

# THE REASONS FOR IMMIGRATION FROM WESTERN THRACE TO TURKEY (1923-1950)

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## Introduction

The narrow stripe that lies between the Maritza River in the east and Mesta-Karasu River in the west which covers an area of 8578 square kilometers is called Western Thrace. There are three cities in this region. These are Alexandropolis in the east, Komotini in the middle, and Xanthi in the west<sup>1</sup>.

Except for a period of four months between Ayastefanos Agreement (3 March 1878) and Berlin Agreement (13 July 1878) signed after the war between the Ottoman State and Russia, the region had been under Turkish sovereignty for 549 years since its conquest in 1364 until its loss. The region has been under the control of Bulgaria (from 1913 to 1919), of France on behalf of the Allies (from 1919 to 1920), and of Greece (from 1920 onwards).

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<sup>1</sup> Baskın Oran, *Türk-Yunan İlişkilerinde Batı Trakya Sorunu*, Ankara 1991, p. 24.

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The region, the borders of which are described above is an important strategic region. This strategic importance means different concepts to the countries that have had political control over the region. For the Ottoman Empire, Western Thrace was a stepping stone during the time of conquests in Rumelia; the last point of resistance during withdrawals; and even a safety zone for the capital city of Istanbul. For Bulgaria, the region was a gate to the Aegean Sea, the prerequisite for the Grand Bulgaria with two seas (Black Sea and Aegean Sea). For Greece, the region was a prerequisite for not becoming partners with Bulgaria in the Aegean Sea, and for its policies against the Ottoman State, the Megali Idea.

It is because of these very peculiarities and priorities that the sovereign states in Western Thrace have applied demographic methods that were suitable for their basic strategies. Through its settlement policy, the Ottoman State created a dominant population in the region by settling Turkomans from different parts of Anatolia in the region. Bulgaria and Greece, the sovereign states in the region after the Ottoman State, increased their ethnic elements in the region targeting the other ethnic elements on the other hand as part of their basic strategies.

This paper will examine the conditions that the Western Thrace Turks (under Bulgarian and mainly Greek rule) experienced after the Balkan War in 1913, in the framework of the chain of disintegration of the Ottoman State that became evident after the Berlin Agreement in 1878. This study has two different aims. The first is to explore whether there were some political and strategic reasons why Muslim immigrants from Western Thrace were not allowed to immigrate to Turkey both in the Ottoman period and the republican era while there were no restrictions for people from other parts of the Balkans to immigrate to Turkey. The second aim is to find out whether Turks under minority status in the Western Thrace can endure this psychology, and to determine the reasons and dimensions of immigration to Turkey that started as a reaction to the applied minority status.

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At this point we have two main problems: The first is that, since immigration from Western Thrace took the form of political asylum or was done illegally, it is not possible to make a reliable estimate of the exact number of the immigrants. The second problem is the diversity and even the contradiction among the numbers given in the studies made by Western Thracian-origin authors, which have also been used as sources for other researches on the topic. Therefore, the main aim of this study is not to determine the number of the immigrants but to analyze the reasons and psychology of the immigration present in archive documents.

### **The Loss of Western Thrace and the Immigration Process until the Lausanne Peace Conference**

Since its foundation until its dissociation, the Ottoman State carried the traits of a Balkan state, and lost its control over the Balkans upon its defeats in the last quarter of the 19th century and in the first quarter of the 20th century.

The war between the Ottoman State and Russia in 1877-1878 erased the Ottoman State from the Balkans on the one hand, and on the other caused Turks, who had been living there for centuries, leave their lands. After the withdrawal of the Ottoman State from the Balkans, Turks and other Muslim elements were left without a state, and had to immigrate in masses to Thrace and Anatolia in order to get rid of Russian, Serbian, Greek and Bulgarian oppression and brutality. The Turkish and Muslim immigrants were coming continuously in waves from the south of the Danube and their first destinations were Macedonia and Western Thrace. Settling the immigrants in these regions was as a result of the security strategy of the Ottoman state<sup>2</sup>. This strategy was put into practice in the last quarter of the 19th century and lasted for half a century until the Balkan War broke out in 1912. Both the revolt in Albania and the

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<sup>2</sup> Aram Andonyan, **Balkan Harbi Tarihi**, İstanbul 1975, p. 92.

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alliance of four Balkan states (Bulgaria, Montenegro, Serbia, Greece) in 1912 turned out to be a Balkan disaster for the Ottoman State.

The Balkan War had two phases: the first war broke out on 18 October 1912 and ended on 30 May 1913 with an agreement signed in London. This war caused the Ottoman State to withdraw its borders from Adriatic Sea to Midye-Enez line. This withdrawal meant the loss of all the lands of the Ottoman State in Europe beyond the west of Istanbul (Albania, Macedonia, Western Thrace and an important part of the Eastern Thrace).

After the Ottoman State was expelled from the region, the suppressed nationalistic ambitions of each Balkan state evoked again. This resulted in a new war called the 2nd Balkan War which broke out among the Balkan states (29 June 1913). This war broke out upon the disagreement among the Balkan states over Macedonia which allowed the Ottoman State, to regain the eastern part of whole Thrace, that was undivided under the Ottoman administration. Due to the effects of the provisions of international agreements, the Ottoman State was prevented from sending its regular army forces to the west of the Maritza River. However, the Ottoman State did not fail to send a 115-strong detachment of the Ottoman Secret Service to Western Thrace, commanded by Kushchubashi Eftref Sencer. This detachment crossed the Maritza River and joined the Turkish militia there; they regained the Western Thrace and formed a political organization called “Temporary Government of Western Thrace.” This formation in Western Thrace disturbed Bulgaria and the big states of Europe. Due to the international pressures on the Ottoman State, the administration of the Union and Progress Party, the then-government of the Ottoman State, ordered its units in Western Thrace to withdraw. Upon this action, the administrators in Western Thrace announced the “Independent Government of Western Thrace.” This courageous step of Turks — the overwhelming majority in Western Thrace — towards an independent and free future was not long-lived.

