

## Greek and Turkish refugees and deportees 1912-1924

[Erik-Jan Zürcher](#) (Universiteit Leiden)

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The final decade in the history of the Ottoman Empire witnessed a tremendous uprooting of a whole range of ethnic and religious communities in the Balkans and Asia Minor. These migrations, which were caused exclusively by political developments and by war, affected, at a very rough estimate, a minimum of three million people. At the same time, they formed the final stage in a process, which had been going on for the best part of a century, in which Muslim communities with various ethnic and linguistic characteristics had fled, or been chased, from the former Ottoman domains around the Black Sea and in South-Eastern Europe, when these areas had been lost to the Russian Empire or to the newly independent national states, such as Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania or Greece. Until 1914 the victims (refugees and deportees alike) were almost exclusively Muslim, but from then onwards the Ottomans, traumatised by the loss of the European provinces, began to see the creation of a homeland in Asia Minor with a solid Muslim majority as a political priority. As a result well over a million Greek Orthodox and Armenian Christians were driven from their homes and, in the case of the Armenians, many were massacred. After World War I, which in the case of the Ottoman Empire was prolonged by an armed struggle between Muslims on the one hand and Armenians and Greeks on the other over the possession of Asia Minor, it was clear to many that coexistence of the different religious communities was no longer possible. It was in this context and against this historical background that the decision was taken to exchange minority populations between Turkey and Greece.

### The Balkan War and its aftermath

On 8 October 1912, the tiny mountain kingdom of Montenegro declared war on the Ottoman Empire, followed within two weeks by Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece. The Ottoman war plan in the case of a simultaneous attack from the united Balkan states had been to hold on to strengthened defensive positions until reinforcements could be brought up from Asia, but it failed. The Ottoman army collapsed in the first few weeks of the war and the remnants retreated to the fortified lines at Çatalca, thirty kilometres from the capital Constantinople. All of the areas to the west, Thrace, Macedonia, Thessaly, Epirus, Albania and Kosovo, were lost. When the Balkan states fell out amongst each other and Greece and Serbia attacked Bulgaria, the Ottomans profited to some extent and managed to recover Eastern Thrace up to the Maritza river. They also recovered the old Ottoman capital city of Edirne (Adrianople). Nevertheless, the loss was still enormous. Eighty percent of the European territory of the Empire was lost, with 4.2 million inhabitants (about 16 percent of the total population of the Empire). The areas lost had been Ottoman for over five hundred years. They included the most developed and richest provinces.

The Balkan War caused many people to leave their homes. Around 800.000 people fled in different directions. In part, these were people simply fleeing the battle zones, but about half of them, some 400.000, were Muslims, who, out of fear for Greek, Serbian or Bulgarian atrocities, followed the retreating Ottoman army. Large numbers of these refugees died from cholera (which had been brought over with the troops arriving from

Syria), but those who remained, gravitated towards Constantinople and had to be resettled there or transferred to Asia Minor. In the Constantinople area the refugees built the first of what later came to be known as 'gecekondu's, settlements built without permission on state land.

Ironically, the new borders left Thrace west of the Maritza river, which had a large Muslim majority, in Greek hands and Eastern Thrace, which was two thirds Greek and Bulgarian, in Ottoman hands. During the war about fifty thousand Bulgarians from Eastern Thrace had fled to Bulgaria and a roughly equal number of Turks had gone in the opposite direction. It was in order to improve the position of the border areas that Bulgaria and Turkey attached a protocol on population exchange to the peace agreement they concluded in Constantinople on 29 September 1913. Under the protocol, a mixed commission was to be formed, which was to act as impartial arbiter and assess and liquidate the property left behind by the emigrants. Although the agreement was never actually carried out because of the outbreak of World War I less than a year later, it served as a model for later agreements on population exchange in the Balkans and the Near East. It should be pointed out, however, that the population exchange envisaged in 1913 was strictly on a voluntary basis.

### Effects in Asia Minor

The loss of the Balkan provinces had a tremendous impact on the political and administrative elite of the Empire, not only because of the history or economic importance of the provinces. A disproportionate part of the elite hailed from the Balkan provinces. Politicians like interior minister and party leader Talât Pasha, administrators like Evranoszade Rahmi, the governor of Smyrna (İzmir), or officers like Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) all hailed from the Balkans themselves and had lost their own homeland. In most cases their families were among the refugees. This helps to explain why the political leadership of the empire from 1913 onwards focused strongly on Asia Minor, or Anatolia, as the Turkish heartland. They adopted it consciously as their new homeland, which was to replace the lost provinces.

