

Downfall of the (European) Refugee Interwar Displacement as Seen Through the Life and Works of Irène Némirovsky

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Abstract

This paper aims to recover a trope of the refugee that has been missing for some time, lost amongst two divergent, yet fundamentally linked narratives: the romantic figure of the 19th century, struggling against tyranny, and the debased multitude washing up on our shores today. What links these narratives is a one-dimensional figure, and a forgetting of the history and the present in which refugees are active subjects of history. The shocks and disintegrations of the interwar period in Europe fragmented refugee communities themselves, and the subsequent collective memories of Europeans as to what it means to be a refugee. In particular, collective identities of refugees, and the difficulties of navigating difficult ethical boundaries as an exile, are aspects of the refugee experience that are either forgotten or denied by European society today, with catastrophic results for contemporary migrants from outside Europe.

Through the life and works of the interwar novelist Irène Némirovsky a missing link in the historical narrative of refugeehood can be recovered. A Jew, who later converted to Catholicism, whose family had fled the Russian Revolution, and who had settled in France, Némirovsky expressed in many of her characters the new challenges and tropes imposed upon various groups of European refugees at the time. In her novels she painted a portrait of the refugee that stripped away the pretensions of the romantic exile of the 19th century, yet at the same time framed the agency of the refugee in ways that have largely disappeared from view in today's collective memory. Her biography too, involving certain controversial aspects of her life, such as her association with far-right anti-Communist and anti-Semitic circles in France, illuminates the sense of dislocation and shifting identities of those in exile.

In her novels and in her complex life, Némirovsky demonstrated the ability of the refugee to shape history, while also being trapped within it. She tells stories of refugees, and of what it means to be a refugee that have since been lost, erased by the romantic paradigm that preceded her, and the 'placeless' and 'abandoned' subject that dominates discourse today. In short, Némirovsky reminds us of a more complex and more active refugee subject, that is currently absent from our collective memory.