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Although the Ottoman State wanted to guarantee the rights of Turks in Western Thrace, it did not help this formation with the fear of a possible alliance among the Balkan states. Finally, Western Thrace was left to Bulgaria with Istanbul agreement signed on 29 September 1913 which guaranteed the rights of Turks living in the region. The region stayed under Bulgarian control until 1919. 80% of the population of Western Thrace was Turkish in 1913, therefore leaving Western Thrace to Bulgarians who constituted only 5% of the population was not something that could be accepted by the Turks living in both Western Thrace and in Turkey. For this reason, the region witnessed important military, political and social disturbances during 6 years of Bulgarian control and of Allies, (1919-1920) and Greek occupation (1920-1923). During the 10 years between Istanbul Agreement on 29 September 1913 and Lausanne Peace Agreement on 24 July 1923 when the region was left to Greece, the problem of Western Thrace had been one of the most important problems of Turkey and Turkish people.

Since 1913 when the region was lost, the Ottoman State intended to keep the existence of Turkish majority there by not accepting immigrants from the region. This shows that the Ottoman State had not lost the hope of regaining Western Thrace<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the Ottoman government supported the “Committee for the Salvation of Western Thrace”, led by Captain Fuat Bey (Balkan), between 1915 and 1917, and, which, proved its interest in the region.

When the Central Powers (Ottoman State, Germany, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Bulgaria) were defeated in the 1st World War, Western Thrace was taken over by the Allied Powers (Greece, Britain, France, Italy, etc.). On 17 October 1919, Western Thracian Turks formed the State of Western

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<sup>3</sup> H. ΥΙΔΕΚΗ Αρσινόη, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Balkanlar'ın Makus Talihi Göç*, İstanbul 2001, p. 111.

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Thrace which was based on the self-determination principle defended by Wilson. However, this formation, too, was not long-lived and ended with the occupation of Western Thrace by the Greek army.

The Mondros Ceasefire Agreement, which was signed on 30 October 1918 between the Ottoman State and the winning states of the World War I accelerated the process of collapse of the Ottoman State and gave way for the occupation of Turkish lands. In such a situation, the Turkish nation started its National Struggle for Independence under General Mustafa Kemal's leadership, and announced the conditions under which it would accept peace. The problem of Western Thrace was included in the National Pact of 1920 which emerged as a result of the acceptance of the decisions of the Erzurum and Sivas Congresses by the Ottoman Parliament and which was the manifestation of Turkish National Struggle for Independence. This document had a national character and determined the borders of the Turkish State. It consisted of 6 articles, the third of which was about Western Thrace and read like this: "The legal situation of Western Thrace whose future was left to the concord with Turkey must be determined through a referendum to be held freely". This statement certainly reflected the sensitivity of the leaders of the Turkish National Struggle about the independence and unity of the lands where Turks were the majority. This approach was also based on Wilson's Principles and international law.

The Turkish National Struggle for Independence was carried on between 1919 and 1922 and its military dimension ended with Mudanya Ceasefire Agreement on 11 October 1922, which brought the Greek occupation to an end in Anatolia and Eastern Thrace. On the other hand, the problem of Western Thrace was left to the negotiation table at Lausanne Peace Conference as a symbol of the lands lost in the Balkans and of the Turkish minority groups that had to be left under the rule of foreign state<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Oran, *ibid.* , pp. 34-35.

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## The Problem of Western Thrace at Lausanne Peace Conference

The Lausanne Peace Conference started on 20 November 1922. One of the first issues to be dealt with at the conference was Turkey's borders in Europe. The Commission for Land and Military Problems which convened on 22 November 1922 and which was chaired by the British Delegate Lord Curzon, discussed Turkey's Thracian Border. Lord Curzon asked the Turkish delegate Çsmet Pasha to speak first. Çsmet Pasha asked the 1915 borders of the Eastern Thrace to be accepted, and a referendum for Western Thrace<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, the problem of Western Thrace was put on the agenda of the conference and was discussed in the sessions on 23, 24, 25 November. Turkish delegation insisted that a referendum be held for Western Thrace, which was included in the National Pact of 1920. Turkish side supported its thesis with statistical data on population density and owning of real estates. According to the Turkish thesis, the general distribution of population and the distribution of real estates in Western Thrace were as follows:

### General Distribution of Population in Western Thrace<sup>6</sup>

Cities	Turks	Greeks	Bulgarians	Jews	Armenians
Komotini	59.967	8.834	9.997	1.007	360
Alexandroupolis	11.744	4.800	10.227	253	449
Souflion	14.736	11.542	5.490	-	-
Xanthi	42.671	8.728	522	220	114
Total	129.120	33.910	26.266	1.480	923

General Total Population: 191,699

<sup>5</sup> Seha L. Meray, *Lozan Barış Konferansı, Tutanaklar, Belgeler*. Series I, Vol. I, Book I, Ankara 1969, p. 20; Ali Naci Karacan, *Lozan*, İstanbul 1971, p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> Meray, *Ibid.*, pp. 54-60.

### Distribution of the Ownership of Real Estates in Western Thrace in terms of Nationality<sup>7</sup>

Turks	% 84
Bulgarians	% 10
Greeks	% 5
Various	% 1

Lord Curzon, Venizelos and the representative of Serbia-Croatia-Slovenia opposed the views of Turkish delegation which were based on Wilson's "self-determination" principle.

In the last session of the conference held on 25 November 1922 in which land problems and Western Thrace were discussed, the last remarks were made by Lord Curzon and he made the following evaluation: "... Turkish delegation has made a political application by proposing a referendum in the Western Thrace. Holding a referendum in the Western Thrace will make it clear that Turks constitute the majority in this region which will make it possible for Turkey to demand the region back in the future. But, the Allies are not willing to give this opportunity to Turkey. The views of Turkish delegation are based on Wilson Principles which emphasize the notion of self-determination of the nations. However, it is not clear whether Wilson has made a terrible impact or not on world peace by inventing the term "self-determination"<sup>8</sup>.

After some pungent negotiations, the problems of Turkish-Greek border and Western Thrace were put aside. The first committee of the Commission for Land and Military Problems held thirteen sessions for these problems. 7 of these sessions were held in the first phase of the Lausanne Peace Conference (20 November 1922-4 February 1923) and

<sup>7</sup> Karacan, *ibid.*, pp.129-129.

