The publication of E. Kyle Romero’s article in early 2023 is timely, coming exactly one century after the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. It deals with tragic events related to the forced displacement of civilian populations between the Ottoman Empire/Republic of Turkey and Greece in 1922–1923, which were sealed by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, and are known as the “exchange” of populations. This unprecedented set of events led to the forceful resettlement of over a million Ottoman Christians, mostly in Macedonia, and of hundreds of thousands of Muslim Greeks in Turkey. The “exchange,” as it was then known, was internationalized in 1923, with the institution of the Refugee Settlement Commission. The reason why this article, and works in the recent historiography, do not adopt the term “exchange” is that violence against civilians forced them to flee: there was nothing peaceful, voluntary, or agreed to in these events. Importantly, before 1923 the flight took place without the control of or management by international humanitarian institutions operating in Greece or in various Ottoman lands. The involvement of these organizations became relevant only in 1923, when almost a million destitute Ottoman Christians had already reached the shores of Greek islands or the Greek mainland. It is always worth mentioning that the exact number of those who died is to this day unknown.1

The Greek occupation of areas of Asia Minor and Anatolia in the aftermath of the First World War triggered the movement of populations, though it should not be forgotten that the Armenian genocide had already

1 Antonis Klapsis, “Violent Uprooting and Forced Migration: A Demographic Analysis of the Greek Populations of Asia Minor, Pontus and Eastern Thrace,” Middle Eastern Studies, 50:4 (2014), 622–639. The historiography is sufficiently clear when it comes to the Ottoman Christians who, in a way or in other, managed to reach Greece. There is consensus that this figure oscillated between 800,000 and a 1.3 million individuals. Things are more complicated when it comes to the figures of these survivors, and their—sometime numerous—movements. On the contrary, when it comes to those who perished, the historiography is influenced by contemporary writings massively produced by advocates and other activists from 1919 to 1925 or by eye-witnesses. The latter were generally Westerners. They produced a relatively extensive literature, whose figure are debatable. With the exception of Klapsis and other studies, mostly in Greek, it is hard to find list of civilians that died in their attempt to flee. The war considerably altered the demography of Asia Minor, Pontus and Eastern Thrace. An interesting recent publication is: The Genocide of the Christian Populations in the Ottoman Empire and Its Aftermath (1908-1923), Taner Akçam, Theodosios Kyriakidis and Kyriakos Chatzikyriakidis (London: Routledge, 2023).
generated a massive movement of civilian population. The war Greece waged against the Ottoman Empire started in May 1919 and was characterized by repressions, reprisals, and vendettas, enhanced by the resistance of Turkish nationalists. The victims of this war were civilian populations, Muslim and Christians alike. During the summer of 1922, the violence by and against the Greek occupiers increased, as did the violence against Orthodox, Armenian, and, to a lesser extent, Catholic Ottoman Christians. The flight of civilians drastically increased in the summer of 1922, when it was clear that the Greek military occupation would not last long. The occupation by Turkish nationalist forces of Izmir (Smyrna) in the summer of 1922 accelerated and tragically amplified this movement. The burning of that city pushed hundreds of thousands Christian civilians to flee. Some Eastern Thrace Ottoman Christians had enough time to bring along mules, carts, and some belongings; in many circumstances they abandoned everything. Muslim Greeks were forced to move after the peace the warring parties signed in Lausanne.

Romero examines these events from a specific perspective, that of the Near East Relief (hereafter NER), one of the major private humanitarian associations of post-World War I, the predecessors of today’s non-governmental organizations (NGOs). According to Romero, NER “came to serve as a sponsor and facilitator of this expulsion” (112). His article is clear and consistent, mostly based on the NER sources that are scattered in various repositories, libraries, and archives in the United States. The article takes into account recent and more classic literature on the history and politics of Western humanitarianism, specifically in the Near and Middle East. According to the author, NER, Western diplomats on the spot, and the League of Nations, alongside the governments of Turkey and Greece, “managed”—a term that appears in Romero’s title—these refugees. All of these actors were persuaded that the “exchange” was the right humanitarian policy to enforce. Romero’s original contribution to our knowledge of these events expands on the reasons why international institutions, NER in particular, thought that the “exchange” was a humanitarian decision.

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5 See footnote 3.

