RELIGIOUS MIGRATIONS

by Tobias Weger

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Photo credit: The synagogue in southern Poland Łańcut, built in 1761 on the site of a previous wooden synagogue. The Jews in Łańcut were under the protection of the Lubomirski noble family. Tobias Weger, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

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What do the Canadian songwriter Leonard Cohen, the American director Woody Allen and the French chansonnier Charles Aznavour have in common?

Introduction

The history of Europe is a history of migrations.[1] Frequently, voluntary or forced migration processes were based on religious or denominational motives. Modern research distinguishes between push and pull factors in questions around the motives for migration: push factors explain situations where migrants yield to external pressure, while pull factors apply where the decision to migrate is voluntary. In a religious context, for example, the persecution of a particular faith practiced by an individual or a group can be a push factor. On the other hand, the search for a "promised land", the proclamation of one's own beliefs by missionary religions or the prospect of forming a new community with others who share one's own religious convictions would be examples of pull factors. In historical reality, religious forces as triggers for migration rarely stood alone, but overlapped with socio-economic, demographic, political or ecological factors.

Migrations for religious reasons always touch the sphere of law; these are found in the context of the toleration, recognition, favoring and promoting or exclusion and persecution of certain religions. But they also have social and cultural effects on the migrants and on the post-migrant host society by triggering intercultural processes that influence collective identity and promote either tolerance or isolation. All of these processes are subject to change over the course of history.

Religious migrations have often become firmly rooted in the collective memory of the respective group. The exodus of the ancient Jews from the slavery of the Egyptian pharaoh under Moses' leadership, for example, is one of the central narratives of the “Tanakh“

“Tanakh“

The Tanakh, also referred to as the "Hebrew Bible", includes the books of the Torah, Nevi'im and Ketuvim. Its contents correspond to the Old Testament of the Christian Bible.

's origins and thus forms a basis of Jewish identity.[2] Many Christian denominations, such as the members of the Armenian Apostolic Church or the Mennonites, also draw a sense of group consciousness from their historical persecution and diaspora situation.

Examples from the history of Eastern Europe

1. Poland as a host country for persecuted Jews

The history of Eastern Europe offers many examples of religiously motivated migration over the centuries. One of the best known is the settlement of Jews in medieval Poland, which was encouraged by the Piast rulers. Already in the 10th and 11th centuries, Jewish communities began settling in the centers of the emerging Polish state. When Jews were expelled from the territories of the Holy Roman Empire, Duke Bolesław Pobożny ("the Pious") granted them freedom of belief, trade and movement within his domain under the terms of the Kalisz Privilege, which he issued in 1264.[3] The Polish king Casimir III ("the Great") extended the privileges of the Jewish population in Poland in 1334 with the Statute of Wiślica

Statute of Wiślica

The Statute of Wiślica is considered the first constitution of Lesser Poland. When Kazimierz III. Wielki issued it on the occasion of his enthronement in 1334, he created a legal framework that strengthened not only the rights of the peasantry but also those of the Jewish population in social, economic and judicial terms: for example, the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and accusations of ritual murder and counterfeiting of money were explicitly forbidden, Jews were not allowed to be charged higher customs duties than the rest of the population, and they were granted the right to their own courts.

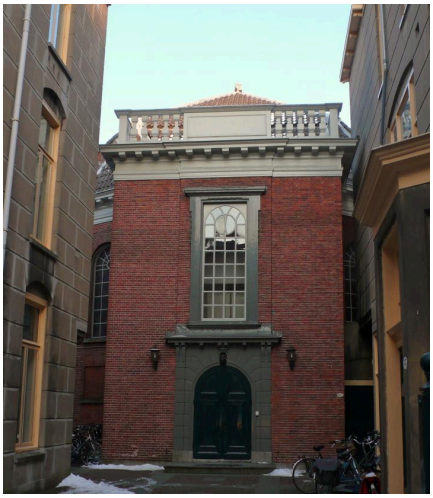
. While, in other European countries, people of the Jewish faith were being persecuted and deported, "Polin", as the country was called in Yiddish, became a safe haven, offering them, comparatively, significant freedoms.[4] Poland became a center of Talmud studies in Europe in the early modern period; the first printing works of Hebrew texts were established in Krakow and Lublin in the 16th century. Magnificent synagogues were also built throughout the country. In rural areas, however, many Jews lived in severe poverty. In the centuries that followed, periods of flourishing culture and tolerance in Poland alternated with periods of exclusion. A large proportion of Polish Jews were murdered during the German occupation in the Second World War; many survivors emigrated to the USA, Western Europe or Israel at the end of the war.

