

DENATURALIZATION AND ASYLUM IN INTERWAR EUROPE

Migrations during and after WWI

In Chapter 9 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt describes the vast migrations set off by WWI, and the further migrations driven by the successor states. These were the new national boundaries set by the victors in WWI, primarily England, France, and the US. They're located along the eastern side of Europe, extending past Turkey into the Levant. The victors put a single national/cultural group in power, even though there were large numbers of people of other nationalities and cultures in those states. Most had significant numbers of Germans and Jews.

As the migrating minority populations in the successor states grouped together, the new states increasingly considered them a threat. This became a greater problem as Germany recovered from defeat and particularly with the rise of the Nazis. Anti-Semitism was rife across Eastern Europe, adding to the distrust of their Jewish population. Other large minority groups, such as Poles, Ukrainians, and Armenians, were also distrusted. In all cases the concern was that these populations would take the side of countries controlled by their nationality against the successor states.

Arendt says the victor nations saw themselves as having evolved legal regimes to replace arbitrary rule of kings and other despots, and that this was done so long ago that the presence of subgroups and migrants was not an existential threat. I think Arendt accepts their view that internal rivalries in these countries were sufficiently tamped down that they would accept the legal institutions, and even the language and culture, of the dominant group. Creating new nation-states from scratch lacked the evolution

that would legitimize the new governments.

So that when the precarious balance between nation and state, between national interest and legal institutions broke down, the disintegration of this form of government and of organization of peoples came about with terrifying swiftness. P. 275.

Denationalization

After WWI, there were revolutions in a number of countries. The winners then promptly denaturalized all the losers and evicted them, adding to the vast migrations. Some of these people were able to return to their home nations, but most weren't. Many had assimilated to the extent that they no longer identified with their native nation. Others had fled from oppression in their home country. In many cases, the home countries didn't exist, or their homelands had been under so many regimes they couldn't claim any single home country. This was the fate of millions of Russians and Armenians, Hungarians and countless others.

Arendt seems to accept the right of a sovereign nation to denaturalize its own citizens:

Theoretically, in the sphere of international law, it had always been true that sovereignty is nowhere more absolute than in matters of "emigration, naturalization, nationality, and expulsion"... Fn. omitted, p. 278.

Obviously large-scale denaturalization would be disruptive to other nations, and could easily lead to retaliation. For this reason it was not used on a mass basis. Arendt associates large-scale denaturalization primarily with totalitarian states, Italy, Germany and Russia. But almost all European countries adopted and used some form of this tool.

Denaturalization led to terrible problems after

World War II. The term stateless people gave way to a new term, displaced persons. This term carries the implication that as soon as things calm down, these people will be returned to their home countries. In other words, it simply ignores the reality of their status.

Asylum

Arendt says that asylum has a long history.

Since ancient times it has protected both the refugee and the land of refuge from situations in which people were forced to become outlaws through circumstances beyond their control. P. 280.

The concept of asylum as a human right, or a Right of Man, dates back to Medieval times, when people were held to be subject to the laws of whichever state they might find themselves in, and were entitled to the protection of that state. In our terminology, simply being in another country entitled you to be treated as a citizens of that country, and your home nation had no duty towards you. As the nation-state developed, asylum came to be seen as a derogation of the duty of the state of citizenship to protect its own citizens when they were beyond its borders, and thus was somewhat anachronistic.

When Arendt was writing (the mid-1940s) the right of asylum was a remnant of the Rights of Man, but was not part of international law, and was not written into national laws either, That has been remedied. Here's the Wikipedia discussion of the legal situation.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Right_of_asylum

In any event, the right of asylum wasn't much help to stateless people who didn't get to England or the US.

Arendt's personal experience

Arendt herself was one of these stateless people. Wikipedia tells us that while still in

Germany in the early 1930s she was arrested on account of working for a Zionist organization. She was released pending a hearing and fled the country over the mountains into Czechoslovakia, then on to Prague before settling in Geneva. She found work there, and eventually found her way to Paris. In 1937 she was stripped of German citizenship.

In 1940 she and all German ex-pat Jews were interned in the South of France. She managed to obtain papers of liberation. She was now a stateless person. Eventually with the aid of Varian Fry and others she was able to escape France and move to the US.

Discussion

1. Arendt politely doesn't mention that her new country, the US, turned away Jews seeking asylum during and after WWII.

2. The US had no definition of citizenship until the 14th Amendment set a baseline. We've had a number of laws on immigration, and we have naturalization laws. We have laws governing asylum seekers. We have the Emma Lazarus inscription on the Statue of Liberty as an aspiration. And for all the shrieking from right-wing scaremongers and their fear-junky followers, immigrants built this country.

Even the flow of immigrants and asylum-seekers into the US over the last few years doesn't compare to the tsunami of people on the move in Europe during and after WWI. Migrants continue to enter Europe today. I took the picture associated with this post at the Vienna train station in mid-September 2015. It shows a large crowd of Syrians, I think, fleeing the war there. In 2015, about 1.3 million people migrated into Europe. The latest wave is Ukrainians and others fleeing the Russian invasion.

And it's going to get worse as climate breakdown continues. Side note: Lake Michigan didn't ice over once in Chicago so far this year, despite several days of polar vortex. It's 61 as I write

this.

3. In a fortunate synchronicity, Heather Cox Richardson just wrote about the ugly history of US anti-Asian immigration laws. For a fascinating look at immigration, watch Celine Song's directorial debut film *Past Lives*. People move for many reasons besides climate breakdown, war, and famine. In another book, *Eve*, by Cat Bohannon, there's the suggestion that migrating played a large role in our evolution as a species.

4. Right wing provocateurs are riling up the rubes with pro-denaturalization anti-asylum rants. Corporate media respond with mindless drool like Pavlov's dogs. For a sane look at the problem, try this.