

‘Welcome to Europe. Now Go Home.’

The overcrowded Moria refugee camp in Greece is where Europe’s ideals—solidarity, human rights, a haven for victims of war and violence—dissolve in a tangle of bureaucracy, indifference, and lack of political will.

By Rachel Donadio, November 2019, *The Atlantic*

MORIA, Greece—From the olive grove just outside the high cement wall—one topped with spirals of razor wire, enclosing one of Europe’s most infamous holding pens for asylum seekers—you can see all the way clear to the Aegean Sea, grey-blue in the distance. It’s a straight shot across the water to Turkey, just six miles away at the narrowest stretch, an ancient Dardanelles trade route.

Moria, on the Greek island of Lesbos, is a symbolic place—a hinge between the Middle East and Europe, the eye of the needle through which migrants must pass as they travel from east to west, a pressure point between Istanbul and Brussels. It is where the collateral damage of contemporary history—Afghanistan, Syria, Turkey—crosses the threshold into Europe. Moria is where geopolitics becomes European politics becomes national politics.

Every new arrival here could one day translate into rising poll numbers for right-wing parties across the Continent, parties divided by language and culture that find common ground in wanting to block these humans from entering.

The United States’ border with Mexico is not the only immigration flash point in the West. What Juárez is to America, Moria is to Europe. The arrivals here have come by boat from across the Mediterranean, now the most dangerous border on Earth.

From up close, Moria is a chaotic mass of humanity. Built to house about 3,000 people, it is now home to more than 13,000 (including an estimated 1,000 unaccompanied minors)—more than it has ever held. They wait, sometimes for more than a year, for the slow wheels of Greek bureaucracy to turn, to review their asylum applications, to send them to the mainland for a decision. Winter is approaching, and many of these 13,000 live outside the camp’s walls, in tents pitched on the surrounding hillsides, without electricity or running water, which are provided only inside the camp. NGOs, which lease the land for the tents, help run basic services and report atrocious conditions. Fights break out in the hours-long food lines. Women are afraid to use the toilets for fear of harassment. In September, a woman died in a deadly fire.

How did it come to this? Because Europe allowed it to come to this.

/.../ Greece was—still is—recovering from a crippling economic crisis at the time of the 2015 migration crisis. Its current conservative government, which took power in July with a more law-and-order approach to immigration, has asked for additional European help. But so did its previous leftist government. Not enough help has yet arrived.

What is Moria? It is where Europe's ideals—solidarity, human rights, a safe haven for victims of war and violence—dissolve in a tangle of bureaucracy, indifference, and lack of political will. It is the normalization of a humanitarian crisis. It is the moral failure of Europe.

/.../

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Lesbos receives 40 percent of all the arrivals by sea to Greece, and Moria is operating at seven times its capacity. Almost every day, boats arrive on Lesbos from Turkey, carrying migrants. In September alone, 12,500 people arrived in Greece, mostly from Afghanistan and some from Syria. /.../

What has changed since 2015 is that an emergency—the great wave of migrants—is now a semipermanent reality.

/.../ The Moria camp is a 10-minute drive from the port of Mitilini, the largest city on Lesbos. The island has long been a tourist haven, but like Lampedusa in Italy, it has become shorthand for a refugee emergency. /.../

Vulnerable people, such as women, victims of sexual violence, and unaccompanied minors, are supposed to be kept in safe areas inside the Moria camp, but because of overcrowding, many live outside, in the olive grove. There are no formal schools. People come and go as they please. /.../

Sandrone said he had worked in hot spots around the world—Haiti, South Sudan, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo. It was a shame, he said, to be operating a refugee camp in Europe. The problem, he said, was a lack of political will, Greece's and Europe's. /.../

Europe's long and dark history casts shadows into the future. There are calls for a contemporary Kindertransport, similar to what was done to move hundreds of Jewish children from Czechoslovakia to Britain after Kristallnacht in 1938. /.../

Greece's government said recently that it would increase border patrols in the water and speed up the mechanisms for processing asylum seekers, keeping those who qualify for refugee status and sending back those who don't. /.../

/.../ The rest of Europe should share the burden with Greece and put in place a system to process asylum seekers in eight weeks, he said. That hasn't happened—presumably because of resistance among other EU member states. /.../

Over house wine in a café in the Mitilini harbor one evening, a senior European diplomat gamed the regional dynamics. /.../ If people like this—migrants from foreign lands—come to his country, the diplomat said, there will be problems of integration. That word contains worlds. For him, integration means adhering to the traditions of his country's national identity, in exchange for access to the generous welfare state.

It is based on a certain set of assumptions—cultural, religious, economic—and if you don't fit in, you don't fit in.

/.../ At a conference in Athens last month, an Afghan immigrant to Greece asked Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis why his government had evicted migrants from a building in Athens that they had occupied. He listened, but was brusque. “If you're entitled to international protection, you will get it, and you will get it earlier and you won't be held hostage,” he said. “If your goal is to come to Greece in search of a better economic future, I'm afraid we're not in a position as Greece to accommodate this.”

How will this end? There was truth in Mitsotakis's answer. Greece can't accommodate everyone. It needs Europe's help.

Source: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/11/greeces-moria-refugee-camp-a-european-failure/601132/>