

Δελτίο Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών

Τόμ. 19 (2015)



Elisabeth Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia: The Rural Settlement of Refugees 1922-1930*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 396 pages.

Aytek Soner Alpan

doi: [10.12681/deltiokms.313](https://doi.org/10.12681/deltiokms.313)

Copyright © 2015, Aytek Soner Alpan



Άδεια χρήσης [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

Alpan, A. S. (2015). Elisabeth Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia: The Rural Settlement of Refugees 1922-1930*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 396 pages. *Δελτίο Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών*, 19, 407-417. <https://doi.org/10.12681/deltiokms.313>

Elisabeth Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia: The Rural Settlement of Refugees 1922-1930*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 396 pages.

In 1923 the signature of the Convention concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations at Lausanne formalized the first compulsory population exchange in world history as a means to avoid and resolve future ethnic conflicts. The impact of the population exchange was so substantial that it served as a blueprint for the displacement of millions of people in the 20th century. Recent studies on diplomatic history show that “population exchange” and “population unmixing” were the two terms that “entered the diplomatic parlance at Lausanne”¹. The population exchange, however, did not only leave a mark in diplomatic history and changed its lexicon. It meant the approbation to the expulsion of millions and their becoming refugees. That is to say, this landmark decision ratified the mass flight of the Greeks from Asia Minor, Pontus, Thrace and Constantinople across the highly volatile Greco-Turkish border, which had been underway long before the population exchange, and consequently changed their status from “ethnic minority” in their native homelands to “refugee” in a nation-state where they were supposed to belong to the ethnic identity that was fostered by the nation-state.

The Greco-Turkish population exchange was based on religious affiliations, for it was impossible either to make a distinction based on linguistic or racial criteria or to maximize the transferable populations by any other categorization². There were some segments of the population, such as Cretan Muslims speaking a Greek vernacular or Turkish-speaking Orthodox Greeks, viz., Karamanlides, which made the process more challenging. By looking at this picture, Bernard Lewis claims that the

1. Eric D. Weitz, “From the Vienna to the Paris System: International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions”, *The American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (2008), p. 1337.

2. Harry J. Psomiades, *Greek-Turkish Relations, 1923-1930: A Study in the Politics of Rapprochement*, Dissertation submitted to Columbia University, 1962, p. 152.

population exchange “was not a repatriation of Greeks to Greece and of Turks to Turkey but a deportation of Christian Turks from Turkey to Greece and a deportation of Muslim Greeks from Greece to Turkey”³. Although this is an overstatement, Lewis successfully captures the irony and underlines the dissimilarity between the incoming and native populations in both countries. There were also Caucasian refugees and those having migrated into Greece from Bulgaria as a result of the “voluntary” population exchange between these two countries decided with the signature of the Convention of Neuilly in 1919.

The arrival of the refugees, significantly varying in socio-economic backgrounds, social customs, traditions and even in language, and their integration into Greece constituted one of the toughest challenges to the highly fragile, war-torn Greek economy and to the socio-political order in Greece. Furthermore, the role of the refugees was “catalytic to all subsequent developments in Greece”⁴. Hence, particularly throughout the interwar period, as a moral, practical and political imperative, the Greek state was heavily preoccupied with the refugee problem (*προσφυγικό ζήτημα*) and put this issue to the top of the national agenda. On the one hand, the resettlement of the refugees and their adaptation to the existing society were proved to be more exigent than anticipated at the very outset of the process; on the other, the Greek state, however, tried to reap benefits from the resettlement challenge and considered this as an opportunity to Hellenize the ethnic structure of the “New Lands” that had been acquired from the Ottoman Empire in 1912-1913.