The first effects of this policy could be seen in the early months of 1914. The secretary of the ruling Committee of Union and Progress (which had established a one-party dictatorship after a coup d'état in January 1913) in Smyrna, Mahmut Celâl (who was later to become Turkey's third president) was instructed by Talât Pasha to Turkify the Western seaboard of Asia Minor. With the help of militias of the so-called 'Special Organisation' he succeeded in forcing up to 200.000 Greek Orthodox to flee the coastal provinces and move to the Greek islands of the Aegean directly opposite the mainland. The means employed consisted mainly of veiled threats and intimidation. Militias would come at night and start drumming in the main square. At the same time the local Ottoman authorities would announce that they could not guarantee the inhabitants' safety from the next day onwards. For most, this was enough encouragement to leave. Those most affected were the Greek businessmen and commercial farmers, as the drive behind the campaign was economic as much as it was political: the Ottoman government aimed to replace the non-Muslim bourgeoisie, which completely dominated the modern industrial, financial and commercial sectors of the economy, with a 'national', that is to say: Muslim, bourgeoisie of their own.

In May 1914, the Ottoman government sought to give permanence to the new situation by concluding an agreement on population exchange with the Greek government. Greek prime minister Venizelos accepted the plan in principle, on condition that it would be voluntary. A mixed commission on the pattern of the Turco-Bulgarian agreement of 1913,

was to be established to oversee the just disposal of properties, but nothing ever came of this. The activities were suspended indefinitely in August 1914, because of the outbreak of the European war. During that war, the Ottoman Greeks were not persecuted in the way the Armenians and Syrian Christians were and there were no large-scale massacres, but once Greece joined the war on the side of Great Britain, France and Russia, many Greek families were moved inland out of fear that they would support Entente landings. Those Greek Orthodox males, who had not availed themselves of a foreign passport or had actually moved to Greece before the Ottoman mobilisation in 1914, were conscripted into the army, but apart from a very limited number of officers, particularly in the medical corps, the Greek Orthodox mostly served as unarmed soldiers in the labour battalions, carrying loads and repairing roads.

When the war had ended with the armistice of Moudros (31 October 1918), it was clear that any future peace agreement would entail far-reaching dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. Greece put forward claims to Smyrna and its hinterland and to Eastern Thrace. In May 1919, the Greek army occupied Smyrna and the surrounding area. Almost as soon as the Greek army had arrived, large numbers of Greeks, who had had to leave the Ottoman Empire in 1914 began to return and to reclaim their former houses and businesses. When a peace treaty was concluded between the victorious Entente and the Ottoman Empire at Sèvres in July 1920, the Greek claims were honoured. The Ottoman state was reduced to Central and Northern Asia Minor and Constantinople, but by this time a strong nationalist resistance movement had emerged in Anatolia, which refused to recognise the Sèvres treaty. Great Britain and France were demobilising and therefore not in a position to enforce the treaty. The Greek government of Venizelos saw in this an opportunity to realise the Greek nationalist programme of the 'megali idea' and unite all Greek Orthodox living around the Aegean and the Sea of Marmara in a single Hellenic state. The Greek army, acting as the strong arm of the Entente, moved inland, but it was halted by the resistance of the Turkish nationalists before Ankara in September 1921 and then routed in August 1922. Smyrna was taken by the Turkish army on 9 September 1922.

When the Greek army collapsed and its remnants retreated towards the sea, the large majority of the Greek population, fearing Turkish reprisals, also fled. The number involved is not entirely clear, but an estimate of between 400.000 and half a million seems justified. These people as a rule left in great haste with only the things they could carry. They were transferred to Greece by a host of larger and smaller vessels of all descriptions and flags. In the following months, mass emigration continued. When the Turkish nationalists demanded the surrender of Eastern Thrace, the Greeks living there, some 250.000, as well as some 50.000 Armenians, left for Greece, but as British forces still occupied the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, the Turks had no means of transferring troops there. As a result the refugees from Eastern Thrace could prepare their migration much more carefully and take much more of their belongings with them. After the Turkish victory, two groups of Greek Orthodox were left in Asia: the communities in central Anatolia, which were partly Turkish-speaking (the so-called 'Karamanlis') and those living on the Eastern Black Sea coast, the Pontian Greeks. Each of these groups numbered about 200.000 souls. In addition there were several hundred thousand Greek Orthodox in the Constantinople area, partly residents of long standing, partly refugees.

### The population exchange

The idea of exchanging the Greeks of Asia Minor against Muslims living in Greece was first broached by the Norwegian Fritjof Nansen (1861-1930), who had been the League of

Nations' High Commissioner for refugees since 1919. It was quickly taken up by the Greek government. The inflow of three quarters of a million refugees posed almost insurmountable housing problems in Greece and the removal of the 600.000 Muslims in Greece would go some way towards alleviating the problem, as the vacated homes of the Muslims could be used to re-house the immigrants. Greece had some experience with population exchanges by now. A clause allowing the exchange (on a voluntary basis) of 92.000 Bulgarians against 46.000 Greeks had already been inserted into the peace agreement of Neuilly with Bulgaria, concluded in August 1920.

