

## INTERVIEW WITH DR. HARRY J. PSOMIADES

### Visiting Scholar's Research Focuses on Greek-Turkish Compulsory Population Exchange of 1923

The agreement governing the Greek-Turkish Compulsory Population Exchange of 1923 was the culmination of a period of intense refugee activity beginning with the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, extending through World War I, and ending with the so-called Greek-Turkish War of 1919-1922. This decade of turmoil involved the movement of some two million Greeks, Turks, and Bulgarians.

As Dr. Harry J. Psomiades investigates this topic, the unpublished "Nansen Papers," housed in the League of Nations headquarters in Geneva, are serving as a primary source of information. In 1922 and 1923, Dr. Fridtjof Nansen was the Secretary General of Refugees of the League of Nations, which oversaw the population exchange. He played an important role in negotiating and carrying out the exchange agreement.

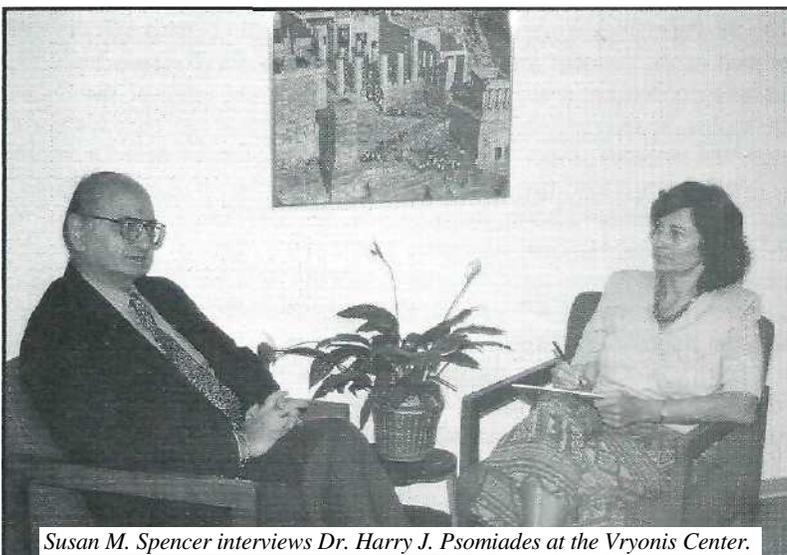
The fact that the majority of the Greeks targeted for relocation in the 1923 exchange were from the Pontos region of Turkey, south of the Black Sea,

played a role in Dr. Psomiades' decision to conduct extensive research on the exchange. One of his areas of interest is the succession of refugee movements involving the Greeks of Pontos since the late eighteenth century.

Dr. Psomiades is a descendant of Pontic Greeks. Although he was born in Boston, both of his parents were born in the Pontos region.

The Pontic Greek homeland extends along the south shore of the Black Sea from Sinope eastward for some 300 miles through Trebizond to the present Georgian-Turkish border. It also stretches inland for about 75 miles into the Pontic highlands which, for centuries, effectively sealed off the Pontic littoral from Central Anatolia. The Pontic Greek Empire of Trebizond, spanning the years 1204-1461, was ruled by the Grand Komnenoi, who were related to the Komnenoi dynasty of emperors that ruled Byzantium from 1081-1185.

In the following interview with Newsletter Editor Susan M. Spencer, Dr. Psomiades discusses the 1923 exchange agreement, while placing it in its historical context and commenting on its relevance to contemporary issues involving refugees. The photographs of the Pontos region and northwestern Turkey were taken by Dr. Psomiades when he visited the area in August 1955.



*Susan M. Spencer interviews Dr. Harry J. Psomiades at the Vryonis Center.*

#### **What was particularly significant about the Greek-Turkish compulsory population exchange of 1923?**

It was the first major official population transfer of our century, involving the exchange of about 370,000 Muslims in Greece for about 350,000 Greeks in Turkey. It began in early 1923 and extended into mid-1924.

