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Minorities and the League of Nations in Interwar Europe

This year the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki is the Cultural Capital of Europe. A century ago, it was known as Selanik, one of the most fascinating cities in the Ottoman Empire. Roughly half its 150,000 inhabitants then were Jews, as many as lived in the whole of France. In addition to Turks and Greeks, there were also Armenians, Bulgarians, Vlachs, Circassians, Albanians, and the secretive Dönmeh—the crypto-Jews who had followed Sabbatai Zevi, their false Messiah, into Islam in the late seventeenth century. Foreign visitors were astonished to find bootblacks and porters on the docks who spoke six or seven languages.

How did polyglot Selanik turn, in the span of a few generations, into a modern metropolis of the Greek nation-state, with a population of more than one million Greeks, virtually no Turks, and fewer than two thousand Jews? Its “liberation” by the Greek army in 1912 is only the beginning of the story. In fact, the city’s designation as the Cultural Capital is perhaps more fitting than the Eurocrats realized: the hellenization of Thessaloniki encapsulates the history of minorities in Europe in the first half of this century.

In 1943, while the young Wehrmacht lieutenant Kurt Waldheim was posted to the city, its large Jewish community was deported and exterminated within a few months at Auschwitz-Birkenau. But even before that point, Thessaloniki had turned into a predominantly Greek city. Nazi genocide was but the most extreme variant of the international experimentation in policy towards ethnic minorities that had begun with the disintegration of the

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Ottoman, Habsburg, and Romanov empires in the maelstrom of World War I.

Nothing contributed more to turning Selanik into Thessaloniki than the population exchanges that took place in the Balkans as the Ottoman Empire broke up. In 1919, under the Treaty of Neuilly, the Bulgarian inhabitants of the city and the surrounding region were “exchanged” with Greeks from Bulgaria. This was a striking innovation in terms of international policy, but the tens of thousands caught up in this supposedly voluntary transfer were small fry compared with the millions involved in the compulsory exchange of populations that took place between Greece and Turkey when fighting between them stopped a few years later. According to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, Muslim residents in Greece had to leave their homes and “return” to Turkey, while Orthodox Christians from Asia Minor were moved in the opposite direction. Hundreds of thousands of the latter settled in and around Thessaloniki, thus helping to “hellenize” Greek Macedonia.

Today, in the aftermath of the war in Bosnia with its ethnic cleansing and its massive enforced movements of population, the 1923 Greco-Turkish agreement has acquired new relevance. Its seeming tidiness appealed to some European policymakers then, and apparently still does today. But how successful was it? At the level of individual lives, it wrought—or acquiesced in—the destruction of centuries-old homes and communities; it transformed identities according to the logic of nationalism, turning Orthodox villagers from Anatolia, many of whom could not speak Greek, into Greeks, and Muslims from Crete, many of whom were the descendants of Islamized Christians, into Turks. It created a massive problem regarding the property these refugees left behind, which poisoned Greco-Turkish relations for several years. It also burdened governments in Athens and Ankara with the expense of resettling hundreds of thousands of refugees.

On the other hand, both the Greeks and the Turks saw the exchange as a means of bolstering their new nation-states and “homogenizing” the ethnic mix of their populations. More to the point, as far as international policymakers are concerned, relations between the two countries did improve over the next twenty years, before the Cyprus dispute poisoned them once more. Today, relations are perhaps as bad as they have ever been. Thus the jury
remains out on whether such transfers of population actually ease international tensions in the long run.

In the interwar years, however, the international community proved strikingly reluctant to draw on the Greco-Turkish population exchange as a precedent. It was not emulated until Munich and the start of Hitler’s own policy of repatriating the ethnic Germans from the South Tyrol, the Baltic states, and Bessarabia. Before that, in the heyday of Wilsonian liberalism, the minorities policy with which the League of Nations came to be associated, and which seems to me to remain an experiment of abiding interest, involved keeping minorities where they were and offering them the protection of international law, rather than uprooting and resettling them elsewhere.

The idea of protecting minorities by law emerged rather belatedly during World War I. The sudden collapse of the great empires of Central and Eastern Europe caught most policymakers by surprise. History seemed to have vindicated the dreamers of a “New Europe”—whether it was Wilson himself with his dangerously vague principle of national self-determination, crusaders for oppressed nationalities like Robert Seton-Watson and Arnold Toynbee, or national leaders such as Masaryk and Paderewski. But some liberals were also well aware that nationalism as a policy could open up a Pandora’s box of conflicts and tensions. Years before, Lord Acton had warned that “by making the State and the nation commensurate with each other in theory, [nationality] reduces practically to a subject condition all other nationalities that may be within the boundary.” “I do not myself believe,” noted Robert Cecil, in the British Foreign Office in 1917, “that a European peace founded only on nationality and without any other provisions is likely to be desirable or even in all respects beneficial.”

