange of populations with a binding character, every hope of return for the displaced faded away very soon.⁵ Hundreds of thousands of homeless and unemployed refugees were

in urgent need not only of temporary aid, but of permanent solutions. The national program of permanent rehabilitation for the refugees was developed later that year under the command of an international humanitarian committee and with funds acquired by international loans.⁶ Apart from alleviating the refugee issue, the program also served other long-term national interests. By siting the newly-arrived populations mainly in the provinces of Macedonia and Evros it aimed at consolidating the contested northern borders of the state. Additionally, the refugees were channeled away from the metropolitan areas and towards the agricultural sector to safeguard the urban order.

The program prioritized heavily the housing needs over employment and its sustainability was highly disputed. Urban and rural settlements sprung up all around Greece, but despite the intense construction effort, there were never enough vacancies to house everyone. Until the late 30s almost half of the refugees were still living in tents, shacks and other precarious dwellings waiting their turn to be allotted with a house in a settlement. For many years the right to proper housing was the central political demand of almost every refugee association.

Despite the intentions of the state, more than half of the refugees chose to settle in the cities, forming makeshift shantytowns on the outskirts. The emerging refugee neighborhoods in the Greek cities became centers of a new urban culture and of a strong and long-lasting refugee identity.⁷ Holding a marginal position in the socio-spatial hierarchy of the urban fabric, they became places of segregation, deprivation and poverty, but also of industriousness, tidiness, collegiality and pride. These “spotless slums” (Hirschon, 1998, pp. 3-4) were also cradles of political radicalization where left ideology had a strong appeal.⁸

During that time, in fear of a gradual proletarianization of the poor, the central intention of the state was to build a broad petty bourgeois class on the solid foundations of land ownership. The need for rehabilitation of the refugees as “decent house owners” was stressed by most political parties of the time. The land policies followed by the state can be analyzed from different theoretical perspectives. In a Gramscian perspective, they can be considered as part of a hegemonic plan aimed at securing the consensus of these lower strata through the ideological use of land and home ownership.⁹ The land aspect was notably suited for this purpose since it responded to issues

that concerned the masses and also allowed the state to ‘offer’ at a low cost. From a Foucauldian point of view, it can be seen as a tool aimed at controlling and managing the population, particularly the refugees that were characterized by high mobility. From this perspective the state can be considered as targeting the creation of subjects who, by enjoying of the special right to acquire urban land became more obedient, manageable and loyal to the established order.¹⁰ In any case, during that time property ownership was charged with great political significance and the commodification of refugee housing was one of its aspects. Additionally, the auction of the newly built settlements would provide the impoverished and indebted state with funds to pay back the refugee loans.

Thus, in 1927 a Bill was passed according to which the houses of the settlements would be sold directly to the refugee beneficiaries that were until then accommodated for free. The procedure was as follows: three-member committees would estimate the value of each house and set the price; refugee tenants would be asked to state within three months whether they intended to buy it at the arranged price; if they were not interested, the house would be offered for sale to other refugees; eventually the houses would be repaid in installments within 15 years. This plan allowed tenants and homeless refugees to become proprietors in a short time and under quite favorable conditions. Nevertheless, this central decision of withdrawal from the social nature of the refugee housing program towards a more profitable resolution intensified the feeling of injustice among the most disadvantaged. Furthermore, the majority expected nothing less than free housing as a minimum compensation for the properties that had been left behind in Anatolia. To them the Greek state was held responsible for their loss and suffering due to its careless decisions that led to defeat and persecution.

All in all, this attempt to commodify the state-owned housing was poorly achieved, since it appealed to a small part of the homeless refugees and full repayment eventually never happened. However, this shift actually meant the end - already at birth - of social housing in Greece. As a response to that, the first mass and organized squatting took place in Athens in 1927 when homeless refugee families took over the newly built houses of three major settlements in Kaisariani, Vryonas and Nea Ionia. The episode led to negotiations and violent confrontations according to a series of reports in the newspapers of the time. Further historical research could reveal the various as-

pects of the episode and the final outcome of the struggle. The incident that I examine below, albeit 9 years later, manifests an active resistance to this shift as well.