Elisabeth Kontogiorgi’s *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia*, which is based on the author’s dissertation submitted to St. Anthony’s College, Oxford in 1997, revolves around the axis that is summarized above. The book concentrates on the resettlement task that the state undertook in Greek Macedonia under the auspices of the League of Nations and the immediate results of the rural resettlement scheme, such as its social, political, ethnological and economic impact. The time period that is surveyed in the book is strictly restricted to the lifespan of the

3. Bernard Lewis, “The Return of Islam”, *Commentary* 61 (1976), p. 49.

4. John S. Koliopoulos and Thanos M. Veremis, *Greece: The Modern Sequel from 1831 to the Present*, London 2002, p. 129.

Refugee Settlement Commission (RSC), 1923-1930. According to the author, why the resettlement practice in Greek Macedonia is worth to be explored is fourfold (p. 5): First of all, it provides an essential case study of refugee resettlement and integration and a blueprint for other practices of exchanging populations. Secondly, the refugee resettlement experience in Greek Macedonia provides insight into the role of international organizations in organizing and managing resettlement tasks. Thirdly, the subject is directly linked to the nation-building process in Greece through the Hellenization of Greek Macedonia as the result of resettling 800,000 refugees of supposedly Hellenic origin. Finally, studying the impact of the resettlement in the region has the potential to improve our understanding regarding the ensuing developments as well as the choices of the “non-Greek-speaking” (as Kontogiorgi calls) inhabitants of the region.

The book consists of four main parts and is divided into ten chapters in total excluding the author’s introduction and epilogue. The first part is on the historical background of the subject matter. Kontogiorgi starts her discussion with an exploration of Macedonia. She first briefly introduces the region at the crossroads of the Balkan Peninsula in strictly geographical terms. Then she examines the economic structure and history of Macedonia and concludes that the population exchange(s) took place when the area had been undergoing a profound transformation towards the development of capitalist relations that were dissolving the economic structures inherited from the Ottoman Empire. In the next two sections, Kontogiorgi introduces the ethnic composition of Macedonia to the reader and in a nutshell she reviews the structures and networks of Ottoman governance in the region that had been subject to alteration for decades and were ultimately destroyed after the Balkan Wars. That brings her to the rise of nationalisms and the landscape of ethnic cleavages in Macedonia. In the following chapter she concentrates on the “Struggle for Macedonia” as the result of the interwoven nationalist claims over the region. The national conflicts that eventually resulted in the Balkan Wars and the division of Macedonia among different states caused a demographic tide that is covered in the final section of this chapter. This gave rise to an enduring problem of the region, namely, the refugees. This constitutes the second chapter of the first part. In this

part, Kontogiorgi starts her examination of the refugees with the historical roots of this long-lasting problem. According to the author, the rise of Turkish nationalism and the policies of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) were the “root cause” of the Greek refugee problem. Particularly after the Balkan Wars and on the outbreak of the First World War, the persecutions of the *Rum* in Eastern Thrace and Asia Minor, including their mass slaughtering and their expulsion from the Aegean and Black Sea littoral, intensified. Kontogiorgi underlines that the ethnic polarization resulted in an influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees (p. 48: 121,604) into Macedonia. This influx was compounded with the “Asia Minor Catastrophe” and the subsequent exodus of the Ottoman Greeks from their ancestral lands. The author claims that the persecutions of Greeks (p. 48) and the already unfolding process of their becoming refugees (p. 61) indispensably led to the Lausanne Convention, and hence, to the compulsory population exchange. Finally, she discusses the role of the League of Nations and Fridtjof Nansen in the formation of the idea of a compulsory population exchange.

Part II⁵, “Refugee Resettlement in Macedonia”, constitutes the heart of the book. At the beginning of this chapter, Kontogiorgi delves into the establishment of the RSC under the patronage of the League of Nations in November 1923. The goal of establishing such a body was fundamentally to administer the resettlement. The League of Nations was responsible to implement and coordinate the resettlement scheme through the RSC but this organization had no allocated budget to carry out this task. The actions of the RSC were funded by international long-term loans. In other words, the RSC was not a philanthropic organization but rather a mediator between Western creditors and the Greek state. Ac-

5. A preliminary version of this chapter was published in the *Bulletin of the Centre for Asia Minor Studies* (Δελτίο Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών) in Greek. For this version see Elisabeth Kontogiorgi, «Αγροτικές προσφυγικές εγκαταστάσεις στη Μακεδονία: 1923–1930», *Δελτίο ΚΜΣ* 9 (1992), pp. 47-59. For another study of the author on the same theme appeared in English see Elisabeth Kontogiorgi, “Economic Consequences Following Refugee Settlement in Greek Macedonia, 1923-1932”, in Renée Hirschon (ed.), *Crossing the Aegean: An Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange between Greece and Turkey*, New York-Oxford 2003, pp. 63-78.

