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**Migrations in Latin America and the  
Mediterranean compared:  
Violence, state cruelty and (un-)institutional  
resistance**

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**Leaving, Never to Return: The Greeks of Chile, First  
Thoughts from Fieldwork**

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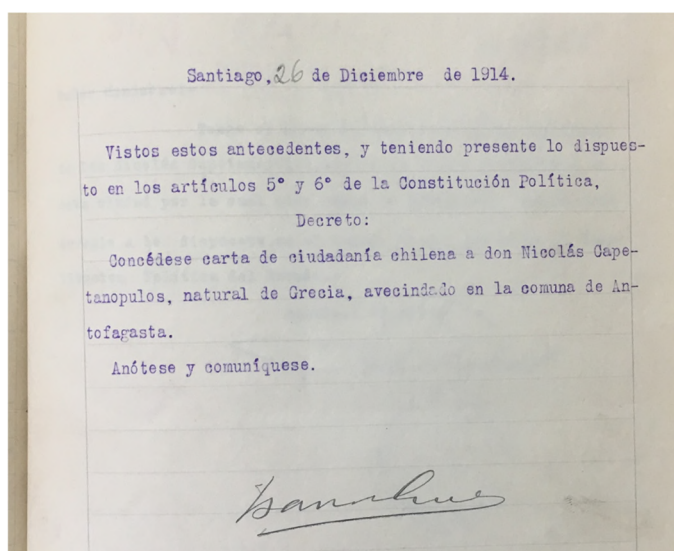
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COMPAS does not have a centre view and does not aim to present one. The views expressed in this document are only those of its independent author

The purpose of this paper is to share some findings and initial thoughts yielded by the fieldwork I conducted on Greek migration to Chile in Santiago, in October 2019. The data and analysis that follow are both at a preliminary stage and reflect the beginning rather than the completion of fieldwork. The material on which this presentation is based is both archival and ethnographic.

Between 1896 and 1920, approximately 450,000 Greeks left their country of origin<sup>1</sup>. The majority of them (namely 350,000) ended up in North America, where they have evolved into one of the largest communities of the Greek diaspora, with 1,316,074 Greeks living in the United States (according to the 2010 census) and 253,000 in Canada (2011 census). In contrast, the migration of Greeks to South America was limited, with only 20,000 Greeks residing in Argentina today and 25,000 in Brazil, according to data from the General Secretariat for Greeks Abroad<sup>2</sup>.

Greek migration to Chile can be divided into at least two periods, the first going back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as already mentioned. The oldest application for the acquisition of Chilean-Greek citizenship that I located in the Chilean archives was filed in Santiago in 1914<sup>3</sup>.



*The first Greek to apply for Chilean-Greek citizenship was born in 1898 in Gevegeli, which today is situated in North Macedonia<sup>4</sup>.*

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<sup>1</sup> AGRANTONI Christina, « Viomihania : Apo tis arhes tou aiona mehri ti Mikrasiatiki Katastrofi» in HATJIOSIF Christos(dir.) *Historia tis Ellados tou 20ou aiona, Opseis politikis ke Oekonomikis Historias, 1900-1940*, Athina, Vivliorama, 2009, pp.259-293.

<sup>2</sup><https://web.archive.org/web/20041012210955/http://www.ggae.gr/gabroad/organosi.el.asp>

<sup>3</sup> Archivo Nacional De La Administración, ARNAD, Fondo EM, n° registro en Archivo 6231, volumen 4295 (du 26/12/1914).

<sup>4</sup> Archivo Nacional De La Administración, ARNAD, Fondo EM, n° registro en Archivo 4890, volumen 9721 (du 6/12/1938).

