Forced Migration as Nation-Building: 
The League of Nations, Minority Protection, 
and the Greek-Turkish Population Exchange

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1 Introduction

Although the two League of Nations projects worked at cross purposes, both aimed to accomplish the same objective: protecting minorities in the lands of the recently defeated Ottoman Empire. The provisions for protecting minorities that were included in the peace treaty with Turkey in July 1923 sought to guarantee special rights to religious, linguistic, and national minorities in former Ottoman territories. On the other hand, the Convention for the Exchange of Populations, signed in January 1923, called for the expulsion of minorities and the expropriation of their properties.1 The minority-protection provisions in the peace treaty and the forcible expulsions envisioned in the accompanying convention were obviously inconsistent solutions to the 'problem of minorities', and the juxtaposition of the two efforts is striking. Nonetheless, the paradoxical new legal arrangements belie an underlying consistency: both measures created the conditions for the new political institutions required by an emerging international consensus on proper political organisation.

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By the end of World War I, both the Great Powers, which demanded protection and expulsion, and the Turkish nationalists, who responded to those demands, had adopted two notions that would hardly have been recognisable only a century earlier, before far-flung empires housing multilingual and multi-religious populations had given way to would-be homogenous nation-states: Muslims and non-Muslims were unable to coexist, and a diverse society was a pre-modern anomaly. This article argues that the unprecedented and internationally-administered forced migration known by the euphemism ‘population exchange’\(^2\) has its roots in the centuries-long legacy of European fantasies about the brutality of ‘the Turk’, while at the same time satisfying the much more contemporary desire of an emerging Turkish-nationalist elite, which seized on the ‘exchange’ as a way to consolidate its new state and legislate a foundational Turkish identity.

2 Defining and ‘Protecting’ Minorities

International provisions for protecting religious minorities have been recognised since the sixteenth century.\(^3\) Nonetheless, the nineteenth century brought a new lens through which these minorities came to be viewed, as nationalist ideologies redefined ‘majorities’ and ‘minorities’ alike. While diversity in religion and language would formerly have been assumed within extensive European empires, 1830 marked a turning point. In establishing borders for Greece, newly independent of the Ottoman Empire, and while recognising the continuing rights of non-Christians in the new state, the London Protocol ‘marked the first time that the powers clearly linked a specific population and sovereignty – that is, the Greek state considered as representative of the

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