A note on terminology is needed here. To begin, “refugees” deserves some attention. Those expelled were promised, and eventually acquired, citizenship in the aftermath of displacement, as a way to ensure they could not return home. Technically speaking, they were not refugees: they were ex-post repatriated civilians. We know that they were not Greek or Turkish nationals, and most of them had never set foot in their alleged “fatherlands.” Many of them did not speak Greek or Turkish. Additionally, it should be noted that Romero uses the term “Eastern Mediterranean” to avoid using denaturalizing “Orientalist conceptions of the Middle East as a confined and distinct region” (112, footnote 1). I note, however, that the protagonists of his story in the NER were Orientalists, and referred to this region not as Eastern Mediterranean but as the Near East (or Proche Orient), a colonially connected and loaded term which is geographically and geopolitically vague.

Romero’s article efficiently summarizes the institutional history of the NER. He explains how the merging of successive associations brought together US missionaries and secular relief workers who did not necessarily share the same ideas and vision of what their humanitarian mission should entail. The women and men working or volunteering for the NER shared at least one thing: the burden of their ‘civilizing mission.’ They envisioned a specific future for the Near East. They would “enlighten” Ottoman lands using Christian minorities as their spearheads. Romero notes the importance of the terms “rehabilitation” and “reconstruction” (123, 124, and 125), which I also think is absolutely crucial to understand the meaning and the purpose of a humanitarian action that was never designed to be short-term or ephemeral. The ambition of the NER—and of the vast majority of humanitarian actors who were present in the Near East before and after 1918—was to construct upon a tabula rasa. This was “development”—an anachronistic term back in the 1920s—designed by wannabe demiurges who aimed at providing much more than a bed for the night to few protected individuals. Constructing and developing a new Near East according to American values, principles, and scientific administration should have turned this troubled—and “barbarous”—region of the world into a prosperous—as well as eternally grateful and indebted—place.

For many Americans, the Near East of 1918 was similar to post-Civil War American South. And some of them, philanthropists and missionaries, had this evocative imaginary in mind (121). They turned to allegedly successful late-nineteenth century reconstruction policies and politics as a precedent. For the NER, the spearhead of re-construction were children, Ottoman Christian orphans in particular. It was through them, and their education, that the US humanitarians of NER wanted to implement agricultural, public health, and industrial programs, whose blueprint had been experimented in further allegedly “un-developed” contexts.

In the title of Romero’s article, the term “nations on the move” refers to a pre-nation-state idea of the nation. This is a good way to refer to Ottoman Christian communities. On the contrary, I did not find the term “refugee management” persuasive. I am not claiming that management was unimportant. In fact, it was part and parcel of NER activities. However, it was not the ultimate objective of the NER. The organization’s ambitions were higher and bigger than just “managing” refugees. Moreover, when it comes to management of displaced civilians, the NER had failed a number of times before 1922.8 The article might have expanded on the reasons why the NER stopped its provisioning of adult relief and the management of adult refugee camps

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in 1920–21. Romero could have explained more clearly that these activities were too expensive, and that the NER could not afford them, or that the organization was utterly unprepared for the long-term “management” of displaced civilians. Some of the documents from the American Relief Administration mission in the Caucasus show several cases of NER mismanagement. These previous experiences might have explained, partially at least, some of the decisions the organization would take in 1922–1923.

Romero convincingly explains the many reasons why the NER preferred managing orphans and orphanages. First, within the ranks of the organization, many missionaries and secular workers had an expertise in this field. Second, the number of orphans was “manageable;” since children stopped being children in their early teens, the organization’s responsibility was engaged for a precise number of years and for a relatively precise number of children. Third, the NER’s constituency and donors in the US were interested in the fate of the Ottoman Christian minorities who had been mistreated by the Turks, a theme that they repeatedly hammered home by the organization’s propaganda. Orphans and orphanages guaranteed successful fund-raising campaigns essential for carrying on with humanitarian aid. The daily management was politically and symbolically less important than the social engineering project attached to these children. The latter were invested with the mission of transforming (civilizing) the Near East. With few exceptions, the NER did not operate on behalf of Muslim children, a point that goes unnoticed in Romero’s article, which reveals the consistency of the organization’s choices since late 1922.

Romero explains that in the period from 1918 to 2020, the NER believed it possible to reincorporate Christians into Ottoman society, to normalize socioeconomic structures, with Christian orphans acting as the spearhead of such transformation. These ideas prevailed as long as the political project of an Ottoman Empire under American or Western tutelage was kept alive. With the looming defeat of Greece in 1922, the NER realized it could not continue their work within Turkey itself. However, its leaders wanted to keep serving on behalf of Christian minorities, especially the Armenians, who they considered as “their” communities. They decided, therefore, to shift to supporting and “managing” the forced expulsions of Ottoman Christian minorities. It was a sub-optimal decision, but it gave new opportunities to show the organization’s authority and legitimacy. Romero is thus correct to argue that controlling and governing the lives of forcefully displaced individuals and community became the goal of NER, when the organization realized that there was no future for Christian communities in the new Turkish Republic.