THE MULTIFACETED CRISIS OF THE 30S AND ITS EFFECT ON THE LOWER CLASSES

During the interwar period the refugee issue was not the only major problem of the country. The Great Depression had a strong impact on the national economy and led to bankruptcy in 1932. Moreover, Greece was trapped in a constant political turmoil that involved coups, dictatorships and civil conflicts. In 1936 events were accelerating dramatically since national elections drove to a political dead-end. At the same time social unrest was manifesting with massive movements of strikes, demonstrations, factory occupations and riots among the impoverished and unemployed workers. The communist guidelines were heavily influencing those struggles that in some cases led to generalized popular uprisings. But the fear of communism was being strategically cultivated among the most conservative parts of the Greek political and social system, paving the way for the establishment of the totalitarian regime of the 4th of August.¹¹ During that period the socio-economic downturn aggravated social antagonism among the lower classes and tensions among refugees and locals escalated. Some newspapers, instruments of right and far-right wing, incited aggressions towards refugees, targeting them as the cause of all national problems. As an outburst of this, a refugee settlement in Volos was attacked and set on fire.¹²

It is in this context that a mass popular uprising took place on Lesvos. In the winter of 1936 hunger and unemployment was kneeing the working class of the island. Harsh weather and bad crop led to a large number of the islanders surviving mainly on wild herbs and weeds. During the first week of February some villages faced mobilizations of groups of unemployed workers that were demanding bread, work and welfare support. At the same time, through its press the Communist party was calling for those groups to unite and take collective action. On February 10 a demonstration took place in the city of Mytilene where thousands of unemployed and starving people took over the streets. The insurgent crowd was demanding bread and work

from the local authorities and eventually clashed with the police and the army that were commanded to disperse it. The upheaval lasted for about a week and it's during that time that the incident of mass squatting took place.

THE REFUGEES, THE STATE AND THE PRESS: DISCOURSES OVER A SQUATTING INCIDENT

Unlawful housing practices such as arbitrary constructions of dwellings (and even churches) were common among the refugee world. Yet, they were often met by a silent tolerance from the Greek authorities as a self-regulative way of alleviating the problem and relieving social tensions. Mass and organized squatting, however, was interpreted as defiance towards the state's sovereignty. Such actions appeared to be inspired by socialist ideologies and had to be violently repressed. Apparently, when refugee and communist identities overlapped and manifested, they presented a truly precarious patchwork to the political establishment.

On the other hand, homeless refugees had very little to lose by engaging in such radical actions. Their former lives in Asia Minor were discontinued by the traumatic experience of uprooting. Fortunes, homes and family members were forever lost and conditions in the new homeland didn't quite meet their expectations. Especially for the most disadvantaged that abruptly descended the ladder of social hierarchy to find themselves trapped in the margins of the Greek cities the feeling of injustice was overwhelming. Through a letter to a local leftist newspaper we can hear the vivid voice of an anonymous squatter that provides us with unique insights into the hopes, expectations and frustrations that fueled part of their struggle.

So they exchanged us as if we were sheep, without asking our opinion, and then they brought us here, promising to rehabilitate us. [...] And instead of sheltering us like humans they threw us in the wooden shacks that they set up in Lagada. Instead of roofs they had tar paper. In 1927 a strong north wind took them and wounded some of us. Under the pressure of the dwellers, the State was obliged to install some phony metal sheets and promise that they would build a settlement. A few years later the government of Tsaldaris built 80 little houses beneath our

shacks and while we were waiting to finally enter our homes they announced that they would sell them and only the ones who had money would get a house. Thus, we stayed behind in the shacks because we didn't have a dime. Our compensation pennies had been spent many years before. (Embros, 1936, March 7)

As neglect and mockery raise the refugee housing issue to a moral level, another letter reveals an inside viewpoint on the constant political bargain between the political parties and the refugees.

The liberals and the conservatives that governed us for so many years pretended to be protectors of the refugees to steal our votes. Now the conservatives started the fight again and through their official press they curse us and call the locals to burn our houses down (like it happened in Volos) and chase us away like lepers. And the liberals undertook our protection once more. But what did they do during the many years that they were in government? [...] For 14 years they kept us canned like sardines inside the wooden shacks. Winters passed and we were rotting in there and no one cared about us. The new houses in Lagada and Kalithea were built long ago, but it seems that they were destined for others or that they wanted us to buy them. Till the time came that we couldn't carry on anymore. The recent rains brought us to a desperate state. We all got rheumatisms. Our children got sick with tuberculosis. And all of us, faced with such abandonment, took the unanimous decision to take over by force what was not given to us civilly. I don't suppose that any man who thinks righteously can say that we did wrong. But now the state remembered us! And it sent its enforcers to violently throw us out. Yet our collective resistance held them up. Now it sends various moles that terrorize the refugees and blackmail them to abandon the houses or get thrown in jail. But our decision is to fight, defending our life, until they take us out in pieces. Anyway jail is better than life in the wooden shanties. (Embros, 1936, February 22)

The writer justifies the action by reversing the unlawfulness towards the state's practices, oriented by a mixture of populism, profit, corruption and repression. The representation of the needy refugee is adopted here since it is highly functional towards this cause. But at the same time it directly contradicts with the subject that is struggling to re-conquer its agency. In addition to the restoration of justice, squatting is considered as a moment of action that ruptures a long period of passivity and en-

ables the squatters to take matters into their own hands.

