

New Critical Approaches to the Greek-Turkish Population Exchange

Introduction

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The diplomatic invention of forcefully exchanging populations was patented at Lausanne precisely one hundred years ago. A hundred years is a lot, long enough for historians to step back and make a subtle assessment of the course and consequences of this impactful event. Recently, many scholars and organizations in Greece, Turkey, and elsewhere have seized on this special occasion to do exactly that. This tendency followed on from a surge of writings by specialists and amateurs on the subject over the past two decades. One can only hope that this unprecedented intellectual interest will translate into a significant revision in the dominant state-centric narratives of the event prevailing on a national scale in both Greece and Turkey. Considering that the discussions developing around this world-historical event in the international arena are mainly fueled by research in Turkey and Greece, there is no doubt that the effects of the anticipated revision will have a wider impact.

The construction of the state-centric conceptualization of the Greek-Turkish population exchange dates from the immediate aftermath of the event, when political elites in Turkey and Greece joined forces with scholars to work on their imagined national entities. In their attempt to appropriate the historical context in which they fought and reached peace, they attributed a similar meaning to the resulting settlement, that is, the uprooting of people in their hundreds of thousands—as well as the confirmation of the previous massive displacements—whereby the population exchange was conceptualized as a favorable step towards consolidating their countries' ethnic and national homogeneity. The emergent official discourse on both sides operated firstly by conceptualizing the exchange as a political matter and interstate business, and then via a teleological interpretation of it by a rudimentary cost-benefit analysis with an emphasis on the presumed benefits for both states. Despite

their understandably opposed readings of the historical circumstances, both Greek and Turkish official circles similarly chose to disregard the human cost of the event in favor of its ideological and institutional gains.¹ Thus, the plight of the nearly two million people who were forced to accept it as well as the actual conditions under which the process took place remained marginal to the focus of neatly crafted official discourse. The evolution of this attitude into an orthodoxy was inevitable, given the uncontested role of the state in the domain of historical research in both countries from the 1920s onwards.

Back in the early 1990s, when I entered the field as a graduate student, I found it largely under the influence of this state-centric approach. There were perhaps a few outlying perspectives, challenging the dictates of official historiography, but on the whole they did very little to affect the prevalent conception with its numerous assumptions and conclusions. Thirty years later, at the centenary of the event, the greater part of the picture is still dominated by this traditional approach, despite the fact that the basic premise of the decision taken at Lausanne—an ethnically homogenous population as a prerequisite for the consolidation of the nation-state—has failed the test of time and is essentially regarded as a despicable idea. In advocating a human rights perspective on population transfers, exchanges, and expulsions, modern scholarship tends to dwell on the violence and suffering, in addition to the numerous destructive effects entailed by these occurrences at the expense of those presumed advantages for the states.² Especially over the past two decades, more diverse research—characterized less by nationalistic dogmas than scholarly concerns—has flourished to effectively challenge the dictates of established scholarship and address previously neglected aspects of the Greek-Turkish population exchange. Close communication amongst Greek and Turkish historiographies and between them and global scholarship has certainly played a critical role in this regard. Various studies in the form of theses, dissertations, articles and books have appeared, with their special

1 For a discussion of the early historiographical attempts, see Yıldırım, Onur, "The 1923 population exchange, refugees and national historiographies in Greece and Turkey," *East European Quarterly*, 40 (2006), 45–70. Also see idem "Stephen Pericles Ladas and the 1923 Greco-Turkish exchange of populations: the making and unmaking of a narrative," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 58 (2022), 520–39.

2 A detailed bibliographical survey of this scholarship can be found in Yıldırım, Onur, "The Turkish-Greek population exchange and international law," in *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, Tony Carty (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199796953/obo-9780199796953-0236.xml> (accessed November 13, 2023).

focus on different aspects of the exchange.³ It would be indeed redundant to take stock of all the approaches afforded by the passage of time on this world-historical event. Thanks to their findings and arguments, we can safely say that we have started to move away from the highly asymmetrical and largely state-centric perspective of the event that pervaded mainstream scholarship for a full century. This special issue, dedicated to the centenary of the population exchange, aims to provide a glimpse of the state of the art on the subject from this perspective.