Most of the Muslims to be transferred to Turkey were living in Greek Macedonia, with a small percentage coming from the Aegean islands and Crete. The Turks of western Thrace—primarily Xanthi and

Komotini—were excluded from the exchange.

The Greeks designated for relocation were primarily from the Pontos region, although some were from Cappadocia and the interior. They were the last Greeks to leave Turkey, with the exception of the Greeks of Istanbul who were not slated for relocation, and they were resettled mainly in western Thrace and Macedonia.

More than 1 million Greeks had left Turkey the previous year. Over 800,000 of them had fled western Anatolia over a three-week period when the Greek army was defeated at

Smyrna in September 1922. An additional 200,000 had left eastern Thrace the following month when the region was handed over to Turkey in accordance with the armistice at Mudania. The agreement governing the 1923 exchange settled a variety of issues pertaining to the earlier influx of these 1 million Greeks into Greece, as well as establishing the terms for the transfer of the remaining populations under the agreement. The total number of Greek refugees covered by the agreement was, therefore, about 1.3 million.

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The 1923 exchange was arranged by the League of Nations, making it the first time an international organization had been given the responsibility of supervising a population exchange.

### **How did you become interested in examining the 1923 population exchange so closely?**

I thought there might be lessons to learn from this exchange which could be applied to what is happening in the world today. The issues of ethnic cleansing, homogeneous states, and population exchanges have reemerged in the last two years in the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union.

The 1923 exchange was used as a type of model for subsequent exchanges. For example, during World War II, part of the Nazi policy in the Balkans was moving populations out of the area. When the Bulgarians occupied eastern Macedonia during the war, they deported all the Greeks to other parts of Greece or to Bulgaria, and they brought in Bulgarian settlers. Then, when the war was over, the Bulgarian settlers left, and the deported Greeks returned. The World Court used the Greek-Turkish population exchange as a model when it called for the relocation of the Sudeten Germans from Czechoslovakia to Germany after the war.

In these instances, minorities were seen to be a cause of instability. Today, what is going to happen to the ethnic minorities who are demanding self-determination in the former Soviet Union? For example, there is the struggle between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and the struggle within Georgia. There are close to 30 or 40 million Russians living outside of Russia in the nations that have emerged from the former Soviet Union. What we do not want to see is ethnic cleansing.



*The fortification walls of the city of Trebizond (Trabzon) on the southeastern coast of the Black Sea. Built during the period of the Grand Komnenoi when the city was the capital of the Pontic Greek Empire of Trebizond (1204-1461).*

### **Had such an exchange between Greece and Turkey ever been considered before 1923?**

The notion of a Greek-Turkish population exchange goes back to the period at the end of the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913. In 1908, the Young Turks had taken over power in Turkey and they were determined to strengthen the Ottoman Empire. They came to the conclusion that there was no room in the empire for minorities and that the hold the minorities had on the economy should be broken.

Secret Turkish organizations in the Smyrna-Aidin area of western Anatolia were putting pressure on the Greeks to leave, and, when the Balkan Wars broke out, this pressure increased. In 1913, at the end of the wars, Greece occupied the Aegean islands. The Great Powers met and agreed to allow Greece to annex the islands, but Turkey refused to give them up, claiming that they were an integral part of Turkey. Turkey then began a program of mass deportations of Greeks from the coast, both from eastern Thrace and western Anatolia, to the interior of Turkey. Then, Turkey

began expelling over 100,000 Greeks to Greece itself.

The Turks said they needed to make room for the Turkish refugees coming into the empire as a result of the Balkan Wars. In 1914, Greek Prime Minister Eleutherios Venizelos told the Turkish Grand Vizier that Greece could not tolerate this situation and that it should be discussed. The Turks suggested that there be a population exchange between the Muslims of Macedonia and the Greeks of eastern Thrace and certain regions of western Anatolia, such as Smyrna. It was agreed that third parties would intervene to assist in the exchange and that they would meet in Brussels in the summer of 1914. However, the plan was never carried out because World War I broke out.