The squatters' suspiciousness, which is a typical condition in most cases of occupation without legal tenure, is justified here by the illicit means employed by the authorities in the attempt to evacuate them. Threats, tricks and propaganda are summoned to the cause both by police and intermediaries. Elsewhere an episode is described where a group of police officers managed to evict a family by promising to give them a house in another settlement. In order to deceive them, the officers drove the family to their supposed new house, while their peers were throwing all their possessions out. And elsewhere a refugee testifies that various intermediaries are employed to propagate that they should leave or else they will be hanged. Below is an abstract from an article where a journalist and a parliamentarian, member of the Communist Party, pay a visit to the squatters. The romantic dream of proper housing that rapidly dissolves is presented in a sharp allegory:

Here we are in Lagada; from afar we see beautiful and newly built little houses in a great location. The midday sun endows them with a special brightness. [...] But as we approach the beautiful picture dissolves. There are no roads at all, nor lamps, nor water. Potholes are everywhere. Faces are pale, undernourished, women with their backs humped from deprivation; children look aged and sickly. And how strange!... When they see us they get in the houses and disappear. The ones on the windows give us hateful looks. [...] All the residents of the settlement go to bed and wake up with the same fear, that they will be evacuated and when they see a stranger they take him for a bailiff or a snitch. (Embros, 1936, February 29)

The editors of this newspaper devote a series of articles that endorse, support and legitimize the squatters' actions. The image of the squatter is mediated through the representation of the press that stresses the moral aspect of the issue. On a political level, the left press sees an opportunity where the right press sees a threat. The extreme right press¹³ maintains an ambivalent attitude that reveals the populist methods and the importance of attracting the refugee vote. In the abstract below it is mildly denouncing and calls for resilience as the most effective strategy.

Since the beginning we reproved the arbitrary occupation of the dwellings of the settlements, because it would be unthinkable to ever applaud it and because no man that respects himself would be possible to encourage such actions that turn

against the Laws, neither to fondle such mob ruling attitudes. But since the harm is done and we are before fait accompli we think that this has to be examined by the authorities with some sympathy and above all with calmness and superiority. [...] We acknowledge that sometimes human need can be even stronger than the Law [...] Throwing a man in the streets these days is a cruel and inhumane measure and especially under the circumstances that the island finds itself it is not wise at all. [...] It is unknown why the lawmaker that composed the Bill about refugee housing imagined that the homeless refugees are earners and millionaires. [...] A real homeless person, towards whom the State has explicit obligations, is the one who cannot pay his rent nor secure his bread. And yet it is him that the Law and the Governmental order deprive from his right to shelter!!! (Fos, 1936, February 28)

Until lately I had no clues as to how this struggle ended since relevant references on the local press fade and disappear. But during fieldwork in the neighborhood I discovered that the squatter's descendants are still living in these houses. In the interviews I was initially reluctant to ask directly about that episode, fearing that it might be offensive to associate the community with unlawful means of possession. But on the contrary it came out that this episode was praised as an important conquest of the past that functioned almost like a foundational myth for the community, cultivating feelings of pride, empowerment and place attachment. The 95 year old man that remembers occupying his house as a child with his family was happy to narrate the story of this community of fishermen that lived in the shanties and occupied the houses in one night. He proudly tells that the police couldn't take them out and that Welfare service came later to distribute legal documents.

The relationship between squatters and the political system in the process of establishing legitimacy has to be further investigated. Here refugees were not passively subjected to the state's policies, but neither did they seek to subvert the social order or spatial hierarchies of the Greek cities. While checking for a possible relation of the current residents to the Communist Party I sensed a silent support. A female interviewee told me: "when I was young I almost lost my job at the factory for being in the Party, so I had to quit". And as another informant stated, "what we did over the ballot box is one thing, but I had seven mouths to feed, I couldn't mix with politics". It seems that these people couldn't afford the cost of being openly political and that fact

outweighed the tendencies towards more radical claims. Currently I plan to expand the research with more interviews in order to illuminate how schemes of memory in such context function in the long-term.