Whereas the records show that the first migratory wave was almost exclusively male, the second period of immigration started after World War II and involved the arrival of women.<sup>5</sup>

**EXTRANJERIA**

**REPUBLICA DE CHILE**  
VALIDO PARA EL BIENIO  
1941 - 42  
Un Peso

**SOLICITA CARTA DE NACIONALIZACION.**

**EXCMO. SEÑOR:**

FORTUNA BENADO BENADO, de nacionalidad griega, de 43 años, lee y escribe, labores de la casa, domiciliada en Antofagasta, calle Condell No. 906, a VE. respetuosamente dice:

Soy nacida en Gevegeli, de la Provincia del mismo nombre, del Reino de Grecia, el día 13 de Octubre de 1898.

Llegué a Chile en el mes de Noviembre de 1923, radicándome en Santiago, hasta el año 1937, en que me vine a Antofagasta.

Soy casada con don Dagoberto Castro Encina, chileno, empleado público. De este matrimonio tengo una hija, también chilena, de 7 años.

Habiéndome casada con chileno, el tiempo que llevo radicada en este país y por sus costumbres, me he vinculado y me he arraigado al suelo chileno. Lo quiero como si fuera mi propia Patria; y por tales causas deseo hacerme ciudadana chilena, para cuyo efecto vengo en solicitar de VE. me conceda carta de nacionalización.

De acuerdo con lo dispuesto en la Ley y Reglamentación sobre la materia, acompaño a VE. los siguientes documentos:

- Fotografía de 8 cm. x 6 cm.
- Ficha dactiloscópica en duplicado.
- CERTIFICADO DE ANTECEDENTES del Gab. de Identific. de Antofagasta.

(vta).

<sup>5</sup> Ministerio de relaciones exteriores, fondo inmigración.

INSTITUTO CATOLICO CHILENO DE MIGRACION

SOLICITUD DE VISACION

PAIS DE PROCEDENCIA .Grecia.....  
 .. Demopolio..... Zos..... Eleni.....  
 APELLIDO PATERNO APELLIDO MATERNO NOMBRE  
 FECHA DE NACIMIENTO. 20 de Abril. 1903..... EDAD.. 57 años.....  
 LUGAR DE NACIMIENTO. Atenas Grecia..... NACIONALIDAD. Griega.....  
 ESTADO CIVIL. Soltera..... RELIGION. Ortodoxa.....  
 NOMBRE DEL PADRE. Demopolio. Gorse.. NOMBRE DE LA MADRE. Karahali. Eleni..  
 NACIONALIDAD DEL PADRE. Griega.... NACIONALIDAD DE LA MADRE. Griega....  
 VIAJA ACOMPAÑADO DE : .sola.....  

NOMBRE	PARENTESCO	LUGAR/FECHA NACIMIENTO	NACIONALIDAD
.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....
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.....	.....	.....	.....
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DOMICILIO ACTUAL. 1462 Sokak, N° 52, Alsancak, Izmir, Turkey...  
 PROFESION. Visitadora Social.....  
 ACTIVIDADES QUE DESARROLLARA. Su profesión.....  
 CAPITAL.....  
 EDUCACION.. Su profesión.....  
 IDIOMAS. Griego, Italiano, Francés.....  
 NOMBRE Y DIRECCION DEL SPONSOR. Sr. Marko. Matzar, 68. Dardignac. Santiago..  
 .....  
 CONSULADO. Estambul..... 2 F

Santiago, 16 de Junio de 1961..  
 FECHA

*Mari M... ..*  
 .....  
 FIRMA



The Greeks who arrived in the country before the opening of the Panama Canal found themselves in Valparaiso, a port city. As Giorgos narrates, his grandfather's brother arrived by sailboat before 1905 at the port of Valparaiso and, since the ship carrying him sank shortly before landing, Giorgos' ancestor decided to settle in the city. Originating from the island of Kefalonia and a sailor himself, he worked on ships, which docked at the port and had a Greek crew (mostly in the catering sector). Gradually, he and his son went on to establish various businesses, the last of which was a restaurant still operating in Valparaiso city centre and now run by his grandson.