Similar doubts were forcefully expressed by Jewish lobbying groups in both Washington and London. Ever since the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, they had tried to alert the Great Powers to the dangers that “half-crazed nationalists” posed to ethnic minorities and international stability in southeastern Europe. During World War I, two national movements proved their point. The first was the Turkish attempt to wipe out the Armenians, which unfolded in all its horror in 1915 and led to the murder of between eight hundred thousand and 1.3 million people. This was perhaps
the first example of the “war of extermination” that the British scholar Arnold Toynbee saw as the result of the extension of the principle of nationalism to the multi-confessional tapestry of the Ottoman Empire.²

On the heels of the Armenian genocide came the struggle for Poland in 1918–1920. At Versailles, proponents of an ethnically pure Poland clashed with those who advocated a multiethnic commonwealth under Polish leadership. The problem for the former was that Poles lived alongside Germans, Jews, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians in the claimed territory; the problem for the latter was that multiethnic harmony was a rather ambitious goal for anyone in postwar Eastern Europe. By the end of 1918, Polish troops were battling for supremacy with the Ukrainians. They also carried out a series of pogroms that forced Jews to form self-defense units. Balfour worried that an independent Poland, “so far from promoting the cause of European peace, would be a perpetual occasion of European strife.” By mid-1919 Poland was only two-thirds Polish from an ethnic point of view. In the disputed city of L’viv someone pointed out the war damage to an American visitor: “You see those little holes? We call them here ‘Wilson’s Points.’ They have been made with machine guns; the big gaps have been made with hand grenades. We are now engaged in self-determination, and God knows what and when the end will be.”³

At the Paris Peace Conference, the struggle over the form of an independent Poland eventually brought into being an ambitious new international policy on minority rights. Behind the scenes, the influential New States Committee recognized the need for some such policy if ethnic civil war was not to spread through Eastern Europe and destabilize an area already under the shadow of Bolshevism. Despite bitter protests, the new Polish government was obliged to guarantee certain rights to its minorities as a condition of recognition: they included equality of treatment under the law and religious freedoms as well as rights to certain forms of collective organization in the educational and cultural spheres. The Polish Minorities Treaty was guaranteed by the League of Nations, which apparently meant that complaints could be brought to Geneva (though not directly by the minority concerned). In certain circumstances, the League’s Council could take action.
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The Polish Treaty took international law into uncharted waters. During the previous century, the Great Powers had often recognized new states dependent on a commitment to religious freedom and toleration; such had been the case, for example, in Belgium in 1830 and Romania in 1878. What was new in 1919 was the concern for “national” rather than exclusively religious rights, for collective rights rather than individual liberties, and the provision for international deliberation.

Poland provided the model for a whole series of minority rights treaties that the peacemakers in Paris drew up for Eastern Europe. Similar obligations were imposed on other newly-created states as well as on former belligerents like Hungary and older states like Romania and Greece, which acquired territory as a result of the war. The League of Nations came to stand for a system that, on the one hand, accepted the nation-state as the norm in international relations and, on the other, made a considered effort to tackle the minority issues that were thus created. It accepted (perhaps thereby sometimes encouraging the creation of) minorities as collective entities; their political weight and profile were increased through the annual meetings of the European Congress of Nationalities, which publicized their plight.

But the role of the League itself in this system was ambiguous. It was difficult to bring cases to the League’s attention, and even more difficult to push them through the Geneva machine and have them taken up by the Council. Although the League had the power to refer cases to the Permanent Court of Justice in The Hague, it rarely acted on it. On the other hand, it jealously guarded this power and blocked proposals to allow minorities to appeal to the Court directly. The League Secretariat did not see itself as a “champion of minorities” but more modestly as an interlocutor helping governments carry out their own obligations. The League also had few sanctions against egregious offenders. Thus the notoriously repressive behavior of Yugoslav gendarmes in Macedonia went unchecked, as did the Polish government’s bloody “pacification campaign” against the Ukrainians in 1930.

