

Die Insel (The Island): A harrowing account of the European Union's murderous refugee policy

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Earlier this year saw the publication of Franziska Grillmeier's non-fiction work *Die Insel (The Island)* about the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos. The book is a harrowing account of the European Union's murderous refugee policy. Its burning relevance has been dramatically confirmed in recent weeks.

On June 14 more than 600 people drowned off the Greek peninsula of Peloponnese after the Greek coast guard deliberately allowed their boat to capsize. Only a few days earlier, the European Union (EU) heads of government had decided to effectively abolish the right to asylum and intern people seeking refuge at the EU's external borders in detention camps.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, 42,000 refugees were living in five Aegean island camps at the beginning of 2020—almost half of them on Lesbos. Franziska Grillmeier, who writes as a freelance journalist for the newspapers *Die Zeit*, *taz*, *Der Spiegel*, the *Guardian* and the BBC, mainly focuses on the Moria camp in her articles.

Originally conceived as a transit camp for 2,800 people, more than 20,000 people have been confined there after EU member-states, including Germany, severely restricted the admission of refugees. A huge fire on September 8 and 9, 2020 finally led to the closure of Moria. The temporary replacement camp in Mavrovouni is described by local helpers and refugees as “Moria 2.0.”

The author, born in 1991, is not content with fleeting visits to the location to collect a few superficial interviews, as is the wont of many other reporters. From autumn 2017 onward, she visited the island again and again, developing associations with the camp's inmates, and eventually, in late summer 2018, she rented an apartment on Lesbos. The small flat became her “temporary home” for five years, she writes.

Grillmeier describes her motives with little pathos. Before arriving for the first time, her friend Armita, who works as an interpreter for asylum-seekers, “explained the situation in exemplary fashion” and reported, among other incidents, that “three men had not woken up in their tents on three different days.” They had tried to dry their wet clothes with firewood and evidently died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

No one was held accountable. “How can this be?” Armita asks. “In any other European city, they can put people in a warm gymnasium within an hour of a storm. Here, the EU has failed to

do anything similar for three entire winters.”

Grillmeier explores this question. In diary-like style, she tries to capture “everyday life” in the camp—in a place that does not allow everyday life—giving voice to those confined and with whom she has struck up friendship.

Thanks to her lively depictions and her factual, yet sensitive descriptions, she brings to life the “hell of Moria.” We get to know Mama Maryam, the volunteer spokesperson for the Afghan community in the camp, who lives in the camp with her family and is fighting for asylum, and Fenet, the baker. We also get to know the exhausted Yasmin from Mogadishu as well as Dimitra, who was born in Lesbos and works in the hospital under catastrophic conditions.

The reader encounters the shy Omar, the disciplined loner Abbas, little Yaser, Azim and his wife Maleka, who set herself on fire while heavily pregnant to put an end to her unbearable existence in Moria—and is then charged with arson after surviving her self-immolation! Grillmeier rescues them and many others from anonymity and for precisely this reason they stand symbolically, with all their vulnerability and vitality, for countless other victims of Europe's disastrous refugee policy.

Unbearable confinement, inadequate food, too little drinking water, no shade and no chance to cool off in summer, no dryness and warmth in the cold season. Fires break out again and again—sometimes resulting in injuries and deaths, because people are forced to cook, warm themselves and dry laundry over open fires in very confined spaces.

A storm with heavy rain on Lesbos in the autumn of 2018 had an immediate and destructive impact on people squeezed into small tents. In autumn and winter, it is wet and cold, and “the children's feet are so shrivelled in the morning” as though “they had been left dangling overnight in a bathtub filled with water,” reports one grandmother, her grandson in her lap. She did not yet know that, following the huge fire in 2020, the situation in the Mavrovouni camp would become even more catastrophic. There, the tents lacked any sort of floor, people had to lie on completely soaked sleeping mats and soggy cardboard.

Some 90 people share one toilet, 200 people one shower—from which only cold water drips. Soap, towels, toothpaste are in absolute short supply. For the thousands in the unofficial camp, into which the “core camp” merges and which extends into the

olive groves of the farmers, there is no shower at all.

For drinking water and food, camp internees queue with food vouchers three times a day for up to one and a half hours in a fenced corridor, surrounded by police armed with batons. Torture victims and people with prison experiences are constantly traumatised anew. Those too weak, due to their injuries or illnesses, are completely dependent on the support of their family members or neighbours.