The interior of the temple synagogue in the Kazimierz district of Krakow (corner of Miodowa Street and Podbrzezie Street), built in 1860-1862 for the reformist community of the city, which at that time belonged to Galicia. Tobias Weger, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Graves dating from the early modern period at the Remuh Cemetery in Krakow (Polish: Kraków). Tobias Weger, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

2. From Friesland via Prussia and Russia into the world – the Mennonites

A global migration for religious reasons – that is, among other things, the history of the Mennonites, a Christian denomination named after the Dutch theologian Menno Simons (1496-1561).[5] He advocated adult baptism and unconditional pacifism. The Mennonites originally came from regions in the Netherlands and Switzerland. In particular, their stance as a peace church and the resulting rejection of military service repeatedly brought them into conflict with state institutions. From the Netherlands they migrated via East Frisia to Gdansk and the Kingdom of Prussia. There they played a major role in the agricultural development and settlement of the lower Weichsel valley and delta. The half-timbered houses they built can still be seen in many villages today. When this area fell to Prussia during the partition of Poland at the end of the 18th century, and the Mennonites were to be called up for military service, many of them fled and found refuge in the Russian Empire. However, when the exemption from military service was lifted there too under Tsar Alexander II in the late 19th century, the privileged period in Russia ended and many Mennonites now sought their fortune overseas. In the USA they met with Mennonite communities who had already emigrated to Pennsylvania in the 18th century and who had founded, among other things, the city of Germantown. But the South American states also became important host countries. To this day, an intensive religious sense of community and the cultural knowledge of a centuries-long history of persecution and migration continue to shape the group identity of the Mennonites.



Doopsgezinde Kerk (Mennonite church) in Groningen (Oude Boteringestraat) in the Netherlands, built in 1815 in a rear courtyard. Tobias Weger, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

A former Mennonite summerhouse from the Vistula region, today in Olenderski Park Etnograficzny (Mennonite Open-Air Museum) in Wielka Nieszawka near Toruń. Tobias Weger, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Mennonite burial cross in Olenderski Park Etnograficzny (Mennonite Open Air Museum in Wielka Nieszawka near Toruń). Tobias Weger, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

3. The Expulsion of Protestant Groups from the Habsburg Monarchy

In the course of the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation, the Habsburgs became one of the pillars of the papacy in the process of re-Catholicizing Central Europe. The members of the Bohemian Unity of the Brethren, which can be traced back to the Hussite Reformation and was initially tolerated in the Czech lands, experienced this as early as the 17th century. In 1628 their bishop, the well-known pedagogue and theologian Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius) was expelled from the country and began a lifelong exile, which led him via Poland, Sweden, Prussia and Upper Hungary finally to the Netherlands.[6] Some Brethren survived the period of persecution as Crypto-Protestants, others fled abroad. In Nowawes and in Böhmisch-Rixdorf near Berlin, the Prussian kings granted refuge to some of them,[7] while the Saxon nobleman Nikolaus von Zinzendorf established a new community of Bohemian exiles (Exulanten

Exulanten

Term for people who had to leave their homeland as (mainly Protestant) religious refugees from the 16th to 18th centuries. Derived from Latin "exsul" = exiled.

