



Civil Engagement and Cultural Transfers between Central and Eastern European Migrants and the Low Countries (from the 1930s to the Present): Introduction

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Recent historiographical trends have increasingly challenged the traditional narrative of 1989 as the “end of a contest” between East and West, the culmination of a long-standing ideological battle between two opposing, fortified, and ideologically-bound political camps.¹ In recent years, research has highlighted both the diversity of actors operating within the supposed Eastern “Bloc,” alongside the interactions taking place across the “Iron Curtain.” György Péteri, among others, has for almost two decades sought to “deconstruct” this popular notion and call instead for greater recognition of the multifaceted transnational flow and transfer of ideas, information, and people between East and West, replacing or at least supplementing the old terminologies with the more permeable conception of a “Nylon Curtain.”² Central to this reconceptualization of Cold War history as a fluid and interconnected one is the attention given to the anti-communist émigrés and dissidents who engaged in heavy lifting both at home and from afar against state socialist regimes, the product of a decades-long movement to contest the “mock homogeneity” of the bipolar Cold War world.³

When subjected to the camera obscura of the popular imagination, the term “dissident” projects images of the trade unionists of NSZZ Solidarność in

1 Krastev, “The Spectre Haunting Europe,” 89.

2 Péteri, “Nylon Curtain.”

3 Mazurkiewicz, “Political Emigration from East Central Europe,” 68.

Poland or Czechoslovakia's Charter 77 and their many supporters and opponents in the diasporic émigré circles. However, the diversity of Central and Eastern European political action is also encapsulated in the priests and ministers in East Germany, folk musicians in the Baltic states, and an immense parade of “feminists, peaceniks, and artists” noted by Paul Betts.⁴ But the very notion of the “dissident” itself is a contested one, applied post-1945 to simplified mass mobilizations against state socialism firmly within the Cold War political scope, and in this framework, these kinds of mobilizations have received the lion's share of scholarly attention.⁵ Closely related is the term “émigré” understood as an explicitly political actor working tirelessly in exile, perhaps best represented by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in West Germany or Czesław Miłosz in France and then the United States.⁶ The contribution of émigré communities to the flow and exchange of ideas went beyond mere political opposition, however, and they were instrumental in shaping a broader understanding of cultural resistance and human rights, or what was sometimes termed Cold War liberalism, thereby enriching the European cultural and intellectual landscape.⁷ Yet these émigrés represent but one form of migrant among many, obscuring the wider history of East-West migrations throughout the twentieth century and its range of manifestations. Though underground art movements or clandestine literature produced abroad were emerging from Central and Eastern European émigré communities, challenging state-imposed narratives and offering alternative perspectives on life under socialism, they were merely one facet of the much wider population movements crossing the imagined frontiers running through the heart of Europe.⁸

When discussing émigrés among the migrant populations of Central and Eastern Europe travelling westward, we must recognize that the Cold War lens narrows our view of the longer histories of European migration. Central and Eastern European migration to Western Europe has occurred in large numbers since at least the nineteenth century and throughout the interwar period, though

4 Betts, “1989 at Thirty: A Recast Legacy,” 274.

5 For a selection of studies on dissident activity, see Zadencka et al., *East and Central European History Writing in Exile 1939–1989*; Nekola, “For the Freedom of Captive European Nations”; Łukasiewicz, “The Polish Political System in Exile, 1945–1990.”

6 For the stories of these individual émigrés, see Pearce, *Solzhenitsyn: A Soul in Exile*; Kołodziejczyk, *Czesław Miłosz in Postwar America*.

