Expulsion Compulsion
Reconsidering the Motivations and Consequences of the 1923 Turco-Greek Population Exchange

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In its 1937 report recommending the forcible transfer of Arabs and Jews in the Palestinian Mandate, the Peel Commission pointed to the Turco-Greek population exchange as a promising precedent.\(^1\) The Turco-Greek exchange had been approved as part of the 1923 Lausanne Peace Conference, and mandated the compulsory transfer of over one million Greeks and Turks across the Aegean Sea.\(^2\) While the Commission acknowledged that this procedure was criticized at the time as inhumane, it argued that the “Greek and Turkish minorities had been a constant irritant.” However morally distasteful, with the exchange “the ulcer [had] been clean cut out” of Greco-Turkish relations, ensuring a friendly stability in the region.\(^3\) In this essay, I argue that all the parties behind this compulsory population exchange were motivated by nationalism; specifically, a belief in the stabilizing power of national homogeneity. The Greek and Turkish delegations signalled their openness to a compulsory exchange of minorities prior to the Conference,\(^4\) as did the Great Powers and the League High Commissioner for Refugees.\(^5\) In the shadow of the Paris Peace Conference, Britain viewed homogenous nation-states as inherently conducive to European stability. For the Greek and Turkish governments, an exchange of minorities was a means to strengthen their weak states – Greece had just lost a war, and Turkey was not a year old. Insofar as its ultimate goal was stability, I submit the exchange was a failure. True, official Greek and Turkish historiographies incorporate the exchange as a national

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\(^1\) Yossi Katz, “Transfer of Populations as a Solution to International Disputes: Populations Exchanges Between Greece and Turkey as a Model for Plans to Solve the Jewish-Arab Dispute in Palestine During the 1930s,” *Political Geography* 11, no. 1 (1992): 61.

\(^2\) The precise figure is a matter of some dispute. A 1931 census analysis by Charles Eddy suggested approximately 1.3 million refugees were displaced by the Lausanne Convention, while Onur Yildirim’s more recent analysis moves the figure to 1.7 million. Charles Eddy, *Greece and the Greek Refugees* (London: George Allen & Unwin Limited, 1931), 52 and Onur Yildirim, *Diplomacy and Displacement: Reconsidering the Turco-Greek Population Exchange of 1922-1934* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.


\(^4\) Yildirim, *Diplomacy and Displacement*, 45, 62.

triumph,⁶ and most proposals for population exchanges since 1923 have cited the Turco-Greek example of proof of concept.⁷ Yet recent scholarship complicates these positive narratives. Contrary to the assumption that minorities would neatly assimilate into their national homelands, the exchange precipitated social breakdown and revanchism. Greece and Turkey were temporarily pacified, but the exchange helped poison cross-Straits relations in the long-run. The displaced populations themselves underwent a humanitarian tragedy, and were often unwelcome in their new communities. Given these motivations and consequences, I conclude by analyzing the exchange as evidence that in the Paris Peace Process, national self-determination was enforced or denied as befit the perceived interests of the Great Powers.

When analyzing nationalism, it is important to lay out exactly what is meant by the word. All the actors behind the Lausanne Convention were motivated by nationalism, but they did not all express this sentiment in the same way. Benedict Anderson was one of the most influential theorists of nationalism in recent decades.⁸ Anderson was something of an optimist amongst researchers, once quipping that he was the only scholar who considered nationalism an “attractive ideology,”⁹ which almost never expressed itself in fear or loathing, but rather “inspire[d] love.”¹⁰ This perception differs violently from theorists such as Ernest Gellner, who considered ethnic cleansing an essential stage of nationalism.¹¹ Both understandings of nationalist expression were present at Lausanne, as well as a more clinical understanding from