Nansen was given the green light by the League of Nations to explore the possibilities of an exchange on 14 November 1922, one week before the start of the peace negotiations between Great Britain, France, Italy and Greece on the one hand and Turkey on the other in Lausanne. Turkey agreed in principle, on condition that the Turkish-Muslim population of Western Thrace (for which the Turkish delegation in Lausanne demanded a plebiscite on inclusion in Turkey or Greece) would be exempt. In return, the Greeks then demanded an exemption for the Greek-Orthodox inhabitants of Constantinople. During the protracted peace negotiations in Lausanne a convention was concluded between the two countries on 30 January 1923. It covered those "Turkish nationals of Greek Orthodox religion and Greek nationals of the Moslem religion" who had emigrated voluntarily or had been forced to emigrate since 18 October 1912 (the date of Greece's declaration of war at the start of the Balkan War). This of course included those groups who had remained in their place but would now be forced to emigrate for the first time. The convention came into force when it was included in the peace treaty of Lausanne concluded on 24 July 1923.

Three things are remarkable about the convention. In the first place the criterion was exclusively religious. There was no reference to linguistic categories or to ethnic ones. The majority of the Muslims from Macedonia were Greek speaking and a considerable proportion of the Greek Orthodox of Central Anatolia spoke Turkish. Nevertheless, these groups were earmarked for migration on the grounds of their religion. In the second place, there was the retroactive character of the convention: it was not limited to the migrations which had started in 1922, but legitimised all of the – largely forced – migrations caused by the wars, which had taken place since 1912. In the third place, there was the involuntary nature of the migration. This was the first time that compulsory migration, or – to give it a more honest name – deportation, was legalised under international law.

As almost all Greeks from Western Asia Minor had already left the country, the population exchange mainly involved the transfer of the Central Anatolian Greek Orthodox (Greek and Turkish speaking) and the Pontic Greeks. Of the latter community, it was primarily the inhabitants of the towns on the Black Sea littoral who were moved, as the Greeks of the mountainous inland areas, some 80.000 people in all, had largely moved East instead of West, into Georgia and Russia, when they had lost the armed struggle against the Turkish nationalists.

## Resettlement and integration

The resettlement of the refugees posed tremendous problems in Greece. The country, which had a population of only 5.5 millions was faced with an influx of about 1.2 million people (the actual numbers are surrounded by a lot of uncertainty). The immigrants were settled first in camps, then in townships on the outskirts of the towns and cities, especially in the two big cities Athens and Salonica. These cities, which each of them had less than 200.000 inhabitants before the exchange, now doubled in size and huge new tracts of land were developed on their outskirts. In the countryside, the properties of the

Muslims of Macedonia and Crete now became available, but as those communities had been only about 400.000 strong, it is clear that there was not enough land to house the immigrants and give them a living. State land and church land was therefore also made available.

As a rule the Greek immigrants from Turkey moved and were *resettled as communities*. The names of their new townships often recalled the places they came from, e.g. "New Smyrna". They brought their own clubs and organisations with them and founded a great number of migrant organisations. AEK Athens, founded in 1924 and famous for its football and basketball teams, is among the best-known. AEK stands for Athletic Club of Constantinople. The social and cultural traditions of the immigrants were different in many ways from those of the inhabitants of Greece, but also from each other: Pontic Greeks, Greeks from Thrace, Central-Anatolian Greek Orthodox and former inhabitants of the West Coast and Smyrna could not be regarded as a single community. For many the first years were a time of extreme hardship and large numbers of immigrants re-emigrated to France, Britain and the United States. On the other hand, the integration and indeed survival of the immigrant groups was helped by the fact that they contained a relatively high proportion of skilled professionals, from shippers to bankers, from hazelnut, tobacco and raisin traders to railway engineers and hotel and restaurant owners. This allowed them to become a dynamic element in the economy. To give only the most famous example: Aristotle Onassis was one of those born and bred in Smyrna, where his father ran a tobacco-exporting business. After the 1922 defeat he rebuilt his family's tobacco business from Argentina, after which he returned and, through his connection with the Livanos shipping family from Chios, built a shipping empire of his own and reputedly became the world's richest man.

The pattern of resettlement of Macedonian Muslims in Turkey was quite different. The migrants from Macedonia formed a much smaller group than those who had left Turkey. They also overwhelmingly came from a rural background, so it was logical that they should be assigned farmland. The Turkish authorities dealt with individual families rather than with whole communities and in assigning land they classified the immigrants according to their agricultural specialisation: tobacco growers, olive growers and growers of grapes. They were resettled in areas which were considered suitable for their kind of produce. Tobacco growers for example, who had produced the famous Macedonian tobacco which went into Egyptian cigarettes, were resettled in the Samsun area on the Black coast, where they grew tobacco for the state monopoly of the Turkish republic.