Polish or Serbian intolerance did not much bother the French, who were more concerned about the stability of their Eastern European allies than about minorities. Nor, increasingly, did it bother the British, who believed the minorities treaties were hin-
dering the process of assimilation. “More harm would in the end be done by unnecessary interference than, even at the risk of a little local suffering, to allow these minorities to settle down under their present masters,” wrote a Foreign Office official in London in 1922. “So long as these people imagine that their grievances can be aired before the League of Nations they will refuse to settle down and the present effervescence will continue indefinitely.”

Yet despite such indifference from the League’s main sponsors, some groups pushed for more of an activist stance. Under the diplomacy of Gustav Stresemann, Weimar Germany entered the League and began to assume the role of the “defender of minorities” with an eye to the millions of ethnic Germans scattered across Eastern Europe. German and Jewish groups spearheaded the lobbying of the European Congress of Nationalities, while Stresemann identified himself closely with the cause of reforming the Geneva machinery by creating a permanent minority rights commission. His efforts had limited results, partly because they were suspected to form part of a more general effort to revise the Versailles settlement. Stresemann merely managed to convince German nationalists at home that the League would never adequately protect ethnic Germans abroad.

At the same time, the minorities treaties were bitterly resented as a humiliation by the countries concerned. They were particularly irritated by the fact that there was no universal minority-rights regime; they wondered why they had been singled out when no such obligations had been imposed on Germany or on Italy when it persecuted the German-speaking minority in the South Tyrol.

It is true that of the approximately thirty-five million estimated minority inhabitants in interwar Europe, only some 8.6 million lived in Western Europe (roughly one in twenty of the total population) whereas about twenty-five million lived in Central and Eastern Europe (one in four). Thus the minorities question was numerically far more important in the East. Even so, the lack of a universal regime was an embarrassment for the Great Powers.

Such an idea had in fact been considered in 1919 in Paris, only to be rejected. As James Headlam-Morley, one of the key figures behind the minorities guarantees, noted at the time, fundamental issues of state sovereignty were at stake:
At first there was, so far as I recollect, a proposal that there should be inserted in the League of Nations some general clause giving the League of Nations the right to protect minorities in all countries which were members of the League. This I always most strongly opposed. . . for it would have involved the right to interfere in the internal constitution of every country in the world. As I pointed out, it would give the League of Nations the right to protect the Chinese in Liverpool, the Roman Catholics in France, the French in Canada, quite apart from the more serious problems, such as the Irish. This point of view was, I think, not seriously opposed by any except the unofficial bodies who wished the League of Nations to be a sort of super-state with a general right of guarding democracy and freedom throughout the world. . . . My own view was that any right given to the League of Nations must be quite definite and specific, and based on special treaties entered into because of definite exceptional cases, and that such a right could only be recognized in the case of a new or immature state of Eastern Europe or Western Asia. Even if the denial of such a right elsewhere might lead to injustice and oppression, that was better than to allow anything which would mean the negation of the sovereignty of every state in the world.7

Thus the Great Powers were happy to interfere in the internal affairs of "new" states but allowed no meddling in their own affairs. This supremely paternalistic stance assumed that "civilized" states such as those in Western Europe had evolved procedures to facilitate the assimilation of minorities that did not yet exist in "immature states." That view was, to some extent, true: it was easier for Welsh or Catalan children to make careers in the professions or the civil service than it was, say, for Ukrainians in Poland or Hungarians in Romania, where hatreds were more recent. Breton children might suffer at school, but they did not have their homes and villages burned down. The minorities treaties were a way of educating less civilized nations in international deportment.

But the underlying premise was that assimilation into the civilized life of the nation was possible and desirable. As a Brazilian delegate put it in Geneva in 1925, the goal of the treaties was not to perpetuate a state of affairs in which certain groups in society saw themselves as "constantly alien," but, rather, to establish the conditions for "a complete national unity."8

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After 1933, however, the “assimilation thesis” (as it was dubbed by opponents) was spectacularly refuted with the rise of the Third Reich. Ethnic nationalism as practiced in Warsaw or Bucharest had limited scope for assimilation; racial nationalism of the kind that spread across Central and Eastern Europe in the 1930s allowed none. The rise of institutionalized anti-Semitism in Hitler’s Germany therefore undermined the whole basis of the League’s approach to minorities. A supposedly “civilized” state was rejecting the assimilationist idea in the most sweeping fashion possible. In October of 1933, Nazi Germany left the League. A year later, the Polish premier, Colonel Beck, drove another nail into the League’s coffin when he denounced Poland’s minority-rights obligations “pending the introduction of a general and uniform system for the protection of minorities.” The number of minority petitions received at Geneva fell sharply from 204 in 1930 to fifteen in 1936. This drop can be taken as a barometer of the waning confidence felt by European minorities in the value of the League.9