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⁹ Benedict Anderson as quoted in Ozkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism*, 107.
the British and the League. The diversity of nationalistic motivations behind the population exchange appears a priori to clash with Anderson’s claims. However, the nationalisms present at Lausanne was altogether different from Anderson’s conceptualizations. The Lausanne delegates relied on a detached, often romanticized understanding of nationhood, which assumed the self-identities of the transferred minorities. Anderson famously defined nations as “imagined political communit[ies].” In explaining his definition, Anderson describes groups imagining *themselves* as a community. No representatives of the minority populations were involved in the exchange negotiations. At Lausanne, the delegates presumed that the Orthodox in Anatolia were “Greek,” and the Muslims in Greece “Turks.” Whether or not this was an accurate premise was simply not ascertained. As this understanding of nationalism differs from that of Anderson, there is no contradiction in its many loveless – or even hateful – expressions. The detached nature of the nationalisms at Lausanne would prove to undermine its goal, and in fact destabilize the region.

The seeds of the Turco-Greek exchange were planted in the Balkan Wars of the early twentieth century. As Greece’s borders pushed into former Ottoman territory, voluntary migration and coerced deportation of Muslims eastwards increased sharply. At the same time, Ottoman elites began embracing a new policy of national homogenization, eschewing pluri-ethnic Ottomanism for a new policy of eradicating non-Turkish populations. This policy trickled down into harassment of Greek speaking populations in Turkey, and a pick up in westward migration. Greece joined the First World War in 1917 under the nationalist Prime Minister

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16 Eddy, *Greece and the Greek Refugees*, 3-4.
16 Yildirim, *Diplomacy and Displacement*, 4.
Eleutherios Venizelos, who hoped that the grateful Allies might restore Constantinople to Greek control. His hopes were not fully realized, but Greece was ceded large swaths of Anatolian land in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres between the Allies and the devastated Ottoman Empire.17 These terms were unacceptable to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk – one of the aforementioned anti-minority elites – who fought back with an army of Turkish nationalists. Ataturk abolished the Sultanate, and defeated the Greek invasion force which had been sanctioned by the Allied Supreme Council in Paris.18 Ataturk’s campaign involved brutal reprisals against Orthodox populations in Anatolia, culminating in the destruction by fire of the historically Greek port town of Smyrna. Terrified by these incidents, hundreds of thousands of Anatolian refugees began fleeing to Greece, precipitating a humanitarian crisis.19 Ultimately, all sides agreed to a League of Nations proposal for a peace conference in the Swiss town of Lausanne. Delineations of borders would be the top priority, but the ongoing refugee crisis ensured that the minorities question of minorities remained high on the agenda.

Writing in one of the first histories of the Paris Peace Conference, the historian Arnold J. Toynbee opined that the Treaty of Lausanne “seemed destined, in all human probability, to inaugurate a more lasting settlement, not only than the Treaty of Sèvres, but than the Treaty of Versailles, St. Germain, Triannon, and Neuilly.”20 Toynbee justified this opinion through his observation that neither side came to the negotiating table as a defeated power. Turkey may have routed the Greek army, but the Allies as a whole were hardly losers. All sides had bargaining

19 Hirschon, *Crossing the Aegean*, 3-4.
power, and the final Treaty was agreed to, not imposed.\textsuperscript{21} As the lead British delegate noted, “hitherto we have dictated our peace treaties… now we are negotiating… an unheard of position.”\textsuperscript{22} More in keeping with the other peace conferences, Lausanne hosted a veritable roster of colorful personalities. Fresh from the March on Rome, Benito Mussolini attended the conference in person.\textsuperscript{23} Eleutherios Venizelos – the man who had brought Greece into the war – led the Greek delegation.\textsuperscript{24} Venizelos had lost the 1920 Parliamentary elections, and was now representing the same government he had chastised for refusing the join the war prior to 1917.\textsuperscript{25} The chief Turkish representative was Ismet Pasha, a man equally deaf and bloody-minded.\textsuperscript{26} Whenever he sensed an opposing delegate was making a speech against Turkish demands, Pasha would simply remove his hearing aid, wait the speech out, and then repeat his initial position.\textsuperscript{27} Lord Curzon the Marquee of Kedleston represented the British delegation, and was nominally the chief negotiator for the whole of the Allied powers.\textsuperscript{28} From November 1922 to July 1923, the delegates debated and approved a treaty which, in fairness, inaugurated the more lasting peace predicted by Toynbee. They also approved a Convention on an Exchange of Populations, an altogether less stabilizing and more traumatic document.

