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ENDURING MYTHS

The compulsory population exchange of 1923 was apt to spawn a variety of myths. Concerning its economic and social consequences for Greece, there are three interrelated and enduring myths, which seem destined to be reproduced in perpetuity. The first myth asserts that the Venizelists *chose* to settle the refugees in the periphery of Athens, Piraeus, Thessaloniki, Volos, and other urban centers with the crass purpose of winning elections. The second claims that the refugees contributed decisively to the industrial development or even “takeoff” of Greece. The third postulates that the refugees after 1930 turned to the Communist Party (KKE). These three myths are interrelated: settled around urban centers, the refugees provided cheap labor for industry and, as industrial workers, naturally gravitated to the KKE. As with all effective myths, there is a grain of truth here as well, but it is based only on a fraction of the urban refugees (i.e., those settled in towns). It ignores completely the other urban refugees and the rural refugee settlement. It obscures the single most important and indeed sweeping consequence of the population exchange for Greece: land reform and the country’s irrevocable transformation into a society of small proprietors in town and country. Although launched earlier, land reform became unstoppable and irreversible because of the population exchange. Constitutional protection of private property was effectively suspended and lands were essentially confiscated. The social revolution that many feared would come from the refugees was in fact made for them but without them.