Greece remained neutral in the war until 1917. Prior to that year, the Turks felt that it would only be a matter of time before Greece entered the war, and, at the encouragement of the Germans, they continued to deport Greek populations from the Turkish coast. When the war ended, a large number of Greek, Turkish, and Bulgarian refugees had been uprooted

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as a result of the fighting in the Balkans. The Greek refugees that had left their homes in Turkey and eastern Thrace during the war began to go home.

### **How did the League of Nations become interested in the possibility of an official population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923?**

In October 1922, Dr. Fridtjof Nansen, Secretary General of Refugees of the League of Nations, was in Istanbul where he was in charge of helping Russian refugees get resettled elsewhere. While he was there, he saw the tremendous influx of destitute Greek refugees, from 20,000 to 50,000, that had come into the city from the Pontos region and other regions of Turkey without food or clothing. Many of them were dying of typhus and the British army, then in control of the city, was concerned that its troops would be infected. It was under these circumstances that Nansen, in discussions with Greek and Turkish representatives, came to the conclusion that there had to be some kind of population exchange to carry out the orderly migration of the Greeks who remained in Turkey, excluding those in Istanbul. The League of Nations then set up a population exchange commission composed of two Greeks, two Turks, and three neutral members appointed by the League.

The agreement was signed on January 30, 1923, and was to take effect in May 1923, before the Treaty of Lausanne was concluded in July. The League of Nations did not want to wait **until** the treaty was finalized because the refugee problem was an urgent one and had to be attended to right away.

### **How smoothly was the exchange carried out?**

The agreement stipulated that the people designated for the transfer would be able to stay in their homes



*The thirteenth-century church of Saint Sophia in Trebizond. Built during the period of the Grand Komnenoi.*

until an orderly exchange was carried out in May. This would have allowed them to dispose of their property or arrange to take it with them. However, in violation of the agreement, the Turks began forcing the Pontic Greeks out of their villages prematurely. These Greeks sought refuge in the ports on the Black Sea, although transportation had not yet been arranged for them by the League of Nations. While waiting without any food, clothing, or shelter, thousands died. If Near East Relief, an American organization, had not been working in the Black Sea ports to feed them, thousands more would have died.

The population exchange agreement was a legal document which guaranteed that the people involved would receive compensation for the value of their property. By 1924, the exchange had been completed. It was then time to determine the value of the property left behind, but negotiations for this purpose dragged on and finally ended at an impasse. The refugees, therefore, were given no monetary compensation for their property.

There were additional violations on the part of both Greece and Turkey

in the implementation of the exchange agreement.

### **Why weren't the Turks of Xanthi and Komotini, in western Thrace, and the Greeks of Istanbul included in this population exchange?**

At the Lausanne conference in November 1922, the Turks made two proposals: that all Greeks should leave Turkey, including those in Istanbul, and that there should be a plebiscite in western Thrace, where Turkey claimed there was a Turkish majority, to determine if the region should become part of Turkey or have autonomous status. At that time, there were about 100,000 Turks in western Thrace and about 300,000 Greeks in Istanbul.

Greece's response was that the Greek population of Istanbul should be allowed to stay where it was since it was essentially a large urban population and Greece would have difficulty absorbing it. Greece also wanted the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate to remain in Istanbul. In addition,

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reminded the Turks that it had acquired western Thrace from Bulgaria rather than from Turkey.