<sup>8</sup> Karacan, *ibid.*, p. 128-129.



6 were held in the second phase of the conference (23 April 1923-24 July 1923). Land problems between Turkey and Greece could be solved in the session held on 17 July 1923. Documents concerning this problem were signed on 24 July 1923<sup>9</sup>.

The Turkish delegation failed in the referendum formula for Western Thrace and had to be content with the guarantee that the decisions in articles 37-45 of the Peace Agreement about the protection of the minorities would be applied to the Greeks in Istanbul and Turks in Western Thrace that had been excluded during population exchange.

The Lausanne Peace Conference was considered by Western Thracian Turks as the last resort of hope in their 10-year-long struggle for independence, but it could only give them a “minority status”. Therefore, Western Thracian Turks were the first Turkish group that was left beyond Turkish borders with the consent and guarantee of Turkish State. At the same time, Western Thracian Turks took their place in history as the sole minority group that was formally recognized by Greece<sup>10</sup>.

After the Lausanne Peace Conference the focus was on whether or not Western Thracian Turks would accept their new roles in minority status. Those who were satisfied with their new roles are those who constitute today’s minority group despite all kinds of pressures exerted by Greek governments. The only choice for those who were dissatisfied with minority status and who could not endure the pressures was to seek asylum in Turkey or immigrate to Turkey illegally.

### **Immigration from Western Thrace to Turkey after Lausanne Peace Conference**

The immigration traffic from various countries to Turkey gained momentum after the Lausanne Peace Agreement (24 July 1923) and the

<sup>9</sup> Kamuran Gürün, “Türk-Yunan ilişkileri ve Lozan Antlaşması”, **Atatürk Türkiye’sinde Dış Politika Sempozyumu**, Boğaziçi University, İstanbul 1984, pp. 24-25.

<sup>10</sup> Stefanos Yerasimos, **Milliyetler ve Sınrlar**, İstanbul 1995, p. 36.

announcement of the Republic in Turkey. On the one hand, the procedures for transportation and settlement of 500.000 immigrants were carried on according to the Population Exchange Agreement (30 January 1923) with Greece; on the other hand, Muslim-origin people from such Balkan countries as Bulgaria, Romania, and Yugoslavia also started to immigrate to Turkey either in masses or in disorganized ways<sup>11</sup>.

Simultaneously, a tendency to immigrate to Turkey began among Western Thracian Turks, who were excluded from the population exchange programme. The most important factor for this is that Greece wanted to settle the exchanged Greeks in the region in order to change the demographic structure of the region. This caused a rapid change in the then-present ratios of population and land ownership in Western Thrace in favour of Greeks. This negative change in social and economic situation and the unbearable minority psychology made them think of immigration as a final solution.

It is needless to say that the desire to own the lands in Anatolia emptied by immigrating Greeks (abandoned property) was a factor in the immigration of Western Thracian Turks. However, because of the strategic importance of the region, the government of Turkey did not want Western Thracian Turks to empty the region, and took a decision on 4 November 1923 not to accept the immigrants from Western Thrace. The right to use the abandoned property was primarily given to those who immigrated from the parts of Greece other than Western Thrace<sup>12</sup>.

Tied to some starategic causes the Turkish governments did not approach positively the immigration from Western Thrace. However, from time to time there were some exceptions. For example, 158 people

<sup>11</sup> Hikmet Öksüz, “<kili <diffkiler Çerçevesinde Balkan Ülkelerinden Türkiye’ye Göçler ve Göç Sonras> <skan Meselesi (1923-1938)>”, **Atatürk Dergisi**, Vol. III, No 1, Erzurum 2000, p. 185.

<sup>12</sup> **Baffbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arffivi, Bakanlar Kurulu Kararlar>** ( Later BCA, BKK ), 030.18.1.1/08.39.09.

from Derecik village of Western Thrace immigrated to Eastern Thrace because of heavy Greek oppression and they were settled in available regions of Tekirdağ<sup>13</sup>. A “letter of complaint” written by 55-year-old <brahim Behzad Agha from Sasall> village of Komotini is important because of the information it contains about the oppression of Greek authorities on Western Thracian Turks. Behzad Agha stated that the first torture he was subjected to was in May 1920 when Greeks occupied Western Thrace. He explained that Greek authorities tortured him by accusing him of hiding 2 Bulgarian brigands, 2 rifles and 2 bombs.

He complained that during torture, he was subjected to a bastinado and different parts of his body were beaten for 45 minutes with a 5 cm-thick stick. Behzad Agha claimed that he was subjected to torture a second time in September 1922. He stated that he was subjected to bastinado again for hiding weapons, the soles of his feet were beaten, and he was able to count until the 57th hit but fainted after that, and said that he suffered from hernia after this torture. He went on to say in his letter of 16 March 1924 that in addition to torture his lands and animals were confiscated by Greek soldiers and immigrants, and that he wanted to immigrate to Turkey with 8 members of his family because it was impossible for him to live in Western Thrace.

Hac> <brahim Behzad Agha’s application was rejected according to the decision taken by Council of Ministers on 4 November 1923 which prohibited immigration from Western Thrace to Turkey. However, Turkish government noticed the tendency among Western Thracian Turks to immigrate to Turkey because of the harsh treatment and oppression of Greeks on Turks, and, therefore<sup>14</sup>, decided that this had to be ended<sup>14</sup>. However, information from Turkey’s consulate in Komotini showed that the Greek government went on to confiscate the properties of Western Thracian Turks. Upon this act, the Turkish government decided to take the necessary measures for the peace and security of the Turkish minority whose rights were guaranteed by Lausanne Peace Agreement. A letter

<sup>13</sup> BCA, T·E, 272.12/41.47.10.

of instructions was sent by Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Turkish chargé d'affaires in Athens<sup>15</sup>.