An exchange of populations made its way on to the agenda of the Lausanne Conference due to the work of a Norwegian: Dr. Fridtjof Nansen. A scientist by training,\textsuperscript{29} Nansen had

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[21]{Toynbee, \textit{A History of the Peace Conference of Paris}, 115-116.}
\footnotetext[22]{George Curzon, as quoted in David Gilmour, \textit{Curzon: Imperial Statesman} (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994), 556.}
\footnotetext[23]{Maria Antonia di Casola, “Italy and the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923,” \textit{The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations} 23, (1993): 66.}
\footnotetext[26]{Lausanne Conference, 4.}
\footnotetext[27]{William L. Cleveland, \textit{A History of the Modern Middle East} (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 178.}
\footnotetext[28]{Lausanne Conference, 3.}
\footnotetext[29]{Nansen had previously been a zoologist, neurologist, and an Arctic explorer, Roland Huntford, \textit{Fridtjof Nansen and the Unmixing of Greeks and Turks in 1924}, (Arbok: The Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, 1998), 5.}
\end{footnotes}
previously convinced the Allied Supreme Council to ship food and medicine to Soviet Russia, and was appointed the first League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. In this role, he was dispatched by the League to report on the refugee crisis in Asia Minor. In his first report to the League Assembly in September 1922, Nansen referred to the “critical condition of more than two hundred thousand refugees,” and implored the League and its members to commit financial aid. In October, Nansen contacted the Greek and Turkish governments, suggesting an exchange of minorities as a permanent solution to the crisis. He reported back to the League Assembly in November that both sides seemed amenable to such a plan. Nansen was granted permission to attend Lausanne as a guest, and presented his proposal for a compulsory exchange of populations on December 1, 1923.

That a committed humanitarian such as Fridtjof Nansen would support a compulsory expulsion of over one million people supports the claim that nationalism was seen at the time as a stabilizing force. Nansen genuinely grieved for the minorities in Greece and Turkey. His proposal to unmix the region into homogenous nation-states was borne out of a belief that this was the only way to permanently improve the human condition in the region. In his report to the Lausanne delegates, Nansen never tried to justify this claim. He simply treated as self-evident that the minorities would live safer and more prosperous lives in their ancestral homelands.

Some historians have argued that Nansen never actually supported a compulsory exchange. This

33 Lausanne Conference, 113.
34 Lausanne Conference, 115.
35 Specifically, he claimed that “More can be done by a prompt and efficient exchange of minority populations to prevent these disastrous results from coming about than by any other measure which can be taken,” Lausanne Conference, 115.
claim is evidenced by the fact Nansen left Lausanne before the Convention was finalized, and that he later renounced ownership of the policy.\textsuperscript{36} Nansen did eventually repudiate the compulsory exchange, but this was years after his proposal had been adopted.\textsuperscript{37} And though Nansen did leave Lausanne early, this was a likely calculated move in support of a compulsory transfer. Nansen allowed himself to become the scapegoat; the delegates gleefully attributed the compulsion to him, cleansing themselves of moral blame.\textsuperscript{38} Fridtjof Nansen acted intentionally to homogenize the national communities of the Aegean, confident this would create a stable environment for its inhabitants.