Articles

Particularly as regards the conditions of local communities, the social and economic history of the late Ottoman era has only recently begun to attract researchers' attention. For the most part, literature on the Greek communities of Asia Minor and the Muslim communities of Greece prior to the population exchange was previously based on oral testimonies or memoirs by their members. Only recently have a few studies appeared that take up the individual histories of these communities.⁴ Ayşe Ozil's opening essay in this special issue offers a detailed analysis of the institutional dynamics behind the making of the Greek communities in western Anatolia in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, which meant turbulence for most of the non-Muslim populations in the provinces. The Greek Orthodox population in western Anatolia proved resilient and continued to thrive at that time, as revealed by the intensifying institutionalization of their communal establishments. Ozil trails the trajectory of these communal efforts and provides a vivid picture of the modernization process by which the Orthodox Christians of Asia Minor confronted the challenges of the new era and prepared themselves for a better future. Ozil's article therefore offers a perspective of the rupture caused by the Greek-Turkish War of 1919–22 and the ensuing population exchange.

The impact of the population exchange on the political spectrum in Greece and Turkey continues to be a largely neglected aspect of the subject. While George Mavrogordatos' detailed and well-argued book maintains its handbook

3 For a survey of this literature, see Alpan, Aytek Soner, "Trajectories of displacement: a comparative historical analysis of the 1923 Greco-Turkish population exchange" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California San Diego, 2022), pp. 130–61.

4 Ozil, Ayşe, *Orthodox Christians in the Late Ottoman Empire: A Study of Communal Relations in Anatolia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); Göktürk, Gülen, *Well-Preserved Boundaries: Faith and Co-Existence in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020).

function—now with the addition of his *After 1922: The Prolongation of the Schism*—for the case of Greece,⁵ there is still no documentation or analysis of the political impact of this event for the Turkish side. The refugees and exchangers' role in electoral processes has never been studied as a separate topic and is only ever mentioned in passing. Here Alexandros Lamprou places this subject under his lens and offers a historiographical perspective of it, moving attention away from the bigger questions to a micro plane where refugee impact on local and regional politics is more discernible. This is the first time a comparative study of the political impact of the population exchange has been undertaken with a thorough survey of the relevant literature from the two countries.

Gender has been one of the significant gaps in the exchange literature. Given the paucity of literature and sources, Gülen Göktürk Baltas' ethnographic research exploring multidimensional aspects of the population exchange for Greek and Muslim women has resulted in a whole range of original findings and arguments. Göktürk Baltas highlights the role of the refugee women's place of origin, place of residence, social class, and cultural capital in shaping the direction of their lives in their new settings. Benefiting greatly from the theoretical insights of scholars such as Renée Hirschon and Ash Iğsız, Göktürk Baltas juxtaposes the experiences of Greek and Muslim refugee women for the first ever time, to shed light on the impact of the population exchange.⁶ In doing so she also considers the former lives of these women, pinpointing the continuities and ruptures therein on the individual level.

The population exchange significantly affected the cultural and intellectual lives of communities on both sides of the Aegean. Much effort has been invested in uncovering the impact of the exchange on the major urban centers of Asia Minor, particularly Smyrna and Ayvalık. The exchange also impacted the cultural and intellectual dynamics of Istanbul, the Greek population of which was exempted from it. The Greek Literary Society in Constantinople was literally at the center of Greek intellectual life in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. Following the transfer of Istanbul's administration from the Allies to the new Turkish state, the local Greek community was subjected to much pressure, which resulted in the departure of many established Greek scholars to Greece. The controversies that arose during the negotiations at

5 Mavrogordatos, George Th., *Stillborn Republic: Social Coalitions and Party Strategies in Greece, 1922–1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); idem, *Μετά το 1922. Η παράταση του σχίσματος* [After 1922: the prolongation of the schism] (Athens: Patakis, 2017).