Romero expands on the US aid efforts that preceded and followed the fire of Izmir, which he defines as a turning point. The victory of Turkish nationalists meant the end of Christian minorities in the new Republic. This was something any informed US citizen living in the region was aware of. This complete change of circumstances meant that policies had to change: humanitarian aid would be purposeless since the recipients of such aid would be forced to move away from their homeland. The NER, more readily than the American Red Cross, accepted the idea of a “new” Near East created upon allegedly homogenous ethno-religious communities, an idea that worked better in Greece than elsewhere in the region. The idea of Christian orphans being the spearhead of civilization within a reformed empire was easily replaced by actively contributing to the settlement of “nations on the move” (112). That was the specific, humanitarian, contribution of NER to peace. The ideological convergence with the League of Nations was spontaneous and natural; it was simply a matter of dividing the labor. NER could help with logistics, transportation, setting up some camps, orphanages, and clinics. Romero is also right when he claims that the political visions of NER,

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9 As I explain in *Night on Earth* this happened in Transcaucasia and Cilicia in 1921, in Asia Minor, Syria and Lebanon in 1922. As Romero explains the NER changed its modus operandi and the very nature of its operations in 1923.

the American Red Cross, and the League of Nations were largely compatible, and that conflicts which arose over the years were not “ideological, but technical, focusing on bureaucratic disagreements” (118-119).

The malleability of NER ideology should not surprise historians. International associations—and NGOs today—often lack the creative imagination that is necessary to imagine a world vision. Most NER workers were white, educated, elites who imagined a world of “civilized” and dominant nation-states; they believed in the myth of national homogeneity. Most of them were nationalists, who were persuaded of the inferiority and barbarity of Muslims and looked down with racist contempt on Greek and other Balkan populations. They were certain they could educate (and civilize) local Near Eastern societies. NER personnel were not frightened to take on governmental duties. They thought they could perform much better than the Turks and the Greeks. They claimed to know what was good and right for Ottoman Christian minorities under their responsibility. NER secular personnel were humanitarians as well as arrogant imperialists. Some of them came to the Near East bringing with them colonial experiences in US occupied Philippines. Others came with racist experience in educational programs set up on behalf of African-Americans in the American South or with ‘industrial schools’ set up for autochthonous populations of North America. The Near East was the perfect laboratory where to repeat these experiences, where sovereignty deficits offered an opportunity to administer (in the sense that President Herbert Hoover gave to this verb) or govern the lives of foreigners.

The final pages of Romero’s article are devoted to the clashes between NER and the American Red Cross. His work is granular and precise, though one does not get a sense of the magnitude and significance of NER operations, from transportation to clinics, from orphanages to food-aid. Selecting a few meaningful examples might have been useful to portray the NER “management” at work. My impression is that after 1923, at least in Greece, the NER became one actor among many, dwarfed by the gigantic American Red Cross humanitarian operation. By 1925, NER’s humanitarian work dwindled, and the size of the organization shrank. Many NER collaborating organizations, such as the American Women’s’ Hospitals, carried on their work autonomously; the vast majority of missionaries resigned from the NER by early 1924 and accepted work with other missionary societies. The NER was not particularly successful with its schools. It ran some educational/agricultural schools in Macedonia and, for a few years, other schools in Athens as well as orphanages, such as the one in the island of Syra.

Additionally, the “exchange” of populations was neither controlled nor managed by the League of Nations or by NER; it unfolded before them. On this point, Romero might have expanded his argument further, since the role of the Greek and Turkish governments is overlooked in the article, and the agency of ‘exchanged’ civilians, Muslims and Christian, is not dealt with.

Romero concludes his article with this line: “Near East Relief’s actions had indeed transformed the demographic makeup of the Eastern Mediterranean, but not in the way they had imagined” (138). This conclusion could have been nuanced. The Near East Relief modestly contributed to the transformation of the demographic makeup of the Eastern Mediterranean. It did not control or manage “nations on the move;” volens nolens it supported this epochal change. Romero is right: this was certainly very far away from the delusional plans the organization and its decision-makers had originally imagined.

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