Let us not, however, be too hasty in writing off the League’s minority system altogether. In the first place, it did notch up a few successes that offered valuable lessons for the future and showed what was possible with astute and far-sighted government. If these today have been forgotten, it is perhaps only because they were too peaceful for the history books. The Aaland islands dispute between Sweden and Finland, for instance, was resolved quietly in 1921: the islands remained Finnish, but the Swedish islanders were granted a high degree of administrative autonomy. This compact formed the basis of a solution that removed a major source of tension between the two countries.

The Estonian government took the remarkable step of granting cultural autonomy to its “national minorities”; the Latvians did not go quite this far but did offer some concessions in education. These, to be sure, were exceptions. More usually, as in the Lithuanian and Polish cases, promises made were not kept. The number of Ukrainian schools in Poland, for instance, dropped from 3,662 to 144 in the interwar period. Too often, numerus clausus clauses kept minorities out of universities and the civil service.10

Those who condemn the League’s minorities system might also ponder the alternatives. Nation-states were a reality, not merely a creation of wartime Great Power diplomacy. The conversion of
the Ottoman Empire into a Turkish national state, for instance, could hardly be attributed to forces outside the country; Mustafa Kemal made the running there, not Lloyd George. And as the Turkish example demonstrates, there were several other ways of treating minorities. “First we kill the Armenians, then the Greeks, then the Kurds,” a Turkish gendarme told a Danish Red Cross nurse in July 1915 as the war accelerated the Turkification of the Ottoman Empire. Even friendly German observers concluded that, beyond the professed concern for military security in border areas, the Turks aimed for “the planned extermination of the Armenian people.” Later this would be termed “genocide” and, later still, “ethnic cleansing.” Neither mass murder nor population transfer offered a way of solving Eastern Europe’s ethnic problems that was acceptable to liberal opinion.11

If proof was needed of the horrors such alternatives held in store, it was provided by Hitler’s use of both mass murder and population transfer in his own effort to construct an anti-liberal new order in Europe. The “final solution of the Jewish question” formed part of this thoroughgoing Nazi attempt to redraw the racial map of the continent. A policy based on international law and state sovereignty was replaced by one that repudiated the very foundations of both: Nazi legal theorists attacked Geneva’s “juridification” of international relations and its pathetic belief in a “common rule of law” applicable to peoples of differing racial worth.12

The Third Reich proposed to replace international law with a doctrine that legitimized German intervention in the internal affairs of other states on behalf of ethnic Germans abroad. The state, after all, was merely the expression of the racial Volk. “Blood is stronger than a passport,” wrote a prominent pan-Germanist in 1937.13 The German minorities in Eastern Europe were “racial comrades” of Reich Germans. They could be protected through invasion—as in Austria and the Sudetenland—or through the “trustee rights” that Germany acquired in its Danubian client states in the second Vienna accord of August 1940. German commentators hailed this last step as a vast improvement on the old League system of minority protection. These “laws for the protection of the folk-group” gave the “mother country” the right to intervene directly with the host government on behalf of the minority. They
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turned the entire “folk-group” into a collective legal entity. Such legislation looked a lot more attractive at the height of German power than it did a mere four years later. By 1945 collective justice had been turned on its head, as millions of ethnic Germans were expelled westwards.

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During the war itself, the League’s record towards minorities came under scrutiny. Had its policy of protection by treaty been too ambitious or not ambitious enough? Had it failed because the machinery was unworkable or because the political will to operate it was absent? As plans emerged to replace the League with a successor organization, these questions could not be shirked. The racial basis of Nazi jurisprudence and Germany’s abandonment of the accepted principles of international law had been regarded since the late 1930s as among the principal causes of the breakdown of order in Europe. Nazi aggression had undermined the very existence of an “international community.” At the same time, Nazi treatment of the Jews persuaded many people that if the individual was to be protected against the state, the traditional doctrine of state sovereignty in domestic affairs would have to be reconsidered. A revival and reinvigoration of international law thus emerged as the natural adjunct to liberal concern for world peace and, in particular, for the safeguarding of human rights.  