6 Hirschon, Renée, *Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe: The Social Life of Asia Minor Refugees in Piraeus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Iğsız, Ash, *Humanism in Ruins: Entangled Legacies of the Greek-Turkish Population Exchange* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

Lausanne and later on in the sessions of the Mixed Commission over the status of *établis* in Istanbul were settled for the most part in favor of the Turkish government, and many Greeks found themselves deported on the grounds of the population exchange. Firuzan Melike Sümertaş offers comprehensive coverage of the history of the Greek Literary Society and the fate of its building, library and archive, thus drawing attention to another dimension of the population exchange, regarding its impact on the “cultural (material and human) and social capital” and “brain drain.”

The trek of Anatolian Armenians at the time of the exchange of populations is yet another understudied aspect of the whole process. Many Armenians had already arrived in Greek cities, particularly Athens, before the exchange and had started to organize their communities by establishing churches, schools, and cultural associations. Merih Erol places the plight of Armenian refugees, including orphans, under her lens and examines the policies of the Greek state in juxtaposition with the involvement of foreign relief agencies, such as Near East Relief. She highlights the role of the Greek state in shuffling the Armenians across the country and in conducting programs to send them to Soviet Armenia.

The realization that the exchange was irreversible and repatriation was only a dream was cemented with the signing of the Ankara Agreement in 1930, when Eleftherios Venizelos and İsmet İnönü agreed to terminate the liquidation of abandoned properties. This event marked a turning point in the history of the population exchange, in the sense that refugees and exchangees were allowed to visit their abandoned homes in their countries of origin. Aytek Soner Alban takes up the case of an exchangee monk who applied to go back to Turkey and unearth the relics hidden by a fellow brother at Sumela Monastery. Alban offers a colorful account of political and social developments in the 1930s, when the memory of displacement and the exchange was still fresh, and many technicalities awaited settlement on the table of the Mixed Commission.

Documentation and analysis of the organizational efforts made by incoming refugees and exchangees in Greece and Turkey to have their voices heard and their presence felt are also lacking. The existence of numerous refugee associations in Greece is illustrative of the fact that, from the very outset, Greek refugees organized themselves into collectivities to form power groups, whereas Muslim exchangees were not allowed to take a step in that direction. One big question that remains is why Turkish exchangees waited for almost 70 years to found an association to represent their position, even though there was no longer any hindrance. Having researched refugee and exchangee associations in Greece and Turkey, Doruk Işıkcı offers a comparative examination of these organizations on the basis of his fieldwork, and points to the discrepancy in

their role as civic institutions.⁷ In his words, “[t]heir motivations, positions, and aspirations differ, as do the effects they have on the formation of refugee and exchangee identities.”

Andreas Baltas’ research complements Işıkcı’s work on associations. Baltas traces the history of the sports clubs brought by the refugees from Asia Minor to Greece and explores their role in preserving the memory of the lost homelands. In doing so, he draws particular attention to the function of these organizations in cultivating the collective identity of the communities involved and in providing a bridge between past and present.

The impact of the population exchange was not limited to the demographic transformation of Greece and Turkey, but also extended to the physical landscape. Several researchers have previously taken up this aspect of the exchange and explored the spatial transformation of urban spaces, based mainly on physical evidence and plans. Melis Cankara’s pioneering research on spatial transformation in the Cretan town of Rethymno employed the most relevant Greek and Ottoman sources to trail the evolution of its streets.⁸ Here she moves out of her comfort zone and expands her discussion on space to a wider framework. Her research is inspiring in many ways, as there is no other study of the transformation of spaces during the exchange process based on a combination of methodologies from different disciplines and concrete archival documentation. It is hoped that her dissertation will soon be published, to offer a much broader picture of the multilayered process by which the spatial organization of Rethymno was transformed after the exchange.