According to Article 2 of the Exchange Agreement, which comprised 19 articles and which was signed in Lausanne between Turkey and Greece, the Greeks in Istanbul and the Turks in Western Thrace were to be excluded from exchange. The Joint Exchange Committee that was formed in accordance with the agreement, started to work in October 1923, and completed part of exchange programme in the following year without facing serious problem. However, the misinterpretation of the word “etabli” (which literally means ‘settled’ or ‘established’) in the agreement by the two sides was an obstacle for the full implementation of the exchange programme. In addition, Greek government’s attempt to settle the exchanged Greek immigrants in Western Thrace, which meant an infringement of Lausanne Peace Agreement, messed up the exchange programme completely. Naturally, this disturbed the Western Thracian Turks and caused their immigration to Turkey. Hamdi Bey, the vice president of the Turkish committee in the Joint Exchange Committee, sent a letter to the Turkish government on 6 February 1924 and emphasized the sensitive situation in Western Thrace.

It was stated in this letter that the Greek government had settled 80.000 Greek immigrants in Komotini and a total of 200.000 immigrants had been settled in Western Thrace including Xanthi and Alexandroupolis. Greek immigrants were settled in Turks’ houses and that Turks’ lands and farms were occupied were among the information given in the letter. In addition to the oppression by the Greek soldiers and immigrants on Western Thracian Turks, some Circassians and fugitives from Turkey, penetrated into the region and created unrest among Turks, in cooperation with Greek authorities. All these contributed to the tendency among Western Thracian Turks to immigrate to Turkey in masses. In order to prevent Turks from immigrating, the above-mentioned letter recommended that;

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<sup>15</sup> **BCA, T·E**, 272.11/20.99.34.

1. the Greek immigrants leave Turkish properties and lands.
2. Circassians and fugitives leave the region
3. the price of confiscated real estates and animals be paid.
4. the schools, medressehs and other real estates be given back to the Islamic Society
5. the notables that left Western Thrace come back safely
6. the Turks jailed for various reasons be released<sup>16</sup>.

Upon the worsening of the situation in Western Thrace and the increase in oppression on Turks, the problem was put on the agenda of Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA). On 12 February 1924, the Mentefle (Muḡla) MP Esad Bey and his friends wrote a letter to the president of the TGNA saying that 36 people from among Turkish intellectuals and notables were arrested under the pretext of preparing for a coup d'état for independence and that they were jailed and sentenced to death, and urged the government that action was needed to be taken for them to be released. The president of the TGNA informed the prime minister, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs entrusted the Turkish chargé d'affaires in Athens to solve the problem<sup>17</sup>.

In order to follow the developments in Western Thrace and take the necessary steps, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs worked in close collaboration with the chargé d'affaires in Athens and the Consul in Komotini. A letter sent by the Consulate in Komotini to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that upon complaints the Joint Exchange Commission had arrived in Western Thrace in May 1925 for an on-site investigation of the situation. The commission was briefed by a committee formed by Muslims from Komotini, Alexandroupolis and Dimetoka. In the Western Thracian Committee were Hafız Salih, the leader of Muslim Congregation in Komotini, Mufti Nevzat, Hafız Galip, who were released from prison a short time ago, and MP Mustafa Agha (Deveci). The above-mentioned letter also stated that the leader of the Muslim Community

<sup>16</sup> BCA, T·E, 272.13/79.1.14.

<sup>17</sup> BCA, BKK, 030.10.00/6.37.3.

in Xanthi and MP Mestan Efendi were involved in activities against Turks and that the consulate had taken the necessary measures<sup>18</sup>.

Despite the government decision of 4 November 1923 on not accepting immigrants from Western Thrace, there were some exceptions. With the amendment of the above-mentioned government decision on 7 December 1925, the following were allowed to immigrate to Turkey: those who immigrated to Turkey before the date on which the government decision was taken; the wives, children and the elderly of those who had been exiled to Milos island with the accusation of working for Turkey in Western Thrace but who had been released according to Lausanne Peace Agreement and had been settled in the cities of Edirne, Kırklareli, Gelibolu and Tekirdağ<sup>19</sup>.

Except for these exceptions, the general policy of Turkish Government towards immigrants from Western Thrace was to send them back. This applied not only to those who immigrated after the Lausanne Peace Agreement but also to those who immigrated from Western Thrace to Eastern Thrace and settled in the cities of Edirne and Tekirdağ during and after the First World War. The only chance given to such people was their exclusion from the tithe in 1924<sup>20</sup>.

During the application of the Population Exchange Agreement between Turkey and Greece, the two countries had a period of crisis during which a war was about to break out. The crisis was partly solved with Athens Agreement signed on 1 December 1926.

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<sup>18</sup> **BCA, BKK**, 030.10.00/253.708.44.

<sup>19</sup> **BCA, BKK**, 030.18.1.1/16.79.7.; The members of the Western Thracea Society for the Defence of Law, who served in the Western Thrace during the National Struggle for Independence, wrote a letter to the Council of Ministers on 20 May 1926, and wanted to be rewarded with a medal of the Turkish War of Independence. (**BCA, BKK**, 030.10.00/195.337.20.)

<sup>20</sup> **BCA, T-E**, 272.12/46.80.22.

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That an important number of Turks were living on the Greek border with Turkey was seen by Greece as a danger in terms of its security strategy. Seeing these Turks as the “fifth wing” of Turkey, Greece started to apply the Hellenization policy by settling the Greek immigrants in the region. In line with this policy, Greece settled 189.000 Greeks in the region between 1923 and 1924<sup>21</sup>. This was contrary to the agreements and created the problem of property ownership. The Athens Agreement which was signed to solve the minority and ownership problems resulted in a temporary relief for Western Thracian Turks; however it was in fact a “scenario of nightmare” which was followed until 1930 by the Greek Government, actually military dictatorship.

Article 9 of the Athens Agreement claimed that the properties confiscated in the villages and cities in Western Thrace be given back to their owners in one month; Article 10 urged that all exceptional decisions and actions that had been taken about the Muslim properties before and after the Lausanne Peace Agreement be cancelled; and Article 11 claimed that all nationalized properties should be returned<sup>22</sup>.

In his letter to the Turkish Foreign Ministry before the 1926 agreement, the president of the Turkish delegation in the Joint Commission, which was established to solve the immigration- and property-related problems, stated that the legal basis of Turkish thesis about the property problems of Western Thracian Turks had to be as included in Article 16 of the Population Exchange Agreement signed on 30 January 1923<sup>23</sup>.