7 Moyn, *Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times*.

8 Apor et al., “Cultural Opposition. Concepts and Approaches”; Nießer et al., “Cultural Opposition as Transnational Practice.”

these antecedents have received comparatively little scholarly attention.⁹ The emergence of the post-war political order and the restrictive regimes of mobility under communism did not so much “divide the European migration space” as simply push this migration towards new dynamics.¹⁰ If we depart from the Cold War image of the “émigré,” which equates East-West migration with dissidence, and instead take stock of politics as merely one of several factors influencing migration across the continent, we may open challenging yet fruitful avenues of historical inquiry. While renewed interest has brought about a boom in research on historical and contemporary East-West migrations, there remains much to be done with regards to branching out beyond the most prominent, valorized figures, seeking instead to locate “alternative perspectives [and] move away from concentrating on well-known exiles” who have already been well represented in the historical literature and probe hidden histories of migration across the entirety of twentieth-century Europe.¹¹

This special issue takes up the task of broadening our historical understanding of East-West migration, filling in the gaps of everyday migrant life, and expanding the chronological framework beyond the Cold War period (1945–1989). The articles investigate a variety of cases relating to Central and Eastern European émigré and migrant histories in order to expound on a central issue about which we still know comparatively little: the contribution of these Central and Eastern European migrants to contemporary European civil society and culture. The contributions in this special issue aim to invert the traditional focus and ask instead how Central and Eastern European émigrés and migrant communities affected the local communities they joined and explore the influences they not only had on social movements, but also on civil society and community life. We bring into view actors whose stories have been neglected by the existing scholarship, and by adopting methodologies which consider memory, heritage, and oral histories, alongside traditional archival research, the contributions trace and highlight the lasting, if subtle, legacies that these migrants left in their adopted societies.

9 For notable research in this timeframe, see Goddeeris, *La Grande Emigration Polonaise en Belgique (1831–1870)*.

10 Wallace and Stola, “Introduction,” 13. See also: Schönhagen and Herbert, *Migration und Migrationspolitik in Europa 1945–2020*.

11 Hammel and Greenville, *Everyday Life in Exile*, p. xii. This book serves as an excellent example of these alternative perspectives, covering a similar topic in the context of exiles and Jewish refugees in the context of Nazi Germany.

Departing from these vantage points, the special issue focuses on migrant communities in Belgium and the Netherlands (the Low Countries) from the 1930s to the present day. These collaborative efforts are the result of a two-year research project, “Émigré Europe: Civil Engagement Transfers between Eastern Europe and the Low Countries, 1933–1989.” The project enjoyed the financial support of the CELSA fund (Central Europ Leuven Strategic Alliance). As a joint venture between KADOC-KU Leuven (Belgium), Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest), Jagellonian University (Kraków), and Charles University (Prague), the undertaking grew out of the ambition to bring Central European historians and scholars into close contact with Western historians. It has resulted in a survey of Central European émigré activity in Belgium and the Netherlands, four international conferences (in Leuven, Prague, Kraków, and Budapest), and the production of a public heritage exhibition hosted online by KADOC.¹² Additionally, the pilot for an international prosopographical database of Czech, Hungarian, Polish, and Slovak emigration in the Low Countries from the 1930s to 1989 has been developed in the Nodegoat research environment.¹³ Though the project took the histories of Central European migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands as its point of departure, the intention was to present historical concepts, methods, and findings that can serve as inspiration for broader research incorporating more Western and Eastern European nations and cases. The primary goal of the project has been to explore new perspectives, and the findings and insights that have been collected here aim to further a more subtle understanding of European cultures of contact, dialogue, inclusivity, and exclusivity from a migration perspective.

The contributions included in this issue reveal the extent to which (and the senses in which) Eastern European networks of migrant and émigré communities can be considered important factors in shaping contemporary Western European understandings of Central and Eastern Europe, and vice versa. As emphasized before, they look beyond the political engagements, observing more deeply the cultural transfers that took place between home and host societies. To do so, the research included in this special issue analyses various exchanges and practices

12 The survey of émigré actors, organisations, and periodicals, in the context of the Polish community in Belgium, has been integrated into the Online Database for Intermediary Structures (ODIS), of which KADOC is a participating management institution [https://www.odis.be/hercules/_nl_home.php]. The “Émigré Europe” heritage exhibition can be viewed at [kadocheritage.be](https://kadocheritage.be/exhibits/show/emigreurope) [<https://kadocheritage.be/exhibits/show/emigreurope>].