) in Herrnhut – the Herrnhuters, who went on develop and pursue missionary activities around the world.[8]

The Czech theologian and pedagogue Jan Amos Komenský as an educator and prominent spiritual figure in the Moravian town of Fulnek. Relief in the Comenius Mausoleum in Naarden near Amsterdam. Tobias Weger, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

"The Salzburgers who were expelled for the sake of the Gospel". Engraving by David Ulrich Boecklin, Leipzig 1732. Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0

Maria-Theresien-Gasse in the Transylvanian Großpold (Romanian: Apoldu de Sus), laid out in 1754 for the settlement of relocated Landler families. Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0

Also well-known is the migration of about 20,000 Salzburg exiles – Lutherans from the mountain valleys of the Prince-Archbishopric of Salzburg – who were expelled in 1731 and were able to settle for the most part in Prussia.[9] This expulsion process triggered a massive publicity campaign throughout the Protestant states of Europe. In East Prussia the new arrivals populated areas where a plague epidemic had shortly before led to a sharp decline in population.

Only three years later (1734) Emperor Charles VI began to expel Lutherans from the Salzkammergut and Carinthia. They found a new home as "Landler" in the Transylvanian parishes of Neppendorf (Romanian: Turnisor, Hungarian: Kistorony), Großau (Romanian: Cristian, Hungarian: Kereszténysziget) and Großpold (Romanian: Apoldu de Sus, Hungarian: Nagyapold) – though, incidentally, this was not

completely accepted by the Transylvanian Saxons, who had been living in the area for centuries and were also Protestant Lutherans.[10] The Austrian authorities glossed over the resettlement process from the Habsburg heartlands to Transylvania with the term transmigration

transmigration

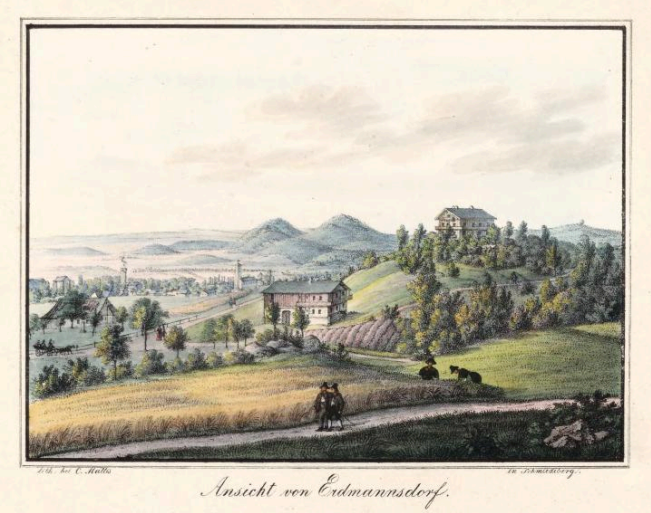
Euphemistic administrative term used by the Austrian court chancellery in the 18th century to describe deportations of population groups for religious-confessional, but also for ethnic or social reasons.

Also on the basis of their Protestant religious convictions, in 1837 Emperor Ferdinand I expelled "Crypto-Protestants"

"Crypto-Protestants"

Crypto-Protestants are people who outwardly practice the majority religion (usually Catholicism), but whose inner convictions and private lives follow Protestantism

from the former Salzburg part of the Zillertal, which had belonged to Tyrol since secularization. As a result, the Protestant-Lutheran mountain farmers had to search for a new place to live. Most of the families affected were settled in the Hirschberger Valley (Polish: Kotlina Jeleniogórska), on the Lower Silesian side of the Krkonoše Mountains, on the initiative of Countess Friederike von Reden and with the permission of the Prussian King Frederick William III.[11] In memory of their origin, they named their most important town Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf (Polish: Mysłakowice). Several houses built in the typical alpine architecture style have been preserved and still stand today as a physical trace of this migration history. Like most German Silesians, the descendants of the so-called "Zillertaler Inklinanten" were expelled from their new homeland after 1945, when Silesia was transferred to Poland.