“Effective international organization is not possible,” wrote Quincy Wright in 1943, “unless it protects basic human rights against encroachments by national States.” Wright observed that unlike Poland or Czechoslovakia, Germany had not been obliged to conclude a minorities treaty with the League of Nations, with the result that “there was no formal ground on which the League of Nations could protest against the beginning of the persecutions in Germany. It was a general principle that a State was free to persecute its own nationals in its own territory as it saw fit.”

But the protection of human rights required the existence of a body superior to the state to which the individual could have recourse. The Austrian jurist Hans Kelsen insisted that “a right consists only in the legal possibility to invoke a court. . . . [International law] can confer rights on individuals only under the condi-
tion that individuals have direct access to an international court.” His colleague Hersch Lauterpacht warned that the international protection of human rights “touching as it does intimately upon the relations of the State and the individual...implies a more drastic interference with the sovereignty of the State than the renunciation of war.” But in his aptly-named *Peace through Law*, Kelsen argued that only people who believed in a “theology of the State” refused to recognize the need for all states to be bound by international law. Sovereignty was simply a red herring. “We can derive from the concept of sovereignty,” he went on, “nothing else than what we have purposely put into its definition.”

The limits of sovereignty, then, reflected political rather than jurisprudential or philosophical considerations. But who was going to make states acknowledge the supremacy of international law? Liberal thought in the interwar period had reposed its confidence in the pressure of world public opinion to safeguard human rights. It was obvious that a more effective instrument of enforcement would be required in the postwar period. What complicated matters was the Allies’ commitment, as enshrined in the Atlantic Charter, to respect traditional ideas of state sovereignty. The postwar state, in other words, was being asked in some measure to acquiesce in its own weakening. Experienced lawyers like Kelsen and Lauterpacht saw no other realistic way to persuade individual states to make their international obligations a part of domestic law. The alternative was to push for some form of world state, but this they regarded as utopian.

At the heart of this debate was the question of whether the human rights to be enshrined in the new postwar order should be individual or collective. This was where the post-1945 order would deviate most sharply from Geneva’s approach. The League of Nations had chosen the latter in its system of protection for ethnic minorities in Eastern Europe. The war had done little to diminish the gravity of the problem of ethnic strife. Indeed, Raphael Lemkin coined the term “genocide” in his 1944 study of *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, and called for the development of “adequate machinery for the international protection of national and ethnic groups against extermination attempts and oppression in time of peace.”
Yet despite the obvious importance of safeguarding minorities, strong arguments were advanced in favor of demolishing rather than improving the collective-rights approach pioneered by the League. President Beneš and the Czech government in exile denounced the League system on the grounds that experience had shown that it had actually jeopardized their national security. "Every protected minority will ultimately find its Henlein," warned one observer. In addition, the states of Eastern Europe resented the fact that they had been singled out for special obligations towards their minorities, whereas the Great Powers, including Italy and Germany, had not had to suffer such an indignity. "In the end," wrote Beneš in 1942, "things came to such an extraordinary pass that the totalitarian and dictator states—Germany, Hungary, and Italy—persecuted the minorities in their own territories and at the same time posed as the protectors of minorities in states which were really democratic." Rather than attempting to restore the League system, Beneš suggested that the postwar approach to minorities should be based upon "the defense of human democratic rights and not of national rights."18

In addition to this opposition from Eastern Europe, the major Allied powers—Britain, France, and the United States—also showed little enthusiasm for reviving a system that had succeeded in internationalizing the most serious source of tension in Europe without finding adequate means of resolution. As the postwar settlement in Europe would show, the main interest of the major powers was in limiting their obligations to minor states; this meant that they too were happy to bury the League’s approach to collective rights. The result was that the UN’s eventual commitment to individual human rights was as much an expression of passivity as of resolve by the Allies. It was a means of avoiding problems, not of solving them. This fact helps us understand why so few of the wartime hopes for a reinvigoration of international law were to be realized.