According to the author “international loans and the establishment of the RSC determined the relationship between Greece and the international economy” (p. 83). Like other scholars commenting on the same period, i.e. Mazower and Pentzopoulos⁶, Kontogiorgi claims that what the RSC and the Greek government, particularly liberals/Venizelists, aimed was to render the refugee settlements self-sufficient and socio-economically viable, that is to say, to integrate the refugees into the polity as small producers as soon as possible (p. 86) and to avoid any social unrest and affiliations of the refugees with the communists (pp. 107, 126). The existence of large estates of arable land in Macedonia was particularly suitable for the resettlement of the refugees and required expropriation of these lands and their distribution to the landless refugees and natives. That approach formed the backbone of the liberal agricultural policy of the period. As a part of the resettlement scheme, a land redistribution plan was put into practice and resulted in dwarfish fields on which the refugees and natives needed to cultivate. There were serious problems resulting from the land redistribution program such as uncertainties regarding the property rights of the refugees or an upside-down agricultural system that turned the polyculture into monoculture. For Kontogiorgi, Macedonia was an appropriate site of resettlement not only due to some socio-economic concerns but it was a matter of national security as well. The establishment of Greek refugees into this “sensitive” region and securing the predominance of the Greek element in Macedonia would eradicate the possible territorial aspirations of the neighboring states and of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) backed by the Soviet Union (pp. 85, 100-1, 126). Finally, the Refugee Settlement Commission was liquidated in 1930 before the resettlement task finished.

Part III and IV concentrate on the consequences of the population exchange and the refugee resettlement in rural Macedonia. The author investigates the consequences in social, political, ethnographical, demo-

6. Mark Mazower, “The Refugees, the Economic Crisis and the Collapse of Venizelist Hegemony, 1929-1932”, *Δελτίο ΚΜΣ* 9 (1992), p. 121. Dimitri Pentzopoulos, *The Balkan Exchange of Minorities and Its Impact Upon Greece*, Paris 1962, p. 153.

graphic and economic terms. She starts with analyzing the tension between the refugees and the local population and gives an account of several confrontations between these communities due to the competition over scarce resources (land, irrigation water etc.). The newcomers were discriminated against or treated unfavorably. The “Greekness” of the refugees was either under constant questioning or denied by the natives due to certain social, economic, or political factors, as well as the differences in the cultural patterns of these two communities, which played a key role in creating cleavage (pp. 166-7). The sharply contrasting interests at the local level projected their shadow on the already-polarized political sphere marked by the deep schism between Venizelists and royalists who had a distinct anti-refugee overtone. In this polarization, the refugees supported Venizelism *en masse* and then became arguably the most important segment of the Venizelist camp. The massive refugee support was the key element that led the Liberal Party to electoral victory. Only when the Venizelist circles were unable to absorb the refugees anymore, the anti-Venizelists came to power in 1933 and reversed many of the liberal policies implemented in the 1920s including the land distribution (p. 186). The refugees’ turning a deaf ear to the political alternatives other than Venizelism throughout the 1920s upset other political movements that sought to recruit them to their grassroots, such as the Communist Party and the Agrarian Party (pp. 188-192). The impact of the resettlement on Greek Macedonia was not limited to social or political matters. With the arrival of the refugees from different regions and different backgrounds the population exchange ethnologically and demographically transformed Macedonia as well. In the final part of the book, the author explains further how the landscape of Macedonia changed as the result of the activities of the RSC. Under the rubric of refugee resettlement, numerous refugee neighborhoods were constructed as well as many technical and organizational structures that supported the society of the region. In this part Kontogiorgi pays special attention to malaria, which threatened and took the lives of the refugees, and to the fight against it throughout Greece. Among the projects carried out by the RSC, the Greek government and several philanthropic organizations were dispensaries, drainage projects, irrigation projects, roads, schools etc. The transformation of Macedonia was not merely physical

though. The new settlements were named after the “lost homelands” in order to maintain the memory of the refugees’ homelands in their new settlements and this resulted in the Hellenization of the toponyms of the region (pp. 293-6). Finally, the author returns to the economic consequences of the resettlement. She examines the economic policy of the Venizelist governments in the 1920s by navigating through the consequences of the land distribution program, such as the epidemic of dwarfish land properties, the crisis in husbandry and the development of monoculture farming. In spite of such negative outcomes of Venizelos’s interventionist policies, they contributed to the development of industrial capitalism through dissolving the archaic economic forms and stimulating an agricultural growth in the 1920s (pp. 320-1).