The above-mentioned article referred to Article 2 of the Population Exchange Agreement and included this statement: “According to Article 2, there will be no restrictions to the rights of those who live in the areas that are excluded from the exchange programme to remain in these

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<sup>21</sup> Oran, *Ibid.* , p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> Oran, *Ibid.* , pp. 81-82.

<sup>23</sup> *BCA, T-E*, 272.12/47.87.4.

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regions or to return to these regions, and to their freedom and free use of their ownership rights both in Turkey and Greece”<sup>24</sup>.

The fact that Turkey and Greece came to an agreement on 1 December 1926 did not mean that these problems were solved. The practices during the application of the agreement made the subject even more complicated. During this period, while Turkish government was trying to take the necessary steps to prevent the return of the Greek fugitives, Greece did not want to settle in the region the Turks who had left Western Thrace since the beginning of the Balkan War (18 October 1912), and did its best not to allow them use their ownership rights.

In order to make the immigrated Turks benefit from their rights provided by the agreement of 1 December 1926, Turkish Government tried some methods/tactics and required the views of Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had some doubts about whether Greek Government would be loyal to the agreement. For this reason, in order to make the immigrated Western Thracian Turks benefit from their rights given by the agreement, Turkey wanted to include the Western Thracian Turks into the problem by founding an organization. Edirne (where there was an intense Western Thracian immigrant population), was thought to be the best place for the centre of the organization. A person that should have been elected by the members of the organization had to be in touch with the Turkish delegation of the Joint Committee, which had been dealing with the immigration problems<sup>25</sup>.

Given the developments in 1927, it can easily be seen that the application of Athens Agreement was not in favour of Turks. Greek Government resorted to various tricks in order not to give the real estates and lands back to their owners. In this context, some small-scale real estates and lands were given back symbolically. Large farms in both Komotini and Xanthi were not given back, lower prices

<sup>24</sup> çsmail Soysal, *Türkiye'nin Siyasi Andlaflmalar*, Vol 1, Ankara 1989, p.182.

<sup>25</sup> BCA, T·E, 272.12/53.123.17.



were paid for the nationalized lands, and some of the payments were made only partially<sup>26</sup>.

It was clear in the reports from Turkish consulates in Saloniki and Komotini that the Greek government went on confiscating the lands of Turkish minority in 1928, too<sup>27</sup>. The oppression exerted on Turks in both Western Thrace and Yugoslavia in 1928 was given wide publicity in some Turkish newspapers, like and Cumhuriyet and Aksam, directed the attention of the public to the Balkan problems<sup>28</sup>.

The minority and ownership problems, which was an important subject of conflict between Turkey and Greece, began to get better partly with the new Venizelos government in 1928. The reconciliation attempts made by Venizelos, who suffered the pains and disasters caused by wars, matched with Atatürk's peace and cooperation policies towards the Balkans, and this created an opportunity for a permanent peace between the two countries.

An agreement was signed between the two countries in Ankara on 10 June 1930. Article 14 of the agreement entitled the Western Thracian Muslims as "etabli" (*settled, established*) regardless of their places of birth and their date of arrival in the region. Article 15 of the agreement declared that the rights given by the agreements could not be violated. However, removing the Greek immigrants who were settled in the lands of Turks was out of question. Article 16 of the agreement contained the statement that the complete ownership of the movable goods and real estates belonging to those who were out of Western Thrace and to the "etabli" or to those who used their right to return were to be taken over by the Greek government. Paragraph b of Article 20 of the agreement of Athens Agreement was not in favour of Turks. Greek Government stated that the Greek government was to pay 150,000 pounds to the

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<sup>26</sup> BCA, T-E, 272.11/23.121.20.

<sup>27</sup> BCA, T-E, 272.12/57.148.5.

<sup>28</sup> BCA, T-E, 272.12/57.151.14.

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Western Thracian property owners in order to remunerate their goods and real estates. Article 29 of the agreement was rearranged “on condition that the general decisions and the terms of Article 16 remain unchanged, there will be no restrictions and obstructions for the properties the ownerships of which have not been taken over by the Greek government” This statement aimed to bring a certain guarantee to Western Thracian Muslims<sup>29</sup>.

Although the Ankara Agreement created a ground for reconciliation between the two countries, it is difficult to say that it pleased the Western Thracian Turks. The first comment of the *‹nk›lap* daily published by the Turkish minority in Xanthi at the time read like this: “We greet this agreement which is the product of a continuous effort of 8 years. However, we are not pleased with this agreement which does not secure even half of the rights of the Turkish Community in Western Thrace<sup>30</sup>”.

The *‹nk›lap* daily kept the Ankara Agreement on the agenda in June and July, and stated that it damaged the rights obtained in Lausanne and that if applied, it would affect the Turkish Community in Western Thrace negatively<sup>31</sup>.

Western Thracian Turks showed a cautious approach to such agreements as “Agreement for Friendship, Neutrality and Arbitration”, “Protocol for the Restrictions for Naval Forces and Settlement”, and “Agreement for Commerce and Navigation”, all of which were signed in Ankara on 30 October 1930 and which paved the way for good relations and cooperation between the two countries. The *‹nk›lap* daily, an important daily among Western Thracian Turkish press, made the following remark about these agreements: “They may open the way to a happy future for Turkish and Greek nations, but will this flamboyant agreement add a drop of happiness to our lives?”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Oran, *Ibid.*, p. 81-83.

<sup>30</sup> *‹nk›lap Daily* (Xanthi), 20 June 1930, No: 20.

<sup>31</sup> *‹nk›lap Daily*, 27 June 1930, No: 21; 4 July 1930, No: 22.

<sup>32</sup> *‹nk›lap Daily*, 14 November 1930, No: 36.

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These agreements signed between June and October in 1930 did not please Western Thracian Turks. This was evident not only in the newspapers but also in the archive documents that marked the belief that the only solution was to immigrate to Turkey.