For Lord Curzon, the exchange was a necessary move to pacify the Near East. Curzon acknowledged that it would have a humanitarian cost, but the exhausted British Empire valued peace above all else.\textsuperscript{39} The British Foreign Office had decided before the opening of the Conference that a population exchange was the only alternative to the constant threat of war in the region.\textsuperscript{40} It was believed that minority populations would be a constant source of tension, and that only through an exchange could Turco-Greek relations ameliorate.\textsuperscript{41} Further, it was assumed that homogenous states would be stronger states, and thus less susceptible to Bolshevik influence.\textsuperscript{42} At Lausanne, the British support was cloaked in the language of national self-determination. Curzon claimed Turkey could not be trusted to protect minority rights,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Yildirim, \textit{Diplomacy and Displacement}, 40.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Eddy, \textit{Greece and the Greek Refugees}, 51-52.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Huntford, \textit{Fridtjof Nansen}, 13-16.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Umut, \textit{Formalizing Displacement}, 121.
\item \textsuperscript{40} “Mr. Lindley (Athens) to the Marquess Curzon of Kedleston (Received February 22, 8:30 a.m.),” in \textit{Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939}, (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1970), 635-636.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Giorgos Kritikos, “Motives for Compulsory Population Exchange in the Aftermath of the Greek-Turkish War (1922-1923),” \textit{Bulletin of the Centre for Asia Minor Studies} (1999), 222.
\end{itemize}
necessitating an exchange.\textsuperscript{43} Yet, responding to Nansen’s report of December 1, Curzon emphatically endorsed a compulsory transfer. Curzon argued that were the exchange voluntary, “months might pass before it was carried out,” placing expediency above the desires of the minorities themselves.\textsuperscript{44} This ordering of priorities would be strange for one truly motivated by self-determination. Lord Curzon and the British really believed that through ethno-nationalism, the exchange would stabilize an otherwise explosive region.\textsuperscript{45}

While the Greek and Turkish governments had spent the past half-decade at war, they were both in complete agreement over the benefits of a population exchange. For Ataturk, this was an opportunity to fully do away with the vestiges of the Ottoman past, and begin afresh with a sovereign, ethnically homogenous Turkish state.\textsuperscript{46} Ismet Pasha was given three goals to achieve at Lausanne: confirm Turkey’s territorial gains, abolish the capitulatory regime, and expel the minorities.\textsuperscript{47} Pasha informed the Conference that in the opinion of his government, an exchange of minorities was the best guarantor of regional security – playing to the British concerns.\textsuperscript{48} Ataturk’s real motivation was a concern that minorities would not be loyal to his new regime. It was his view that ethnic heterogeneity had been a fatal Ottoman weakness, and that only a homogenous Turkish nation could beget a stable Turkish state.\textsuperscript{49} Venizelos strongly supported a compulsory exchange to claim a measure of victory out of a crushing defeat.\textsuperscript{50} Greece decisively lost their war, and had to surrender claims on Constantinople and Anatolia.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Lausanne Conference}, 220. \\
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Lausanne Conference}, 121.  \\
\textsuperscript{46} Umut, \textit{Formalizing Displacement}, 13-15.  \\
\textsuperscript{47} Yildirim, \textit{Diplomacy and Displacement}, 68-69.  \\
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Lausanne Conference}, 204.  \\
\textsuperscript{49} Kritikos, “Motives for Compulsory Population Exchange,” 218.  \\
\textsuperscript{50} Yildirim, \textit{Diplomacy and Displacement}, 50.
Venizelos thought this would be devastating to the Greek national conscious. He thus seized on Nansen’s suggestion as a way of repatriating the Anatolian Greek brethren, if not the land itself. Venizelos thought that this would not only placate Greek nationalists, but also boost his personal political popularity.51

The 1923 Lausanne Convention on the Exchange of Populations failed to bring stability to Greece, Turkey, or the wider region. Indeed, its immediate impact was humanitarian tragedy. While hundreds of thousands of refugees had already been forcibly displaced by war, the Convention added hundreds of thousands more. Many of these displaced persons had never left their home regions before, and were made to travel in wretched conditions to what was essentially a foreign land.52 Upon arrival, most refugees were met not as national brethren, but were rejected as foreign. Until recent decades, these stories were not told. The official historiographies of Greece and Turkey see the exchange much as Ataturk and Venizelos predicted: a stabilizing bolster of the respective nation-states.53 These histories have been vigorously promoted, but are inaccurate; for the displaced, the exchange was exile, not repatriation.

