

SO-CLOSE: A Brief Introduction

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The book that begins here is part of the European project SO-CLOSE. On more than one occasion, I have found myself explaining in simple terms what SO-CLOSE is and what it aims to do. It is not easy to explain because, while SO-CLOSE is based on a relatively simple idea, putting it into action is incredibly complex.

Our project has a central goal: to help combat stigmatization and the rhetoric of hate and to facilitate the integration of refugees (and asylum seekers) in Europe through mutual knowledge and understanding between these people and the communities that have welcomed them, using history and personal stories as central narrative threads. All of this is being done with technological tools that are attractive, innovative, and replicable and can be used in schools, museums, cultural institutions, public administrations, and civic organisations.

The goal is to facilitate and recognition between refugees and local communities in three main areas: research, education, and culture. There is pedagogy in SO-CLOSE, but also artistic production, cultural heritage, and digital humanities. The project also involves research at the highest possible level of interdisciplinarity on the past and present of migration and forced displacement. Combating anti-immigration and anti-refugee sentiments and facilitating mutual knowledge and understanding have been primary concerns in recent projects in the Horizon 2020 programme. A distinguishing feature of our project is that it places the voices of refugees and asylum seekers at the centre of historical and contemporary narratives. This can undoubtedly help to restore a certain degree of purpose to many lives that have been truncated by war or by persecution for political views or sexual identities.

The people with whom we work and whom we place at the centre of our research have experienced situations of expulsion, forced migration, and, in short, danger, both in their places of origin and, in many cases, in transit or in places of refuge. Now, we want to

contribute to making their stories, memories, and cultures known through the prism of the existence of similar experiences in Europe. In order to do so, SO-CLOSE draws on personal narratives, making this storytelling its central methodology. We want to contribute to mutual knowledge and understanding because of our conviction that malicious and hate-filled discourses often stem from stereotyping and ignorance. The way to do this is through the empowerment or – better still – the recognition of the empowerment of the subjects who participate in this project, and particularly the refugees and asylum seekers who have worked with us on the different activities that are part of SO-CLOSE. This empowerment occurs through the co-creation of educational, cultural, and artistic digital tools that, in turn, are based on the needs expressed by different actors, including the refugee communities with which we have worked in Spain, Poland, Greece, and Italy.

It might seem odd that this project is led by a historian. The truth is that SO-CLOSE involves a constant learning process. But it is also the case that historiography and the social sciences are becoming increasingly digitized, and this tendency will only increase in the future. In SO-CLOSE, we aim to be ahead of the curve, creating an extensive living scientific repository that is constantly evolving on the phenomena of violence, war, forced displacement, and asylum. SO-CLOSE is creating digital tools to contribute to the long-standing debate about public uses of the past and using history as a focal point from which to construct messages of knowledge, understanding, integration, and solidarity.

History is the focus of this book, the first in a series of Open Access publications that will be prepared by SO-CLOSE over its three years of existence. Using multiple case studies, this book shows the historical centrality in contemporary Europe of the phenomenon of forced migration and displacement due to war, political persecution, or reasons such as gender identity. These case studies are accompanied by a study on the important role of ethnic cleansing in driving forced displacement in 20th-century Europe, written by the leading expert on refugee history in Europe, Philipp Ther, member of the SO-CLOSE Advisory Board. What we propose in this book is a sort of incomplete panorama that will help to resituate a phenomenon that is both contemporary and historical in historical narratives.