The reports sent by the Turkish Embassy in Athens and the Turkish consulate in Komotini two weeks after the Ankara Agreement of 10 June 1930 showed that Western Thracian Turks had the tendency to immigrate. It was stated in these reports that because of the oppressions and poverty, the Turks living in Boyacılar and Babaköy villages of Xanthi had applied to the Komotini consulate for immigration. Based on these documents and other intelligence reports, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned the government that such demands could increase and that the government had to take the necessary measures<sup>33</sup>. Except for some exceptions<sup>34</sup>, Turkish government policy in the 1920s that no application for immigration would be accepted was in effect in the 1930s as well.

During this period, the immigration demands that appeared in Turkish media were highly disturbing for the Greek authorities. For this reason, the Athens Telegram Authority sent a telegram to the Anatolian Press Agency in which they tried to explain the immigration problem in terms of the data they had at hand. They stated in the above mentioned telegram that the number of those who immigrated to Turkey in 1932 was 27, and claimed that the immigrants were those who;

1. were disobedient
2. had relatives in Turkey and who received their compensations from the Greek government
3. left the country in order not to pay back their debts to Greek Agricultural Bank

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<sup>33</sup> **BCA, BKK**, 030.10.00/254.712.16.

<sup>34</sup> These exceptions were made as an annex to the No 2912 Governmental decision dated 7.12.1925. According to this, the close relatives of those who had settled in Turkey would be allowed to immigrate. (**BCA, BKK**, 030.18.1.2/29.44.18.)

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#### 4. were workers without lands.

In addition to these, the Greek authorities denied the news in Turkish press that Turks were leaving Western Thrace secretly and were putting their lives in danger while passing the Maritza river by swimming<sup>35</sup>.

Although the Greek government tried to present the immigration problem as a simple and unimportant one, it was clear that the problem was of paramount importance for the Turkish government. Bulgaria's rejection of being a member of the Balkan Union which was to be created between 1930 and 1933, its tendency towards revisionist policies, and the revelation of its ambitions for Western Thrace caused great concern not only for Greek authorities but also for Western Thracian Turks<sup>36</sup>, and thus created another cause for the immigration of Turks to Turkey.

With the formation of the Balkan Pact by four Balkan States (Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia, Romania) on 9 February 1934, Turkey and Greece became partners and founding members of a regional alliance. The formation of this alliance caused concerns in Bulgaria and created another problematic period for Bulgarian Turks and for the rebirth of the notion of immigration. This naturally affected the Western Thracian Turks and became an encouraging factor for their immigration to Turkey.

When a mass immigration from Western Thrace to Turkey started in late 1934, Turkey felt the need to take some on-site measures. For this reason, M. Recep Bey, the third secretary to Turkish ambassador to Athens, was sent to Western Thrace, and together with Selim Rauf Bey,

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<sup>35</sup> **BCA, BKK**, 030.10.00/255.715.13.

<sup>36</sup> **BCA, BKK**, 030.10.00/241.628.25.

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Turkish council in Komotini, he visited the villages in Western Thrace and gave some advice to the villagers a for not to immigrate. This task took 20 days and the observations were reported to the Turkish Embassy in Athens on 11.12.1934 under M. Recep's signature, and the report was sent to Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and then to the Prime Ministry. The first page of the 17-page report contained the summary of the 20-day visit. The first page was about the visit to the Governor General of Western Thrace and about the aim of the visit. It was explained that the aim of the visit was not to investigate the reasons for immigration but to advise Turkish villagers to stop immigration. He reported that during their visit to the Governor General, they were given two escorts, one of whom was a civilian and the other was a soldier, and the details of these two escorts appeared on pages 2 and 3. On pages 3 and 4 he explained that they started the fieldwork in the villages near the Turkish border where immigration was intense, and gave some other detailed information. The delegation went to Alexandroupolis on 15 November 1934, and the next day they started to work in the villages of Nea Orestiya, Dimetoka, Souflion and Alexandropulos. After completing their work in the eastern part of Western Thrace, they returned to Komotini. After staying there for two days, they passed to the west Xanthi region.

During this work, it was found that in the last three months (October, November, December) the number of those who immigrated to Turkey illegally reached to 700, and considering the villages that they couldn't visit because of bad road conditions the number could rise to 1000.

Although M. Recep Bey explained on page 4 of the report that their aim was to give advice to the Turkish villagers, he emphasized that the factors that caused tendency for immigration were in detail as follows:

- The economic crisis caused by inadequate land allotment. This affects especially those who live on the highlands of Xanthi and who make their living only by tobacco plantation.
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- Greek government's desire to leave the Turks without lands by either buying or confiscating big farms, and to change the population balance in favour of Greeks by settling Greek immigrants in this region.
  - The discomfort created by the settlement of the Greek immigrants in the Turkish villages and the discord between the two communities.
  - The physical and psychological pressure created by such actions of Greek immigrants as occupation of the threshing fields of Turkish villagers, arsoning the crops, occupation of lands, threats, swearing and stabbing.
  - Difficulty in adopting the minority psychology.
  - Being unable to find an authority to complain about usurpation of the goods and real estate of the Turkish minority, being unable to receive prompt replies to their petitions and objections, and, therefore, the unjust treatment created by delayed justice.
  - Being unable to educate their children in the villages due to lack of schools and teachers, and the burden that the teaching-incurs on the Turkish minority.
  - The dispute among Turks about whether to use Arabic script or new Latin-based Turkish script in teaching-training.
  - The difficulties created by the inadequacy of imams to carry out funeral ceremonies.
  - The lack of confidence created by the muftis appointed by the Greek government and their distance from their community, their exploitation of the religion, and their closer stance to Greek government than to their own community.
  - The disorder and uneasiness among Turkish minority created by the fugitives from Turkey.
  - The arbitrary/illegal nationalization by the Greek authorities (like governor's office/ municipality) in order to cease the sources of income of Turkish foundations.
  - Emergence of speculation that immigrants in Turkey are given houses, lands and cattle.
  - The effects of the land speculators (Turkish and Greek) who encourage immigration in order to own their properties at cheaper prices.
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- The spread of the disturbing news that a war is about to break out between Greece and Bulgaria and that Bulgaria will occupy Western Thrace
- The encouraging effect of the protection of the immigrants in Turkey on the people in Western Thrace with poor income.
- The demand of the previously immigrated people for bringing their relatives in Western Thrace, and persuasion of their relatives to immigrate.
- The psychological depression created by the decrease in Turkish population in the areas of mixed nationalities.
- The tendency of some Turks not to pay their debts back to banks, or the worries about the military service.