Contrary to the assumptions of the Lausanne plenipotentiaries, the minority populations of Greece and Turkey overwhelmingly did not see themselves as distant members of their respective nations. Recent historical ethnographic analyses of the deported Anatolian population have discovered distinct nations, more akin in culture to their fellow Anatolian Muslims than to the denizens of Greece.54 Emine Bedlek has even posited that many of these communities saw

52 Emine Yesim Bedlek, Imagined Communities in Greece and Turkey: Trauma and the Population Exchanges Under Attaturk (New York: I. B. Taurus, 2016), 90.
54 Hirschon, Crossing the Aegean, 19.
themselves as the last Ottomans.\textsuperscript{55} Neither did the majority populations of Greece and Turkey follow the Lausanne plan and greet the newcomers as of the same nation. While the pro-Venizelos faction treated welcoming the refugees as “the most National of the Questions,”\textsuperscript{56} they were relentlessly belittled by Anti-Venizelists. The massive net-population inflow to Greece put tremendous strain on the state, and the newcomers were blamed by many for the consequent social ills. Most were identifiable by their Anatolian dialect, and were frequently insulted as “Turkish seeds,” and “baptized in yoghurt.”\textsuperscript{57} Venizelos regained the Premiership on the refugee vote, but this merely led to the opposition decrying the displaced as illegitimate foreigners.\textsuperscript{58} The population exchange left deep social and political cleavages in Greece, which ultimately culminated in the civil war of 1944-1949.\textsuperscript{59}

There is still little literature on the Turkish experience, but that which does exist also problematizes the official narrative.\textsuperscript{60} Turkey experienced a net-decline in population. Many of those who left were artisans and local elites; their departure gutted the economies of many Anatolian settlements.\textsuperscript{61} There is scant evidence as to whether the Muslims transferred to Turkey considered themselves Turkish. There is however manifold evidence that they were not seen as such by their new compatriots. One Turkish newspaper wrote of a housing dispute with an exchangee that “the nation is not responsible for… people whose races are unknown.”\textsuperscript{62} More

\textsuperscript{55} Bedlek, \textit{Imagined Communities in Greece and Turkey}, 1-4.
\textsuperscript{58} Gursoy, “The Effects of the Population Exchange,” 110-122.
\textsuperscript{59} Hirschon, \textit{Crossing the Aegean}, 17.
\textsuperscript{60} Yildirim, “The 1923 Population Exchange,” 57.
\textsuperscript{62} Ahenk 1924, as quoted in Kolluoglu, “Excess of Nationalism,” 542.
generally, the newcomers were stigmatized as “half infidels.”\textsuperscript{63} We may not yet know the full extent, but the population exchange was other than purely stabilizing for the Turkish Republic.

Turco-Greek relations did not improve as a result of the population exchange. Nor was a more ethnically homogenous Greece less susceptible to Soviet influence. Economic and social discrimination led the Greek refugees to consider radical politics. By the 1930s, a majority of the Greek Communist Party’s leadership was Anatolian in origin.\textsuperscript{64} The political success of the Communists led to a royalist backlash, a military dictatorship, and an armed communist uprising.\textsuperscript{65} The population exchange thus failed to achieve the British aim of preventing the spread of communism in the region. In the long-run, the exchange also worked to destabilize cross-Straits relations. The shared experience of enforced exile among many exchangees led to an inter-generational persistence of revanchism. These memories of expulsion shape national narratives, building feelings of resentment. As Benedict Anderson notes, “the deaths that structure a nation’s biography are of a special kind.”\textsuperscript{66} Furthermore, the enforced isolationism between Greeks and Turks has resulted in a near-total elimination of shared experiences. Sociologists link such a decline in cross-cultural familiarity to a rise in stereotyping the “other.”\textsuperscript{67} We can thus thread a line from the expulsion of minorities to the present state of Turco-Greek relations, which are as toxic as they ever have been.\textsuperscript{68}

Historians of international relations and the interwar period have granted the Lausanne Conference and its exchange of populations limited attention.\textsuperscript{69} This is unfortunate, as the

