

Harry J. Psomiades, *Fridtjof Nansen and the Greek Refugee Crisis 1922–1924* (Bloomington, Ill.: The Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center, 2011), 160 pp., appendices, maps, photographs. \$25.00.

This important book by Harry J. Psomiades, subtitled *A Study of the Politics of International Humanitarian Intervention and the Greek-Turkish Obligatory Population Exchange Agreement*, is one of a number of valuable books and articles by Psomiades that built and enlarged upon his Columbia University doctoral dissertation on the topic of Greek-Turkish relations in the 1920s. His earlier works had highlighted the diplomatic aspects of the last phase of the Eastern Question and Greece's Asia Minor Disaster, the status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Constantinople, and the fate of the Greeks of the Black Sea

Pontus region during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of modern Turkey.

This study focuses on the role of the Norwegian diplomat and humanitarian Fridtjof Nansen, who, as the League of Nations' high commissioner for refugees, along with Greek statesman Eleftherios Venizelos, took the initiative to bring about the Greco-Turkish Population Exchange of 1923 and established the foundations of refugee relief in Greece. Both those projects were critical in saving the lives of almost 1.5 million Greeks who fled the Ottoman Empire at the end of the Greco-Turkish war of 1919–1922, an event known in Greece as "the Asia Minor Disaster." This is the only monograph that focuses on Nansen's role, which is not known or even acknowledged sufficiently in Greece, even though Nansen's name will be forever associated with refugee rights and protections—passports issued to stateless people were his idea and were called Nansen Passports. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work while he was dealing with the Greek refugees. Immediately after his death in 1930, the League of Nations set up the Nansen International Office for Refugees to continue his work, which, too, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1938. In 1954, the league's successor body, the United Nations, established the Nansen medal, later named the Nansen Refugee Award, given annually "in recognition of extraordinary and dedicated service to refugees."

This is a well-researched academic study for which Psomiades worked in the archives of several countries and consulted an extensive corpus of secondary sources, including his own contributions. Psomiades' parents were Greek refugees from the Black Sea Pontus region, and therefore the story he tells has also a personal dimension. As a scholar, he was aware of the lack of recognition afforded to Nansen. And yet, his tone is sober and matter-of-fact and never slips into sentimentalism, negative stereotyping,



or shrill nationalistic propaganda. Even when he is talking about deportations and massacres, he is restrained, letting the facts speak for themselves. For example, in the case of thousands of Greeks and Armenians forcibly drafted by the Ottoman authorities into what were euphemistically known as labor battalions, Psomiades does so briefly, succinctly, but no less effectively, by citing a British diplomat, who noted that the average life expectancy in the labor battalions was two months.

Following the prologue that provides a historical background, Psomiades' first chapter describes Fridtjof Nansen, the man and the diplomat, his early fascination with exploring the polar regions, and subsequently as a diplomat and the League of Nations' first high commissioner for refugees. Thereafter, the book resumes its examination of the events between 1922 and 1924. Chapter 2 outlines Nansen's initiatives to provide relief to the refugees already in Greece and those in transit within the Ottoman Empire, including many from the Pontus region, who arrived in Constantinople suffering from disease and malnutrition. Chapter 3 describes the negotiations leading to the population exchange, and its compulsory character, a decision taken because there was clearly no alternative. Chapter 4 examines the ways Nansen and Venizelos fought for the exchange at the Lausanne Conference of 1923, which settled all outstanding issues between Greece and Turkey following the end of the war. It was there that the decision was made to have a compulsory exchange, but to make exceptions for the Greeks of Constantinople and the Muslims of Eastern Thrace. The final chapter of the book returns the focus on Nansen and describes his subsequent involvement in Greek refugee and other issues that included another thorny one, dealing with the Armenians, who had been expelled from the Ottoman Empire. In terms of the Greek refugee issues, it was Nansen who had the idea of establishing an independent Refugee Set-

tlement Commission answerable not to the Greek government but to the League of Nations—a move that ensured international legitimacy and support.

In this account of Nansen's role in the exchange of populations and the establishment of refugee relief, Harry Psomiades' book has two major, interconnected themes that run through the entire narrative. The first is the question of why the exchange happened, and why, ultimately, it was the only option that would have saved Greek lives, even though it deprived many people of choice and, in fact, caused many (more Muslims in Greece than Greeks in the Ottoman lands) to be uprooted against their will. In the book's epilogue, and in light of the documented account he presents, Psomiades concludes that there was no alternative. Turkey could not or would not offer protections to large ethnic minorities remaining within its borders and, indeed, had raised the possibility of the exchange early on in the proceedings. Without the exchange, and the reciprocal movement of Muslims out of Greece and Greek Orthodox out of Turkey, thousands would have been threatened by a prolongation of the hostilities. As Psomiades puts it in his characteristically restrained prose,

Using contemporary language, one could argue that the compulsory uprooting of over two million people became a form of internationally legitimized "ethnic cleansing." Debate among historians and political scientists will long continue as to the merits and demerits of this grand historical experiment, pitting ethnic homogeneity against socio-cultural pluralism. Ultimately, however, the fact remains that, without the exchange, the Greek element—given subsequent demographic trends in Turkey and Greece—would have been considerably reduced (115-16).

The second theme running through the book has to do with the pivotal roles of



Nansen and Venizelos, both in instituting the exchange and laying the basis for refugee relief in Greece. Psomiades notes the paradox that they have born most of the blame by the critics of the exchange (and little credit for setting out the parameters of refugee relief). Psomiades concludes:

Ultimately, the painful choice of the compulsory uprooting of populations was viewed as a "lesser evil" by both Venizelos and Nansen. Subsequent historical developments have tended to vindicate their actions (116).

This is, unfortunately, the final study we will be reading by this fine scholar. Psomiades was stricken by cancer as he was completing the manuscript, and though he managed to complete it successfully, he succumbed to the illness in August 2011, several weeks before the book was published. The recently founded Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center in Bloomingdale, Illinois, is to be commended for undertaking the costs of publication, as are George Shirinian of the Zoryan Institute for the care he took in editing the manuscript, and Leandros Papathanasiou of Athens Printing, New York, a long-time collaborator with Psomiades, for his work on the book's production. They all combined their efforts to produce a volume which is a worthy culmination of Harry J. Psomiades' rich contribution to Modern Greek Studies.

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