Immigration from Western Thrace to Turkey, the reasons of which were listed above, was of two sorts: with and without passport. Those who obtained a passport and a temporary visa entered Turkey and did not go back; those who couldn't get a visa tried to cross the Maritza River in boats. Those who entered Turkey illegally did so via some crossing points on the Maritza River and especially via Gavur Adas. The last page of the above mentioned report advised that the immigrants with large families not be sent back and if necessary those who had small families and the unmarried ones be preferred. This view was based on the reason that the Greek government would not facilitate the re-settlement of the returning immigrants and that they would fall into economic and social decline<sup>37</sup>.

Due to the above-mentioned reasons, the immigration from Western Thrace to Turkey went on until late 1930s at a low rate. However, the onset of the Second World War on 1 September 1939 marked a new phase in the mass immigration of Western Thracian Turks to Turkey. When Germans occupied all the Balkans in 1941, Bulgarians sided with Germans and occupied Western Thrace, which they had always seen as

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<sup>37</sup> BCA, BKK, 030.10.00/116.810.8.

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the gate to the Aegean Sea<sup>38</sup>.

This occupation had a negative effect on the Western Thracian Turks as well as the Greeks. While Greeks migrated to safer regions in Greece for their security, the safest option in front of Turks was to migrate to the East, that is, to Turkey. Being exposed to Bulgarian oppression, thousands of Western Thracian Turks piled up on the Turkish border, on the Maritza River. Some of them managed to go to Turkey. Those who couldn't go to Turkey remained in the neutral Dimetoka zone after the bilateral negotiations between Turkey and Germany during the war. It was stated in the *Trakya Daily*, (an important daily among the Western Thracian Turkish press) that during this period the number of those who immigrated to Turkey increased to 10.000<sup>39</sup>.

This immigration phenomenon which emerged in the summer of 1941 started to concern the agenda of Turkish government. During their meeting on 13 August 1941, the Council of Ministers decided that those who immigrated before 20 April 1941 and whose return was not possible should be treated as refugees and free immigrants<sup>40</sup>. However, this should not be interpreted as if Turkish State had changed his policy about keeping the Turks in their own countries. That this strategy of Turkey had not changed was evident in the new decision Article 5 of the Council of Ministers taken on 14 August 1941. The decisions were as follows:

1. As has been up to now, the main principle is that Western Thracian Turkish population should remain there,
2. The formal procedures of those who immigrated with their families during the Second World War and settled in different places be completed and given the status of citizenship. The immigrants in the Eastern Thrace who were not settled be sent back

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<sup>38</sup> Kemal fievket Batbey, ... **Ve Bulgarlar Geldi**, Istanbul 1976.

<sup>39</sup> **Trakya Daily** (Xanthi), 3 August 1959, No.773.

<sup>40</sup> **BCA, BKK**, 030.18.1.2/96.72.3.

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3. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should take the necessary steps in order to investigate the conditions of the Turks in Western Thrace<sup>41</sup>.

These decisions had an important contribution to the prevention of a possible mass immigration from the Western Thrace to Turkey during the Second World War.

During the three-year Bulgarian occupation, the Western Thracian Turks experienced extreme difficulties and Turkish minority schools in the region had to give a break to their education. Upon the withdrawal of Bulgarians, these schools reopened<sup>42</sup>. During this period, the Turkish consulate in Komotini paid close attention to the problems of Western Thracian Turks, and played an important role in keeping them loyal to Turkey, in identifying them with the basic principles of Turkish Revolution, and in building strong bonds with the Turkish state<sup>43</sup>.

After Bulgarian occupation came to an end, the EAM (National Salvation Front), which was fighting against the occupying forces (Germans, Italians, Bulgarians) since 1940, came to power in the country<sup>44</sup>. In a short while, however, the EAM coalition started to lose power, and consequently Greece fell into a political unrest which led to a civil war that lasted until 1949<sup>45</sup>.

During the EAM government and the civil war, new waves of mass immigration from Western Thrace to Turkey started again. Western Thracian Turks were deeply affected by the Greek Civil War between 1946 and 1949<sup>46</sup>. Turks were exposed to the attacks of the communist

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<sup>41</sup> BCA, BKK, 030.18.1.2/96.73.1.

<sup>42</sup> BCA, BKK, 030.10.00/256.725.13.

<sup>43</sup> BCA, BKK, 030.10.00/256.725.12.

<sup>44</sup> Barbara Jelavich, **History of the Balkans**, Volume 2 , Cambridge 1991, p. 278.

<sup>45</sup> David H. Close, **The Origins of the Greek Civil War**, New York 1995.

<sup>46</sup> Hikmet Öksüz, "Western Thracian Turks in Greek Civil War (1946-1949)", **Turkish Review of Balkan Studies**, Annual 2000/01,5, İstanbul 2001, pp. 53-65.

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gangs which were also fighting with the government on the one hand, and remained under the pressure of government forces and rightist gangs on the other<sup>47</sup>.

In order to deprive the communist gangs of the sources of weapon and manpower during the Civil War, the government forces had emptied the mountain villages especially near the Bulgarian border where Turks were living intensely. The economy in Western Thrace was mainly based on agriculture. The annoyance among Turks caused by the attacks of communist gangs and Greek government's decision to empty the villages for reasons of security, forced the Turks to immigrate to Turkey. In a source, the number of the immigrants who entered Turkey either freely or illegally between 1946 and 1949 is given as 17,793<sup>48</sup>.