Behind the rhetoric, the UN’s commitment to minority rights was as weak as its overall position in power politics. In terms of the protection of minorities, the UN Charter represented a definite step backwards from the League. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 underlined the new status of the individual in international law and revealed a lasting mistrust of the Nazi doctrine of state supremacy, but it contained no provisions for
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enforcement. Minorities were scarcely mentioned, and their study was confined to an obscure Sub-Commission of the Human Rights Committee. A UN Secretariat study of 1950, which provided a sharp distinction between the League's outmoded approach and the new "general and universal protection of human rights," has been described by one commentator as "disastrous for the international protection of minorities."\(^{19}\)

More far-reaching in its implications was the 1948 Genocide Convention—passed after a remarkable one-man crusade by Raphael Lemkin, who had been disappointed at the refusal of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg to judge acts committed by the Nazis before 1939. Lemkin and others had seen the war-crimes trials as an opportunity to secure world peace by increasing the powers under international law to take action against individuals as well as states. The Genocide Convention added an important new crime to those recognized under international law and imposed obligations upon ratifying states to act to prevent or punish its commission. But the convention's potential has been ignored by the international community, and there has been little evidence to back the UN's confident assertion that "the feeling will grow in world society that by protecting the national, racial, religious and ethnic groups everywhere in the world we will be protecting ourselves." Over four decades, a series of genocides went unpunished outside Europe; in 1992 that indifference extended to Europe itself.\(^{20}\)

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During the Cold War, Europe's minorities problems—already much reduced by the dramatic shifts of populations that took place in the 1940s—were simply put into a deep freeze. On each side of the Iron Curtain, potentially destabilizing disputes were managed bilaterally, under the gaze of the presiding superpower. Neither Austro-Italian differences over the South Tyrol nor Hungarian-Romanian disputes over Transylvania were allowed to jeopardize bloc cohesion. The German problem was no longer one of minorities—as it had been between the wars—but rather of a divided country. The brutal stability the Cold War brought to Europe disguised the fact that the international regime on minority rights
had regressed rather than advanced after the interwar years. In the 1990s, as the international response to the outbreak of war in Yugoslavia showed, thinking on minority rights had to start from scratch again.

There is a striking contrast between the ambition and confidence of international policy in the 1920s and the uncertain, reactive style of the 1990s. Population transfer along the lines of the 1923 Greco-Turkish exchange may have appealed to some Western policymakers as they tried to manage the war in Bosnia, but none had the assurance to offer it explicitly as a solution. It remains instead one possible interpretation of that masterpiece of obfuscation, the Dayton peace accords.

As for a fully developed international regime of minority rights protection, the League’s effort must seem from today’s perspective the product of an almost unimaginably activist and idealistic political elite, confident of their right to reshape half a continent according to the tenets of Western liberalism. Their effort remains of interest as the most sustained attempt in Europe’s history to solve the dilemmas of nationalism through international law. But today the map looks very different. The two great minorities of 1918, the Germans and the Jews, have in different ways been eliminated; minorities also generally form a smaller proportion of national populations in Central and Eastern Europe today than before the war. At the same time, liberal confidence in history as an engine of ethnic assimilation has disappeared, perhaps for good.

The international community has grown in size and shrunk in resolve; emulating Geneva therefore seems unlikely. There may be some talk of rewarding Eastern European countries for good behavior, but when the Council of Europe admits Tudjman’s Croatia as a member, it is hard to take this very seriously. The breakup of Yugoslavia eventually impelled the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) to appoint a High Commissioner on National Minorities, and it accelerated the publication of the UN’s own belated “Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.” So far, however, these initiatives remain tentative; the League’s policies look forceful and coherent in comparison. Internationally as well as domestically, it seems as though history is more about forgetting the past than about learning from it.
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Let me conclude, then, with a paradigm of forgetting. The island of Ada Kaleh was the site of a Turkish fortress on the Danube just above the Iron Gates. It contained a mosque, a library, and a small village. When the Ottoman grip on the Balkans slackened in the nineteenth century, Ada Kaleh was overlooked. It was apparently forgotten by the diplomats at the Congress of Berlin and remained a curious Turkish anomaly, stranded midstream between the newly-created kingdoms of Serbia and Romania. In 1919 its three hundred Muslim inhabitants were handed over to Romania. Tourists used to row across from the mainland to view these “human curiosities,” drink their coffee, buy their figs and rose-water and Turkish delight, and peer inside the last remaining harem in Europe. At a time when Atatürk was creating a secular state in Turkey, these few islanders preserved the traditional Ottoman ways. Today one will search in vain on the map for Ada Kaleh. It lies beneath the waters of the Danube, sacrificed in the 1950s to the ambitious hydroelectric plans of Romania’s communist rulers. Is not Ada Kaleh just as appropriate a symbol of our manner of dealing with minorities this century as any of Europe’s Cultural Capitals?

ENDNOTES


2See especially Arnold Toynbee’s deliberately titled The Western Question in Greece and Turkey: A Study in the Contact of Civilizations (London: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1922).


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17Lemkin, Axis Rule in Occupied Europe, xiii.


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