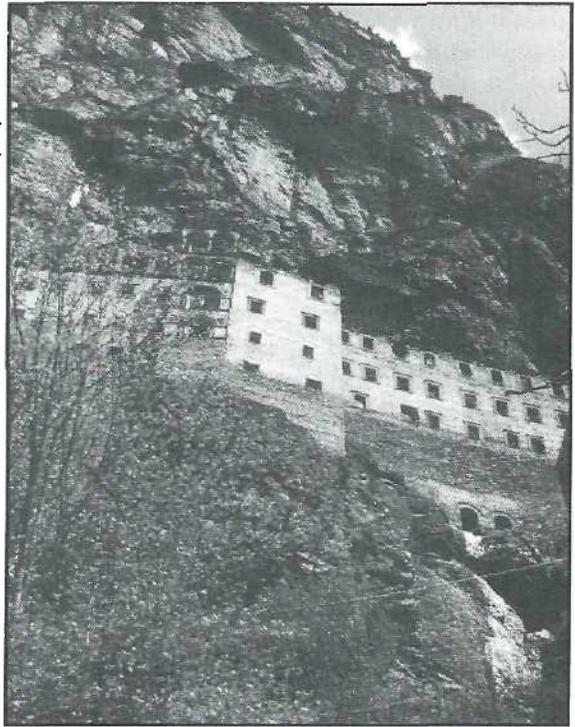
Greece got its way: the Greeks were permitted to remain in Istanbul and there was no plebiscite in western Thrace. In future negotiations, however, Turkey only allowed 120,000 of the Greeks in Istanbul to remain since it decided to expel the Greeks living in the suburban areas and small villages around the city. To balance the equation, the Turks were allowed to stay in western Thrace.

Before the Greek army agreed to give up eastern Thrace to Turkey in 1922, western Thrace had a Muslim majority and eastern Thrace had a Greek Christian majority. When eastern Thrace became part of Turkey, the Greek farmers living in the region crossed over into western Thrace, giving western Thrace an overwhelming Greek majority. And so the Hellenization of western Thrace began.

### Why has the plight of the Pontic Greeks been so dramatic?

There have been a number of significant movements of Greek refugees out of the Pontos region since the late eighteenth century. This is in sharp contrast to the situation concerning the Greeks of western Anatolia who fled from Turkey in a matter of a few weeks in September 1922.

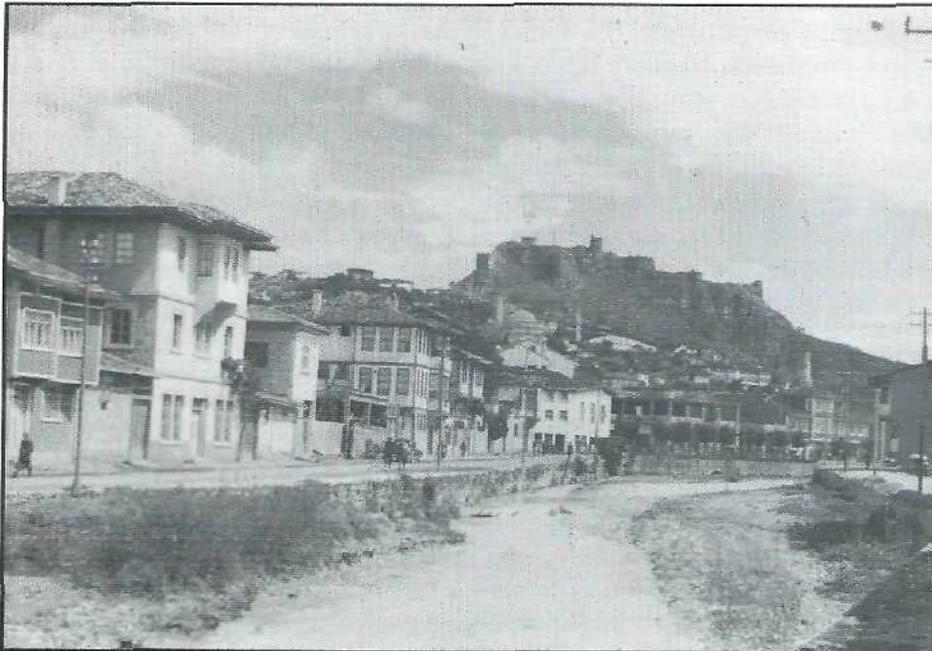
During World War I, Turkey carried out major deportations of Greeks from the Pontos region. Russia was on the side of the allies in the war, and, because the Greeks shared a common religion with the Russians, the Turks believed that the Greeks would cooperate with the Russians. Therefore, under terrible conditions, the Turks started to deport the Greeks from the Pontos into the interior. Many of these Greeks