CONCLUSIONS: SQUATTING AS AN ACTIVE CONTESTATION OF THE STATE'S SPATIAL GOVERNANCE

The history of the Asia Minor refugees' settlement in Greece is often told in terms of a successful achievement and almost never in terms of a violent struggle,¹⁴ but here we explored an episode of collective claim to housing when the state/refugee confrontation reached its peak. In the context of a political and financial turmoil, an acute housing crisis, the "threat of communism" and the strategic significance of land ownership I sought to find an entry point to this underexplored and currently relevant phenomenon.

It is interesting to observe how the state manifested not as a coherent and rigid mechanism, but rather on the basis of improvisation. Repression was the initial and automatic central reflex. Yet, this response offered to the squatters a chance to shift from a denunciatory discourse to a militant one. Thereon, the authorities resorted to illicit means to achieve their eviction, but faced with strong resistance and possibly under the pressure of the public opinion finally compromised. Thus squatters turned quickly into tenants and in the long run they became proprietors. It is precisely this flexibility of the official policies that achieved assimilation and ultimately pacification of the marginalized and threatening to the status quo strata. On the other hand this opportunistic attitude of the state impeded the planning and implementation of a concrete social housing program.

A double subordination was imposed upon the protagonists of this story: they were both refugees and homeless, thus culturally and socially "others". Squatting was a scenario of survival, a practice that addressed their urgent housing needs. But their collective action aimed not only at producing shelter; it was also an act of rebellion. This example from the past offers a case of an unmediated struggle that helps us transgress the boundaries between active political agents and refugees, since refugees take

over urban political action and demand their right to the city.

Squatting as a practice involves a sense of political disobedience that brings it close to other conditions of relegation on the margins of the city and the society. As Sanyal (2009) observes in her research of the Palestinian camps in Beirut, the act of squatting empowers the refugees to stake claims to land in analogous ways to their urban poor counterparts in cities of the developing world. Squatters, homeless, undocumented migrants and other marginalized groups express a differentiated way of being in the city and exercise the right of living beyond the law.

NOTES

1. This approach is based on interpretive ethnography as introduced by Geertz (1973).
2. The first Balkan War (1912-1913) and the subsequent military actions put an end to the island's 450-year-old Ottoman era. The island remained under the control of the Greek Army and Navy, but it was officially annexed to the Greek State in 1914.
3. Data obtained from Mytilene's Sorority School, *Register of pupils 1914-1915 and 1915-1916*. General Archives of the State, Department of Lesvos.
4. According to the 1928 consensus out of the island's 122,720 inhabitants 35,485 were refugees, while in Mytilene out of 31,661 inhabitants 13,512 were refugees. (Ministry of National Economy, 1936, p.338).
5. The socio-cultural results of the Population Exchange between Greece and Turkey are thoroughly examined for both parts in the collective volume edited by Hirschon (2003). For an earlier research on the topic in English see Pentzopoulos (2002).
6. The Greek Refugee Settlement Commission was established by the League of Nations in 1923. Details on its work can be found on the accounts of its chairman Morgenthau (1929) and his successor Eddy (1931).
7. For more on the social life of the Asia Minor refugees see Hirschon (1998).
8. Since the Treaty of Lausanne guaranteed the civil rights of the “exchanged” populations, refugees constituted an electorate that could agitate the political status quo. The main preexisting political forces of the time were anxiously seeking to absorb refugee vote under the imminent “threat of communism”.

9. This interpretation is based on Gramsci's notions of hegemony and "the manufacture of consent" (Gramsci, 1971).
10. For more on Foucault's approach to the State's mechanisms of control over the population see Foucault (2009).
11. The Metaxas regime (1936-1941) was supported by the King and inspired by Mussolini's Fascist Italy. Fierce anti-communism was the core of its ideology and tactics.
12. Two wildfires were set among the refugee barracks of Volos within a period of two months. The second one, on the 12th of February 1936, killed a young refugee man (Tahydomos, 1936, February 13). Such outbursts were not rare since the first months of refugee settlement, but usually took place during periods of crisis and mainly under political motives.
13. Newspaper "Fos" in a few years would become the local Nazi instrument during the island's German occupation (1941-1944).
14. The only exception is the relatively well known "battle of the barrack" that took place in Drapetsona neighborhood of Piraeus in 1960 with refugees resisting their eviction from the shanty town.

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