"View of Erdmannsdorf", graphic by Carl Theodor Matthis, 19th century. In the foreground, figures in Tyrolean costume are clearly visible and at the center of the picture one of the Tyrolean houses can be seen. Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0

A Tyrolean farmhouse in Erdmannsdorf-Zillerthal (Polish: Mysłakowice); today it houses a restaurant offering Tyrolean cuisine. Tobias Weger, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

4. The Diaspora of the Russian Old Believers

In the 17th century a fierce internal conflict broke out within the Russian Orthodox Church when Patriarch Nikon of Moscow (1605-1681) called for a series of reforms. The points of contention ultimately concerned theological details – for example, the wording of the creed, making the sign of the cross with three fingers spread instead of two, the number of communion loaves, and the spelling of Jesus' name ("Іисусъ" instead of "Ісусъ"). The so-called Old Believers, who supported parts of the Russian elite, held on to the traditional principles and resisted the reforms. There was violent persecution of Old Believers by the reformers. Tsar Peter the Great, in his efforts to modernize the Russian Empire, intensified the reforms and ordered that the Old Believers' boyars trim their traditional beards. Many Old Believers fled to remote areas of Russia that were inaccessible by paths or roads. One group settled in the then Ottoman Dobruja.[12] There, tolerated by the Muslim authorities, they founded their own monasteries and churches. Many of the "Lipovans" still live in the Danube delta today as fishermen and smallholders. In the area that is today part of southern Ukraine they built a small town, Vylkove (Ukrainian: Вилкове), where canals form the main traffic routes, like in Venice. An important place of pilgrimage in today's Romanian Dobruja is the monastery of Slava Cercheză, and another important center is the large village of Sarichioi. Even today, many male Lipovans can be recognized by their long beards and traditional dress. They have preserved an ancient variant of the Russian language and have held on to their religious customs. Like other minorities in Romania, they have a political lobby, the "Comunitatea Rușilor Lipoveni din România". A group of Old Believers moved to North America in the 19th

century, where an important community still lives in the US state of Oregon, for example.

Lipovan wooden cross at the entrance to Sarichioi (Russian Сарикёй) in the Romanian Dobruja region. Almost half of the village's inhabitants adhere to the old orthodoxy. Tobias Weger / Tobias Weger, CC BY-NC 4.0

Richly colored paintings at the Birth of the Virgin Mary Church in Sarichioi (Russian: Сарикёй) in the Romanian Dobruja region. The churches of the Old Believers are characterized by their particularly splendid decoration. Tobias Weger / Tobias Weger, CC BY-NC 4.0

5. Armenians

With the Christianization of the Armenians and the foundation of the Armenian Apostolic Church in 301, the oldest Christian state church and at the same time the oldest oriental Christian church was established. The major dispersion of Armenians in the Orient, Crimea and the Eastern Balkans led to an Armenian diaspora in the Middle Ages, which also spread to the Danube principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia and to Poland in the 14th century.[13] The Armenian cathedral of Lviv (Ukrainian: Львів, Polish: Lwów), which dates from the middle of the 14th century, is an eloquent architectural testimony to this early presence. During the early modern period, richly decorated, ornamental buildings housing Armenian department stores were built in the planned city Zamość, the aristocratic ruler of the city having granted them tolerance. In the 17th century, Armenian refugees from the Danube principality of Moldavia arrived in Transylvania and found refuge in Elizabethstadt (Romanian: Dumbrăveni,

Hungarian: Erzsébetváros), where a baroque church still bears witness to their presence today. Priests of the Armenian Church had already maintained good relations with the Roman Catholic Church in the late Middle Ages; in the early modern period, Armenian Catholic (united) church communities were established in Poland and Transylvania, for example, which in practice led to a strong linguistic acculturation of the members. The genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire (1915) caused a further exodus, and today important Armenian communities can be found in France, the USA, Canada and a number of South American countries. Many of the emigrants have continued their religious practices far from their original homeland.