*Panagia Soumela Monastery, south of Trebizond. Established in 270 AD.*

went to Russia during World War I to avoid deportation, and, then, when the allies were victorious, they returned to the Pontos. During the so-called Greek-Turkish war of 1919-1922, many Pontic Greeks were again deported into the interior. The figures for the total number of Pontic Greeks who died during the deportations accompanying both wars are as high as 303,000. I would say that the figure is at least 200,000.

In the Middle Ages, the Pontic Greek Empire of Trebizond of the Grand Komnenoi included portions of what is today southern Russia and the Crimea. In modern times, the Greek population of southern Russia increased drastically because of a series of wars between Russia and Turkey in 1774, 1828-1829, 1855-1856, and 1878. During each of these wars, the Russian army came into eastern Turkey and, when it left, the Greeks in the areas that the Russian army had occupied were afraid of Turkish reprisals. They would then {continued on page 40}



*The modern town of Kastamonu, about 100 miles north of Ankara, in the former Byzantine province of Paphlagonia. The castle in the background was the ancestral home of the Komnenoi dynasty of emperors that ruled Byzantium from 1081-1185.*

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leave with the Russian army and go into Caucasus and southern Russia. Even in 1922, with the movement of the Greek population to Greece, some 80,000 Pontic Greeks crossed over into Georgia.

The Pontic Greeks on the Soviet Union had their own schools and were allowed to teach Pontic Greek to their children until 1938 when they were persecuted by the Stalinist regime. There is, therefore, a very significant Pontic Greek population in southern Russia, the Caucasus, and the Crimea. The Russian census of 1979 lists about 400,000. My own figure would be closer to 500,000. There were about 125,000 Greeks in Georgia alone as of 1989.

### **What can we learn from the 1923 population exchange that could help us understand the problems involved in the movement of populations today?**

It is important to note that nobody wanted to take the credit for the compulsory population exchange of 1923. Everyone blamed everyone else for it because, given western values, such an exchange was considered anathema. Even those in the west who advocated the exchange always prefaced their remarks by saying they really did not want to carry it out. They realized that it was a failure of societies to become pluralistic and an admission of the failure of the international community to find peaceful means, more humane means, of reaching a settlement concerning minorities. Countries are generally more willing to agree to a population exchange if it is voluntary.

Arguments for ethnic cleansing are still very much in evidence today. Time and again, countries, and very often international organizations, come to the conclusion that the only way to prevent



*The ancient Greek town of Kotyora (modern Turkish town of Ordu), between Trebizond and Samsun on the southeastern coast of the Black Sea. The nineteenth-century Greek Orthodox cathedral in the foreground was used by Greeks until they left the region during the Greek-Turkish Compulsory Population Exchange of 1923.*

minorities from being troublesome in the future is to get rid of them. The virulent nationalism that was suppressed in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union is now emerging, leaving little room for a pluralist or civil society where everyone is basically equal and people of different ideologies, religions, languages, and color participate fully in society. The countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have had no tradition of a civil society. They were imbued with the notion that homogeneity

is central to the state, and, in one way or another, they all persecuted their minorities.

Whenever a population exchange is contemplated, it never takes place during periods of stability and peace. It always occurs during times of crisis, rather than in an environment which is conducive to sitting down and working out problems. This is one of the reasons why it is very difficult to come to an agreement on providing compensation for the property left behind by refugees.