When the Panama Canal made travel faster, Greeks settled mostly in the north of Chile, in Antofagasta in particular. Despite the prominence of local saltpetre mines (*salitreras* in Spanish), Greek immigrants did not work as miners, but initially as small traders. Historian Maria Damilakou,<sup>6</sup> who has studied 608 files of Greek immigrants who settled in the region since the last decades of the 19th century, notes that ‘the group of Greek immigrants is of considerable size and is devoted in its absolute majority to commercial activities’. More specifically, ‘of these, eight arrived in Antofagasta before 1900 (the first one in 1886), 87 in the first decade of the 20th century, 188 in the 1911-1920s, 200 in the 1920s and 63 in the 1931-1940s. Among the 608 immigrants, there were only 38 women, most of them married. The causes of Greek immigration were similar to those of other Balkan and Middle Eastern countries: economic problems in rural areas, the Balkan wars, problems in the Greek regions of the Ottoman Empire that had not yet been liberated, as well as the gradual activation of social networks promoting immigration from certain regions and populations. Besides the urban centres of Athens and Thessaloniki and certain regions of Asia Minor, where migration must be linked to the Greek defeat in Asia Minor in 1922 and the arrival of more than one million refugees in Greek urban centres, some island and rural regions stand out clearly among the places whence the Greeks who arrived in Antofagasta originated. These are the islands of Kythira and Antikythira, the province of Laconia and more particularly the region of Vassitica at the south-eastern tip of the Peloponnese, the village of Oktonia on the island of Evia and the village of Krokylio in the province of Fokida in continental Greece. With the exception of Fokida, a mountainous province, these places of Greek origin, had all the characteristics of island societies: they were the crossroads of different civilisations, depended on maritime activities and had a strong migratory culture. In Antofagasta in 1917, a number of the Greek immigrants created the *Sociedad Helenica de Socorros Mutuos de Antofagasta*, a mutual assistance club that exists even today.

The second wave of immigration is linked to the economic situation in post-war Greece and among the population that migrated to Chile we encounter different social classes. Nikos, 86 years old today, immigrated to the country at the age of 20, when his father, who dealt in imported and exported machinery, chose Chile to settle in among all Latin American countries. Nikos arrived with his father in Santiago in 1953, followed by his mother and his two brothers.

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<sup>6</sup> DAMILAKOU Maria ; Migración, comercio y moral en los márgenes del mundo salitrero. Oficina «CHACABUCO» 1920-1940, *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos*, Año 21, n°62, 2007, pp.85-128.

N.º 1663

**CONSEJO DE ESTADO**

Personalidad jurídica N.º 333

Solicitante *Jesualdo Triantafilo i  
Ramon Chilvantes*

Nombre de la personalidad *Sociedad Helé  
nica de Seguros Marítimos  
de Antofagasta*

Departamento *Antofagasta*

Fecha del ingreso: *9* de *Diciembre* de *1956*

The mother, despite being highly educated and already speaking English and French as she had attended a private school in Athens, never worked, while Nikos learned Spanish and studied civil engineering in the country. After his father's death, he took over his father's business. At the other end of the spectrum lay the narratives of Anna, of Armenian descent, and of Mario, of Greek-Italian descent. After the end of World War I, Anna's parents came to Athens from Turkey as 'stateless persons'. Anna was born in Athens in 1935 and, after the end of World War II; in 1956 the family arrived in Chile because Anna's father had a friend in the country. Mario, on the other hand, was born in the midst of World War II, in 1941 in Egypt. His Italian father was sent from Italy to Egypt, where he was captured by the English allied forces and met a Greek woman, Mario's mother. The family remained in the country until 1962. From Egypt, they moved to Athens, but their stay there was very short and they migrated again, this time to Chile.