In Turkish society, the immigrants, like those who had come to the country as the result of earlier waves of immigration (1878, 1913), remained a recognisably different group, collectively known as 'muhacir's. They lived in separate villages or neighbourhoods and on the whole kept up their traditions. The use of minority languages was actively discouraged by the government of the republic, but the first and second generation migrants still often spoke Greek or Albanian amongst themselves. A common characteristic of the Greek and the Muslim migrants is that they had to rebuild their lives from scratch. The Lausanne convention included the establishment of a mixed commission on the pattern of the earlier agreements with Bulgaria, but in the event the task of assessing the value of the property left behind and disposing of it in an equitable manner proved simply too complicated. The mixed commission continued its work until October 1934, but the bulk of the migrants never saw any money.

As will be remembered, two groups had been exempted from the exchange: the Muslims of Western Thrace and the Greek Orthodox of Constantinople. The first community was about 200.000 strong and the Turks did their utmost to reduce the second one to a similar

number by demanding proof of each individual that he or she was actually resident within the Constantinople municipality in October 1912. These were the so-called 'établis' and assessing their status was the major occupation of the mixed commission. The fate of the two communities in the rest of the Twentieth Century was very different. The Muslims of Western Thrace were certainly mistrusted by the Greek state. Expressions of their Turkish (as opposed to Muslim) identity were – and are – strictly forbidden and there has been constant pressure to Hellenize the community. Nevertheless it has survived more or less intact as a separate community living in a clearly circumscribed area with a strong feeling of separate identity. The same cannot be said for the Greek Orthodox of Constantinople, or – as it was known after 1923 – Istanbul. In the interbellum the community diminished in size, but it held on to its socio-economic position in spite of the nationalist economic policies of the state, which still had as its goal the creation of a native Turkish bourgeoisie at the expense of non-Muslims. The skills possessed by the community were simply indispensable. The community's trust in the impartiality and the secular character of the state was fatally weakened, however, by two events. First, the imposition of a hugely discriminatory Wealth Tax in 1942, which ruined many Greek businesses and then a large-scale, and politically inspired, pogrom in September 1955. The result was that the large majority of Istanbul Greeks decided to emigrate to Greece or the United States and at the end of the Twentieth Century the community had shrunk to about 2000 souls, or about one percent of its former size.

## Perceptions

The perception of the population exchange has differed widely between Greece and Turkey. The Greek mainland had no previous experience of large-scale immigration. It was suddenly faced in 1922-24 with a mass immigration amounting to over 20 percent of its autochthonous population. In addition, this wave of immigration was part of a huge military and political crisis. The Greek army had been humiliated and the whole political system discredited. No wonder, then, that in the Greek vision of the events the negatives dominate. It is the major national catastrophe par excellence and as time has gone by, it has been blamed less on the follies of the Greek government and its occupation of Asia Minor and more on the 'injustice' and 'barbarism' of the Turks. In addition there came into existence a strong sense of nostalgia for the lost world of Anatolian Hellenism, a nostalgia which was fostered by countless immigrant organisations. The magnitude of the problem and of the migrant population has meant that Greek society as a whole has identified strongly with the fate of the migrants. This is reflected in the number of archives, research institutes and publications devoted to the Greek communities of Asia Minor and to the population exchange. As early as 1930 a large-scale survey of the social and cultural heritage of the Anatolian Greeks was started.

The Turkish situation is very different. In Turkish eyes, those who came in 1924-25 constituted only one among many groups of Muslim refugees who had had to be resettled ever since the Eighteen Twenties. At the time the Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923, over twenty percent of its population had a 'muhacir' background. In line with the policies of their predecessors, the rulers of the Committee of Union and Progress, the leaders of the republic saw the homogenisation of Anatolia (which was now a 98 percent Muslim country as opposed to 80 percent in 1912) as a positive development. In other words: the population exchange was seen as an integral part of the nation-building process and the fact that the homogenisation of Anatolia also meant that the precious skills of an entire commercial and industrial middle class had been lost, was seen as a price that had to be paid for full independence. This historical interpretation still prevails, both in Turkey itself and in the literature on Turkey in Europe and America.

The fact that the Macedonian deportees were only one among many groups of immigrants and that it concerned a relatively small community (3 percent of the population) in a very large and very empty country, has meant that there has been little interest, either scholarly or popular, in the population exchange. Where in Greece there is a whole library of publications and rich resources for further study are available, in Turkey only one fairly small monograph has been published on the exchange. Nostalgia and resentment have been limited to the migrant groups themselves and have not become national issues. It is only very recently that social historians have started to be interested in the human aspects of the population exchange. This new interest expresses itself in a few television documentaries and in plans for oral history projects, which have not so far materialised.

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