\textsuperscript{63} Hirschon, \textit{Crossing the Aegean}, 20.
\textsuperscript{64} Gursoy, “The Effects of the Population Exchange,” 116.
\textsuperscript{65} Gursoy, “The Effects of the Population Exchange,” 119-121.
\textsuperscript{66} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 205.
\textsuperscript{67} Hirschon, \textit{Crossing the Aegean}, 9-10.
\textsuperscript{68} Mazower, “Minorities and the League of Nations in Interwar Europe,” 48.
\textsuperscript{69} Weitz, “From the Vienna to the Paris System,” 1338.
exchange challenges us to rethink the purpose and importance of national self-determination in the Paris Peace Process.\textsuperscript{70} As Toynbee noted, Lausanne was the last leg of the Paris Process. Erez Manela has already written on the limits of self-determination in Asia and Africa.\textsuperscript{71} The Lausanne Conference and its Exchange Convention extends this lack of application to the edge of Europe itself. Entire communities were labelled as members of a nation and traded for others based neither on consultation nor consent; this would appear to be a rank violation of Woodrow Wilson’s peace principles. President Wilson spoke of the consent of the governed as a moral imperative,\textsuperscript{72} but self-determination was applied as a tool for international stability. If nation-based sovereignty was inconvenient, it was denied.\textsuperscript{73} Where it was not wanted but deemed desirable, it was enforced. “Consent of the governed,” and “self-determination” were certainly important justifications for the provisions of the Paris treaties. Yet Lausanne is further evidence that perceived state interest took precedence when negotiating said provisions. The key development of the Peace Process was therefore a shift in perception of interests, namely the impression that at least in the “civilized” (European) world, homogenous nation-states were inherently conducive to peace.\textsuperscript{74}

The 1923 Turco-Greek population exchange fell well short of its initiators’ goals. This failure does not disprove the value of nationalism to stability generally. It is possible that organic nationalisms, more akin to Benedict Anderson’s conception of self-imagined communities, produce peace, tolerance, and social-cohesion. A population exchange based on nations

\textsuperscript{70} I define “Paris Peace Process” as all peace treaties to end the First World War and its related conflicts.
\textsuperscript{72} Manela, \textit{The Wilsonian Moment}, 23.
\textsuperscript{73} Manela gives among others the examples of India, Egypt, and China, Manela, \textit{The Wilsonian Moment}.
\textsuperscript{74} My ideas here are inspired by Eric Weitz, who wrote of an interwar “Paris System,” of which “the Lausanne population exchange was no violation; it was an intrinsic element,” Weitz, “From the Vienna to the Paris System,” 1334.
volunteering to be moved could feasibly be successful, if such an event is even conceivable. Lausanne’s primary utility to historians is rather as the completing piece to the Paris Peace Process. Those responsible all firmly believed that the exchange would increase the national homogeneity of Greece and Turkey. Typifying the period, all assumed homogenization would pacify the region and stabilize the two states. The underlying assumption that the relevant minorities self-identified as Greek and Turkish was inaccurate. Thus, while the official histories – propagated by those who negotiated the exchange – still treat this event as a triumph, it was in fact a tragedy. Over a million lives were changed for the worse. Refugees were compelled to leave their homes, forcibly transferred in unbearable conditions to states they did not recognize. Once arrived, the minorities remained minorities. The Peel Commission might have pointed to the Turco-Greek example as a success, but the social breakdown and generational trauma caused by the exchange hardly exemplifies its goal of stability. Neither does the present state of inter-Aegean relations. In 1931, Charles Eddy quoted the Greek diplomat tasked with actually writing the Exchange Convention as physically struggling to pen the clause, so concerned was he for those he was condemning to exile.75 This nameless mandarin deserves some historical pity: the Lausanne Convention was thus not only inhumane, it was also ineffective.

75 Eddy, Greece and the Greek Refugees, 51.
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“Mr. Lindley (Athens) to the Marquess Curzon of Kedleston (Received February 22, 8:30 a.m.).” In *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*. London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1970.