If migration allows us to understand the political, social, and economic conditions prevailing in the country of departure, what can we learn from immigrants not leaving the host country? A key feature of Greek immigration to Chile is that of **non-return** to the country of origin, a feature shared with immigration in both North America and Canada as well as Australia. Only one of the Greeks I met told me that he wanted to return to Greece. Moreover, only one of the interviewees reported that their parents had expressed a desire to return, and although all those I met, had been to Greece on vacation, no one had returned to settle down. For the interviewees and, as it appears through their narratives for their ancestors as well, the reasons for their non-return to Greece and therefore their permanent residence in Chile are in line with the great geographical distance and the scarcity of available transportation, in particular ships, with both factors contributing to raised travel costs. However, the geographical distance and the material means available, though they may explain a potential non - return to Greece, do not explain permanent residence in the host country. In other words, they do not disclose social order, as Sayad notes in the case of immigrant workers arriving in France after World War II.

In this sense, Greek immigration to Chile must be viewed over time by analysing the social status or social advancement of immigrants within Chilean society. We already know that after the economic crisis of 1930 and the years that followed, part of the Greek immigrant population residing in Antofagasta moved to Santiago where they also developed economic activities. Thus, this predominantly rural population did not become a workforce in the mines, but, thanks to its commercial activity, became urbanised in a relatively short period. If the world of *salitreras*, as Maria Damilakou notes, 'is defined, in a way that is both original and paradigmatic, as a privileged space of the 'modern', the cradle of the Chilean proletariat and the political and social struggles that marked Chile in the 20th century', and if it is indeed the laboratory for the establishment of a capitalist economic system which led to the redefinition of social identities, what position did Greek immigrants have in this system at the turn of the century and why, although of rural origin, did they not become workers?

A second issue that the fieldwork highlighted was that of language. The quotes from the interviews I mentioned come from three categories of immigrants: the first is comprised of Greeks who were born and went to school in Greece, such as Nikos; the second encompasses migrants who have a Greek parent and whose mother tongue is Greek, as in the case of Mario; and the final category is the third generation, like Giorgos, who learned Greek as a descendant of Greeks, but grew up and was educated in Chile. The emic distinction that interviewees make when attempting a genealogy of this migration is between the 'elders', which refers to Greeks who came from Greece and both their parents were Greek, and subsequent generations born of mixed marriages, mainly between Greek fathers and Chilean mothers, which the interviewees categorise as 'Greek-Chileans'.

Historically, in the case of Greece, language and religion are some of the elements of construction of national identity. Therefore, in the case of Chile, the element of common, co-national origin - however distant - acts as a link between different generations and organises its members around it. At the same time, both Nikos and Giorgos who, unlike Mario, do have offspring - children and grandchildren - reported that they all speak Greek, but to varying degrees of fluency.

Martine Hovanesian explains, in connection with the Armenian diaspora, that the community would rather be this abstraction which, far from organising all individual conduct and desires, would function as a symbolic reference system, making it possible to unify the multiple 'we' of reference as a substitute for a nation-state, stretching from the family unit to the associative unit, to the diasporic macrocosm<sup>7</sup>. What does this language transmission convey and symbolise? How is the identity of the offspring determined in relation to the family background?

During the interviews, people mentioned that the descendants of immigrants are not interested in learning the Greek language. The explanation they gave was that you learn the language from the mother, who in the case

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<sup>7</sup> *Le lien communautaire : trois générations d'Arméniens*, Paris, l'HARMATTAN, 2007.

of descendants was Chilean, while the Greek father, who could potentially transfer this knowledge, did not do so as he was 'out of the house', busy with his work . However, within the Hellenic community of Santiago, we will find some descendants who take Greek language courses.

Language does not only refer to an imagined community of belonging, it is the safe means to turn 'space' into 'place'; in other words, it is what can make the 'space' inhabited, bridging the distance that – both in terms of time and space - separates the generations, connecting what the ancestors left behind with what the descendants discover, joining what they are experiencing in Chile with what they can share with those living in Greece, and thus, completing a biography.

In conclusion, the analysis of Greek immigration to Chile can explore at least three distinct, but interrelated issues: Survival tactics, work, and the progressive urbanisation and integration of Greeks in Chile; the production of community bonds between different social classes of immigrants; and the role of language.