For example, the badly injured Omar had been able to escape his torturers in a Sudanese prison. He needed immediate medical help for his open and severe wounds and a wheelchair. Instead, when he arrived, the 21-year-old was handed a child's tent, one metre long. He could not erect the tent without help. His legs failed him, his eyesight was severely impaired. He would probably have starved to death if an Iraqi family in the camp had not taken him under its wing.

Many prepare their food on primitive, self-built cooking and baking plates, attempt to grow “something green” or tomatoes in the narrow spaces between their tents or in front of the tent entrances. Grillmeier describes the many bread ovens as “a sign of resistance in Moria,” an attempt by the camp inmates to preserve their human dignity. Omar writes later that he has “one good memory” of the camp: the “smell of fresh bread.” The taste of bread “reminds people of who they were before they escaped,” Fenet explains.

The worst aspect, however, is the uncertainty, “waiting for a decision,” the grandmother emphasises. No one says how long the processing of the asylum application will take and how long they will have to wait. This makes people break down physically and psychologically. “We see psychosis, depression, acute suicidal tendencies” among all age groups, doctors and helpers report, and the risk of suicide is very high. Children fall silent. One doctor reports that many children “hurt themselves,” “break off contact with other people,” “try to kill themselves.” Approximately 42 percent of Moria inmates in 2020 are children.

Dimitra, who works at the emergency hospital, is “faced with the wreckage of untreated illness and trauma—the consequences of detaining thousands of refugees in a confined space.” Her conclusion: the people in Moria are being “forced to go crazy.”

The concrete description of the camp conditions are complemented in Grillmeier's book by background information on the various asylum agreements of the EU and the role of the Greek Syriza-led government and its conservative successor under Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Any illusions about an allegedly leftist policy under Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras are thoroughly shattered.

In July 2019, the Syriza government withdrew any access to public health care to asylum seekers as well as those without official papers. Since then, hospitals have only been allowed to treat emergencies. A report by Doctors Without Borders reveals that since January 2020, over half a million refugees in Greece have no longer been entitled to medical care—a humanitarian catastrophe, right at the time when the COVID pandemic began to wreak havoc!

Protests increasingly began to flare up. The brutal police repression of these protests escalated on February 3, 2020. Grillmeier was contacted by Mama Maryam: This time

“everyone” wants to make their way to the island's capital Mytilini to protest against the camp conditions. The author documents the clash between the highly armed special and military forces and the approximately 2,000 people from the camp. “There is an acrid stench of burnt plastic, itchy tear gas, wet smoke in the air,” Grillmeier notes. People tried to break through the police cordon, “driven by the fear of being caught in the cauldron of tear gas.” Grillmeier encounters unconscious people foaming at the mouth, including a baby held up screaming by its desperate mother.

The images of police brutality against defenceless people triggered a wave of outrage in Europe. But the brutality was deliberate and served as a deterrent. The subsequent crocodile tears shed by EU politicians could hardly be surpassed for their cynicism. Their hollow promises of improvement were followed by increased border closures and worsening camp conditions.

The camps now resemble prisons. A ban was imposed to prevent inmates going out at night, and during the day they need permission to leave the compound for a few hours. Access to legal counselling has been almost completely curtailed. Promises of “expedited asylum review procedures” have turned out to be expedited rejection procedures. Journalists are barely allowed into the completely closed and highly monitored camps.

Following groundless accusations of “terrorism,” “people smuggling” and “money laundering,” refugee volunteers have also been criminalised. Widely publicised in 2018 were the cases of Seán Binder, whose mother Grillmeier meets, and Saraardini, who gained international notoriety as one of the “Mardini sisters.” The Syriza government had them arrested and put on trial. It was only at the beginning of this year that all the charges against them were dropped.

In a documentary on the French-German ARTE channel titled *Against the Current*, Binder argued, “I think what we did was right. There's nothing wrong with pulling drowning people out of the water, or trying to save families from hypothermia, or making sure pregnant women don't go into labour on the side of a cliff, or allowing children to be children, or protecting people from parasites with clean clothes. There is nothing wrong with that.”

At the end of her book, referring to Ukraine, Grillmeier laments the “drastic unequal treatment of refugees” and the “fatal classification” of refugees by the media, which is “often accompanied by overt and subliminal racism.”

She provides no explanation for these developments, but, nevertheless, her book constitutes a vehement indictment of the EU's criminal refugee policy and deserves a wide readership.



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