The revival of exchangee spirit in Turkey is a latecomer. In the atmosphere of the 1990s, the creation of the Foundation of Lausanne Treaty Emigrants played a significant role in helping the exchangees come out of the closet to talk about their experiences during and after the exchange. Cretans formed a special group amongst the entire population of Muslim exchangees in the sense that they represented a culturally hybrid situation, speaking solely Greek and carrying unique names upon their arrival. It is highly likely that exchangees of Cretan origin held onto their identity more than any other group of refugee descent in Turkey. Efpraxia Nerantzaki, who has recently completed a dissertation on Cretans in Turkey and their cultural dynamics through

7 Işıkcı, Doruk, “Yunanistan ve Türkiye’deki Mülteci ve Mübadil Dernekleri Tarafından Oluşturulan Ulusal Anlatıların Karşılaştırmalı Bir Analizi” (unpublished M.A. thesis, TOBB Ekonomi ve Teknoloji Üniversitesi, 2018).

8 Cankara, Melis, “Mübadelenin Sessiz Tanıkları: Lozan Antlaşması ile El Değiştiren Girit-Resmo Yapıları” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yıldız Teknik Üniversitesi, 2016).

in-depth interviews and observations with current generations of Cretans in the country, explores the unique qualities of Cretan identity through the concept of “symbolic Cretanness”, a term she has derived from the work of Herbert Gans.⁹ Her findings and discussion certainly shed new light on the long-term implications of the population exchange.

Last but not least, the special issue ends with an article on one of the historically and historiographically controversial aspects of the population exchange, namely, the fate of properties abandoned on both sides. The exchange created much havoc in the existing property regimes in both Greece and Turkey. Based on the proportion of arriving refugees to the available land and houses in Greece, the enormity of the challenge was much greater for that country than for Turkey. However, research has shown that the challenge was not negligible for Turkey either, for many of the abandoned properties had already been seized by a coalition of local populations and refugees of different sorts. In northern Greece, much of the valuable property owned by Muslim landowners had also ended up in the hands of *tschorbadzides* before the arrival of refugees and exchangees. The Mixed Commission in charge of overseeing the property allocation process failed to fulfill its prime function, and the properties allocated to incoming exchangees did not end up in their hands. In the end, much of the abandoned property was not subject to a proper compensation scheme. Having written an original dissertation on property matters associated with the exchange,¹⁰ Ellinor Morack now adopts a comparative perspective and juxtaposes the Greek-Turkish population exchange with other major cases of forced population transfers. After surveying the available literature for all those cases and sharing her original findings for the Greek-Turkish one, Morack moves on to argue that the adoption of a formal legal document to administer the distribution of abandoned properties did not mean much, as it was the main principle according to which distribution was conducted that eventually determined the success or failure of state policies on this matter. The Turkish-Greek case and other instances of forced population transfers that she studies were open to abuse and misuse of authority. Morack shows that schemes based on unilateral compensation proved relatively more

9 Nerantzaki, Efpraxia, “Symbolic Cretanness in Mersin and Ayvalık: assertion of distinctiveness and the need for recognition” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Middle East Technical University, 2023). See Gans, Herbert J., “Symbolic ethnicity and symbolic religiosity: towards a comparison of ethnic and religious acculturation,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 17 (1994), 577–92.

10 Morack, Ellinor, *The Dowry of the State? The Politics of Abandoned Property and the Population Exchange in Turkey, 1921–1945* (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2017).

successful than multilateral ones. Morack's piece definitely helps integrate the Greek-Turkish exchange into the broader history of forced migration and refugeedom from the vantage point of the Orthodox Greeks and Muslim Turks who experienced it. It nicely wraps up the purpose of this special issue, by showing the direction of research towards global rather than national history.