Elisabeth Kontogiorgi concludes that although the resettlement and the integration of the refugees was complicated and by no means followed a smooth pattern, the task was undertaken efficiently and the refugees’ livelihoods were successfully re-established in both rural and urban areas. Furthermore, according to the author, ethnic homogenization in Greek Macedonia successfully avoided further ethnic conflicts in the region.

Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia is an extensive research and displays a richness of detail as well as a good command of sources. The innovation of the book lies in its effective utilization of newly released or underexploited sources. Most of the primary materials utilized in the book come from different archives in Greece, some of which are the archives of the National Bank, the Benaki Museum, the Centre for Asia Minor Studies, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Moreover, the author’s research draws on some personal collections as well, such as the papers of A. A. Pallis housed at the Hellenic Research Institute in Athens. In addition to the Greek sources, the author extensively uses the documents of the Public Record Office in London and the US State Department. The book also relies on the published and unpublished materials produced by the League of Nations and by the members of the RSC, other state officials and diplomats. The author surveys some of the Greek newspapers of the time as well as a large body of literature on the subject published mainly in Greek and in English. The literature and the archival sources in other regional languages, particularly in Turkish (or

on Turkey) lack in the study. Although the study is not a comparative one, a set of explanatory or critical notes on Turkey as the other party of the population exchange and a case of refugee resettlement conducted without assistance of international organizations would have enhanced the analysis. Despite the author's sure grasp of source material, there are some editing problems in the citations and bibliography. For example, the pages of *Balkan Economic History, 1550–1950* of Lampe and Jackson that are referred with the footnotes 12 and 15 do not contain information on the point that the author discusses (p. 12). In the bibliographical entry of Nestor's piece (p. 357) the page numbers should have been "169-184" rather than "173-181". As for Doğu Ergil's article, in its bibliographical entry the name of the author should have been written "Ergil, Doğu" as cited in the text (p. 43) and not vice versa as given in the bibliography (p. 348). A final remark about the sources can be on the material that is not used in the study. First of all, the author does not utilize the refugee press proliferating throughout Greece immediately after the arrival of the refugees. Elisabeth Kontogiorgi is the author of the informative entries on the refugee press in the *Encyclopedia of the Greek Press 1784-1974* (*Εγκυκλοπαίδεια του Ελληνικού Τύπου*), hence nobody can claim that she is unaware of these sources. The second point that deserves discussion is the author's analysis of the relationship between the Communist Party of Greece and the refugees. While discussing this relationship, the author heavily relies on the secondary sources or diplomatic reports. Although the archive of the Communist Party is not fully available to the researchers the collection of *Rizospastis* is (and was, I guess, at the time of this research) accessible.

Although well written and well researched, some criticisms can be made regarding *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia*. To begin with, there are some organizational issues, which result in repetitions, like the discussion on land distribution that appears in different chapters of different parts. The reader would have benefited more if a thorough analysis of this issue had been carried out under a single title.

As far as the rise of nationalisms in the Ottoman Empire that led to the gradual disintegration of the empire is concerned, the author's approach seems to be problematic. Kontogiorgi considers the rise of nationalisms as the awakening processes of latent nationalities (p. 24) that were con-