13 For more information on the Nodegoat platform, visit <https://nodegoat.net/>.

of self-organization and engagement that occurred between migrant and host communities. Certain contributions also highlight the impact that interactions and relationships with the host society can have on migrant actors or on how the host society is motivated to act by Central and Eastern European political developments. By looking at transnational contacts and exchanges prior to and beyond the presumed caesurae of 1945 or 1989, the issue sheds new light on different processes and alternatives of European integration beyond the institutional level and center-periphery approaches that have dominated public and academic narratives.

From both a conceptual standpoint and in its methodological approaches, the “*Émigré Europe*” project has placed heritage at the center of its investigations. This has primarily been done through immersion in understudied or previously neglected archives: whether through the personal archival collections of individual migrants to Belgium and the Netherlands in the articles of Żaliński and Coudenys or of host society actors in the contribution of Dodds, or through investigation of Belgo-Polish migrant religious organizations, as in the article by Praszalowicz and Kuźma, and Dutch professional milieus in the contribution of Michela and Šmidrkalová. The special issue also incorporates the issue of transnational motivations and means of Belgian solidarity with Eastern European nations like Romania, informed by oral history methods in the article by Herrera Crespo. The methodological implications of heritage and memory sit at the forefront of the contribution of Hajtó, whose investigations of Hungarian families in the Low Countries also draws on literary, oral, and web sources, emphasizing the potential that cultural heritage can serve in uncovering the hidden memories of migrant experience across generations and into the present day, charting the spaces and methods of interaction between migrant and host societies.

The articles in this issue come together to offer a multi-perspectival view, combining information on the *émigré* and migrant communities themselves with information on the local institutions (religious, civil, and transnational) which supported new beginnings for *émigrés* and served as structures of reception, integration, and interaction. Among the contact sites under analysis are political activist circles, pastoral schools and community councils, churches and religious communities, and heritage societies and workplaces. These sites, where members of the host society and the various migrant communities mingled, arguably played crucial roles in co-creating a culture of civil engagement. The contributions cover a broad chronological scope, from the late interwar period

(Coudenys) to the present (Hajtó). In many ways, the research also acknowledges and challenges the idea of an inclusive and tolerant societal landscape, which in recent years has been a notion presented by Europe in general and the Low Countries in particular, for example in the spaces of solidarity demonstrated by Michela and Šmidrkalová, the intergenerational legacy and wider societal interest in migrant communities in the work of Hajtó, or the role of migrants in the preservation of common European heritage investigated by Praszalowicz and Kuźma. In contrast, the articles also demonstrate challenges to this notion of self-represented inclusivity: the Belgian-led organization at the center of Herrera Crespo's investigation is influenced by émigré networks but limited by the lack of migrant agency, for example. And it is not only barriers between migrant and host that appear in this research, as there is also a distinct lack of engagement between different migrant communities or even, in some instances, successive generations of migrants of common national origin, supporting the conclusions of Idesbald Goddeeris in his wider study of Polish community responses and layers of “indifference” in Belgium to *Solidarność*.¹⁴

The questions addressed by this special issue pertain to the preservation and reformulation of émigré heritage and identity through interaction with host societies, or the ways in which political, cultural, and religious markers can influence the practices and attitudes of migrant communities. The agency of host societies in facilitating mobility, aiding or resisting integration, or engaging with transnational networks and campaigns also emerges as a persistent issue in the research, cast against the often subtle but ever-present political backdrop not only of the Cold War, but also of the rise in migration-related anxieties in Western Europe from at least the 1970s.

The impetus and findings of this special issue, in seeking to illuminate not only the impact of Western host societies on Central and Eastern European émigrés but also the inverse, and in centering migrant and émigré heritage in the realms of political, civil, and cultural engagement and transfer, are particularly pertinent. The solidarities (and their limits) that transcended Europe's Nylon Curtain, along with networks and barriers that characterized East-West migration over the course of the century, seem a lost memory today.¹⁵ As the hidden histories of these communities fade into the past, and new dynamics of interaction and opposition between West and East emerge, this innovative exploration of émigré

14 Goddeeris, “Solidarity or Indifference?”

15 Christiaens and Claeys, “Forgotten Friends and Allies.”

history and heritage reasserts the civil and cultural contributions to modern Europe. These contributions have been shaped by migrations that facilitated encounters and dialogues of culture, civil engagement, and political activity, bridging East and West.

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