The cruelty that Western Thracian Turks experienced, and their immigration to Turkey during the Greek Civil War was given a lot of publicity in the Turkish press. We can find more illuminating data in a press conference made by the General Directorate of Press and Publication: The *Son Posta* daily reported on 14 December 1947 that the number of the immigrants in the last few days from Greece and Bulgaria reached to 60 people. The *Son Telgraf* daily reported on 5 January 1948 that the Greek government had changed the course of Karasu River and that Turkish villages had been flooded; The *Vatan* daily reported on 10 February 1948 that a strong immigrant group of 20 had escaped from the oppression of the gangs and reached İstanbul; the *Cumhuriyet* daily reported on 13 February 1948 that in the last few months the number of the immigrants who had escaped from the atrocities of the communist gangs and reached İstanbul had reached to 2000; The *Yeni Sabah* daily

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<sup>47</sup> From time to time, the conditions of the oppressed Turks during the Greek Civil War were put on the agenda of TGNA. For example, Fuat Balkan, the MP from Kocaeli, (and the president of Committee for Western Thracia between 1915-1917) submitted a list to the prime minister that contained 12 families with 54 members and demanded attention for these tortured people.

<sup>48</sup> Ahmet Kayhan, *Lozan ve Batı Trakya: 1913'te İlk Türk Cumhuriyeti*, İstanbul 1967, p. 32.

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reported on 22 December 1948 that the center of the atrocities exerted by the Greek gangs were the villages in which Turks were dense. The most interesting information appeared in Selim Ragıp Emeç's article "Western Thracian Turks" in the *Son Posta* daily on 1 March 1948:

"Once they escaped from the hell of Western Thrace, and since it will not be possible to send these people back especially with their consent, we should accept the fact that they have lost all of their possessions. This is an important loss for the Western Thracian Turks that they bear in mind. Another important thing is that the Western Thracian Turks, whose number varies between 120,000 and 150,000, remained there in return for the Greeks living in and around İstanbul. Any change concerning the lives and future of the Western Thracian Turks should automatically affect the lives and permanency of the Greek minority in İstanbul. In this problem, we would like to see the Republican Government vigilant in its full sense"<sup>49</sup>.

These news and comments indicate that the Turkish press was highly sensitive towards the Western Thracian Turks who experienced an important social, economic and psychological down fall during the Greek Civil War.

The Turkish government provided accommodation for the immigrants during the Greek Civil War (1946-1949) through organizations set up for the Western Thracian Turks. After the Civil War, some of the Western Thracian Turks went back and some stayed in Turkey.

In 1950, with the improvement of the public order and the state authority, an important decrease was observed in the number of the illegal immigration from Western Thrace. From then on, people were allowed to immigrate either by signing a written contract or by submitting a free immigrant decree obtained from their relatives in Turkey.

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<sup>49</sup> BCA, BKK, 030.01.00/101.627.1.

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## Conclusion

The fact of immigration that the Balkan Turks experienced was the result of the military and political phenomena that took place in the last quarter of the 19th century and in the first quarter of the 20th century. In order not to live under another oppression (Bulgaria, Greece), the Western Thracian Turks, who constituted an important part of all Balkan Turks, had chosen immigration as their only goal after 1913, the year when Turkey lost control over the region. The minority rights gained by both bilateral and multilateral agreements were not enough to make them stay there. The only choice for those who were dissatisfied with the minority psychology was to immigrate to Turkey.

In the legal context of Lausanne Peace Agreement, the Western Thracian Turks were the only minority group which was left by Turkey outside its borders with its own consent, and which was recognized by Greece as the only minority group within its territory. The exception that Greece recognized Turks as the only minority group was not enough to prevent the Western Thracian Turks from immigrating. Greek governments always increased the degree of their oppression over the Western Thracian Turks because of the political problems between Turkey and Greece after the Lausanne Agreement. The economy of the Western Thracian Turks was mainly based on agriculture and the majority of them were living in the rural areas. During the problematic period between Greece and Turkey (1923-1930), the nationalization practices by the Greek government, its attempts to settle the Greek immigrants in the region, and its denial of their ownership of real estates issued in the Ottoman period forced the Turks to immigrate to Turkey with the hope of finding better opportunities. The expression of "If you are a Turk, go to Turkey" was another psychological factor which made immigration inevitable.

Although Turco-Greek relations got better from 1930 onwards, immigration to Turkey did not stop. However, the most intense immigration took place during the Greek Civil War that broke out after

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the Second World War. The most important reasons were that the most intense clashes between the communist gangs and government forces took place in Western Thrace. Greeks did not trust the Turks, and that they saw the Turks as the “fifth wing” of Turkey.

Except for some unimportant exceptions, Turkey’s policies towards Western Thracian Turks did not show any diversity between 1923 and 1950, which covers the time span of our investigation. The basic policy of the Turkish governments was to keep the Western Thracian Turks in peace and security in their own countries without making any compromises over the rights obtained through agreements.

Although from time to time we presented some figures about the number of the immigrants, it was not possible to find the exact total number. The reason for this lies in the quality of the immigration from the region. Immigration was mostly illegal because of the fact that the Turkish governments did not allow free immigration and settlement. From time to time, there were individual or group immigrations. Most of such immigrants were sent back whenever the suitable conditions existed. Sometimes, some immigrants went back with their own consent when they could not please their expectations. Those who hid themselves in one way or other stayed in Turkey illegally under the protection of their relatives in Turkey and their obtaining Turkish citizenship took a very long time.

For all these reasons, it seems impossible to determine the exact number of the immigrants from Western Thrace under the light of the

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documents, which are currently open to research<sup>50</sup>. Therefore, this research is based not on the figures but on the reasons for immigration and the unbearable immigrant psychology.

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<sup>50</sup> Some figures are given without any reference in some studies about the immigration from the Balkans which also covers the time span of our study. For example, in his article “Balkanlardan Göç”, Nazif Baydar claims that 38,556 people immigrated to Turkey between 1923 and 1939; 23,873 immigrants with passports obtained permanent settlement between 1939 and 1960; 25,360 Turks took refuge within Turkey in the same period. (See Nazif Baydar, “Balkanlar’dan Göç”, **Türk Dünyası Özel Sayısı II**, Yeni Türkiye Dergisi, No: 16, June-July 1997, Ankara, p. 1769; In another study, it was claimed that 23,798 people immigrated from Western Thrace between 1934 and 1960. (See Halit Eren, “Balkanlar’da Müslümanlar ve Göç Olgusu”, **Balkanlar**, OBÇV Yayınları, İstanbul 1993, p. 297.

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