cealed and obscured by the denominational *millet* system. Hence, the abandonment of the *millet* system by the CUP resulted in “increasing national consciousness among most Ottoman subjects” (p. 43) and the rise of violent and aggressive Turkish nationalism. First of all, an objection can be raised to the author’s understanding of the concept of nationalism. National identities are “constructs” of certain social actors and nation is a modern phenomenon. Thus, although the author has no such intention, referring to an “awakening” of national consciousness inexorably leads to retrospective quest for the roots of a nation buried deep in history, which is imbued with the classic nationalist mode of thinking and the displacement of millions of people that is being discussed here was the outcome of such mode of thinking. Secondly, as opposed to the author’s approach, what is called “millet system” in the Ottoman Empire was hardly a “system”, that is to say, it was not an institutionalized policy but rather, as Braude claims⁷, “a set of arrangements, largely local, with considerable variation over time and place”⁸. Thirdly, the author discerns the power of the CUP as a decisive moment for the rise of nationalisms in the Ottoman Empire; however, particularly in the Balkans the rise of nationalisms precedes the CUP power as seen in the cases of the Balkan states that gained their independence from the Ottoman Empire in the 1830s. In addition to this, the epidemic of ethnic violence in the Balkans in the nineteenth and twentieth century is explained with the rise of nationalism and with an unstoppable march towards the formation of nation-states, which seems to me tautological and does not contribute to answer the question that we all need to think about: How and why did violence become a common language in the region that led to other violent practices, such as forced displacements and genocides?

The book can be considered as an example of “history from above”. Needless to say that the concept is not used in a pejorative sense but

7. Benjamin Braude, “Foundation Myths of the Millet System”, in Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire. The Functioning of A. Plural Society*, New York 1982, p. 74.

8. There are also some more recent criticisms of the historiography on the millet system. For instance see Macit Kenanoğlu, *Osmanlı Millet Sistemi: Mitve Gerçek*, İstanbul 2004.

to indicate that the study concentrates on the institutional framework of the resettlement and approaches to the process from a state-centric point of view. This, nonetheless, has some drawbacks that can be traced throughout the book. For example, the voices of the refugees are absent from the discussion. Whenever the reader starts to hear the refugees in the book, one actually reads about the activities of the refugee organizations, practices of which were under serious criticism for being organizations of the big *tzormpatzides* or *prosfygotateres*, that is, “elite” refugees who were assigned in managerial positions in bureaucracy, particularly in the RSC⁹. Moreover, the refugees’ experiences and the overall tragedy are overshadowed by the success of the resettlement task carried out by the Greek state and international organizations. The hardships that the refugees went through are displayed as the short-term problems subsidiary to the long-term benefits of the displacement, such as avoiding “the sort of problems that (...) less homogeneous northern neighbours [of Greece] faced in the 1940s” (p. 241). The state-centric approach of the author is also visible in her discussion on the tension between the natives and refugees; the author claims that these two communities “undoubtedly shared the same religion, *national consciousness*, and *national ideals*” (p. 165, my emphasis). Although the state and the mainstream literature on the period attribute a national consciousness and a clear-cut national identity to the refugees, the testimonies of them do not support this supposition. For instance, Vretos Menexopoulos¹⁰, a refugee from Chili (Şile) tells that he heard the name of Greece only after the Balkan Wars. Moreover, before coming to Greece they had the picture of the Tsar hanging on their wall. According to Menexopoulos, when they first arrived in Greece, they thought that they had not left their village for good and they would return soon. The examples can be multiplied but lack of space precludes further discussion. As a last point, it needs to be told that this approach overlooks the multiplicity of the refugee experiences, which were not homogeneous, but differentiated along class and gender lines. In summary, it can be told that the author

9. See Anastasis Ghikas, *Ρήξη και ενσωμάτωση. Συμβολή στην ιστορία του εργατικού-κομμουνιστικού κινήματος του μεσοπολέμου, 1918-1936*, Athens 2010.

10. Fotis D. Apostolopoulos (ed.), *Η Έξοδος*. v.1., Athens 1980, p. 339.

does not transcend the limits of the literature in Greece on this particular issue.

In conclusion, it is to Dr. Kontogiorgi's credit that *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia* is such a rich and readable account of a very significant episode of modern Greek history. The book provides the reader with an illuminating insight into the population exchange and refugee resettlement. This study should be on the syllabi of graduate seminars on modern Greek and Southeastern European history as well as refugee studies and forced migration. It should, however, be noted that the book, which costs £111.00 is discouragingly expensive even for libraries.

AYTEK SONER ALPAN