The Armenian Cathedral of Lviv (Ukrainian: Львів, Polish: Lwów), the core of which dates from the middle of the 14th century. Tobias Weger / Tobias Weger, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Dedication inscription at the Armenian Catholic Church in the Transylvanian town of Dumbrăveni. Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0

A headline from Church and Homeland. Newsletter of the Aid Committee of the Transylvanian Saxons and the Protestant Banater Swabians in the Diakonisches Werk of the EKD. Facebook, CC0 1.0

6. The church integration of German displaced persons and refugees after 1945

From 1945, West and East Germany began admitting German refugees, displaced persons and ethnic German repatriates from Eastern Europe, leading to a loosening of the denominational boundaries in many German regions, which, until then, had been relatively sharply delineated.[14] For example, the arrival of Catholic Silesians in Lower Saxony reinforced the Catholic diaspora in the Oldenburg region and in East Frisia, while Protestant East Prussians and Transylvanian Saxons loosened up, in confessional terms, the predominantly Catholic areas of Bavaria and the Protestant Zipsers did the same in Catholic Baden. While church integration – even in regions of the same denomination – was anything but easy in the early days, this new proximity of Catholics and Protestants proved to be an important long-term impulse towards a more ecumenical coexistence of Christians in Germany. At the same time, independent traditions were preserved over a longer period of time: In congregations with a high proportion of Catholic Lower Silesians, for example, a Christmas service without "Transeamus usque Betlehem", a well-known Silesian choral work, remained, for many years, unthinkable. Furthermore, pilgrimage traditions from places that

were considered unreachable during the Cold War continued to be practiced in the host regions; for example, Catholics from the county of Kłodzko made pilgrimages to Telgte in the Münsterland region, while for Catholic Upper Silesians, the Upper Bavarian town of Altötting became a new pilgrimage destination. At the same time, various Protestant customs and musical traditions also had an impact on the Protestant Church in Germany and thus became common property.

A headline from Church and Homeland. Newsletter of the Aid Committee of the Transylvanian Saxons and the Protestant Banater Swabians in the Diakonisches Werk of the EKD. Facebook, CC0 1.0

Conclusion

The examples given here are representative of many other religious communities that have migrated throughout European history. This phenomenon was not limited to Christian churches and communities. When the Russian Empire expanded in the 18th and 19th centuries and Islamic groups such as Tatars or Circassians were expelled, some of them migrated to the provinces of the Eastern Balkan Peninsula, which at that time still belonged to the Ottoman Empire. This became home, in particular, to the Tatars, who mostly lived in peaceful coexistence with the region's Christian communities.

Today, people are still fleeing persecution and war for religious reasons, for example Christian and Iraqi Syrians or Shiite Muslims from predominantly Sunni areas in the Middle East. While the importance of religion is declining in many European countries, in other parts of the world, belonging to a particular religious group continues to be a criterion for exclusion.

Let us return once again to the initial question: The Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen came from a Jewish family whose ancestors emigrated to North America from Lithuania, then part of the Russian Empire. The ancestors of New York director Woody Allen also migrated to the USA from various Jewish communities in the Tsarist Empire and Austria-Hungary. The French chansonnier Charles Aznavour, on the other hand, was born into an Armenian family: his father emigrated from Georgia, while his mother escaped the genocide of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire.

English translation: William Connor ↗

Footnotes

1. Oltmer 2017. ↥
2. Konrad 2020, pp. 102–104. ↥
3. Haumann 1990, S. 18; Zbikowski 1997, p. 19. ↥
4. The Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich POLIN [Museum of the History of Polish Jews POLIN], opened at Warsaw in 2013, adopted this term. See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2018. ↥
5. Lichdi 2004. ↥
6. Kumpera 1992. ↥
7. Wichgraf 1862; Korthaase 1987. ↥
8. Meyer 2000. ↥
9. Florey 1977; for iconographic aspects see Marsch 1977. ↥
10. Bottesch / Grieshofer / Schabus 2002. ↥
11. Annegret Waldner, Sonja Fankhauser: Von Zillerthal nach Zillerthal – Der Weg der Zillerthaler Protestanten von Tyrol nach Preussisch-Schlesien im Jahr 1837. Wien 2010. ↥
12. Ipatiov 2002; Hauptmann 2005. ↥
13. Stopka 2000. ↥
14. Rudolph 1984; Bendel 2012, pp. 86–118. ↥

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