Henry Morgenthau’s Voice in History

Author’s Note: This essay is based on a lecture I gave to the Euxeinos Club of Thessaloniki, Greece, in 2010, at an event honoring my great-grandfather, Henry Morgenthau, for his extraordinary service in Turkey and Greece during and post-World War I. The Euxeinos Club published an earlier version. I offer great thanks to Margaret Lavinia Anderson, Peter Balakian, David and Lucy Eisenberg, Helen Fox, Maria Hadjipavlou, Nicolas Jofre, Theodosios Kyriakidis, Deborah Lessor, Ellin London, David Lotto, Henry Morgenthau III, Rosemarie Morse, Judy Naumburg, Elaine Papoulas, Alan Stone, and Henry Steiner for comments, information, or encouragement. Of course, the narrative is mine, as is the responsibility. Correspondence should be addressed to me at The FXB Center, Harvard School of Public Health, 677 Huntington Ave., Boston, MA 02115. E-mail: psteiner@hsph.harvard.edu

ABSTRACT: Henry Morgenthau (1856-1946) distinguished himself as the U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, 1913-1916, and as the chairman of the League of Nations Refugee Settlement Commission (RSC) for Greece, 1923-24. I describe aspects of his early life that shaped the man he became, his accomplishments in these two posts, and his feelings about himself over time. At the end I briefly describe his attitude toward a possible Jewish state in Palestine.

I. AMBASSADOR HENRY MORGENTHAU’S VOICE IN HISTORY

Henry Morgenthau served as U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire (OE), 1913-1916, and as the chairman of the League of Nations’ Refugee Settlement Commission (RSC), for Greece, 1923-24. He is still considered a pivotal figure in both countries. In his first assignment, he became known for his efforts to save Armenian and Greek citizens of Turkey by pushing the boundaries of the usual behavior expected of an ambassador.

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The second assignment arose out of the need to resettle hundreds of thousands of ethnic Greek refugees forcibly returning to the homeland from Turkey. Morgenthau secured the necessary international loans, negotiated ownership of land on which the refugees could settle, and played a major role in supporting and guiding the Greek leaders to establish constitutional democracy.

There is as yet no critical biography of Ambassador Morgenthau to consult or be guided by. In this lecture, therefore, since I am a psychologist and not a biographer or historian, I relied primarily on Henry Morgenthau’s own accounts—Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story (2003 [originally published in 1918]), All in a Lifetime (1926), and I Was Sent to Athens (1929). I presumed that these publications expressed how he wished to be understood—as a man, as an American, as a Jew, as a public servant, and as a participant in and reporter of great events.

Nothing better characterizes Morgenthau than his own words in their directness, clarity, and insight. I say this with conviction because, although he died at 90 when I was very young and so hardly knew him, both his non-sectarian devotion to public service aiming at the good of all people and particularly the direct way he expressed himself, describe family traits recognizable through the generations to mine. To the extent that it can be separated from the personal characteristics I describe, the eloquence in the volumes is mostly the work of his excellent collaborators—on his ambassadorial experience, Burton J. Hendrick, and on the latter two, French Strother. In the period of his life covered in this essay, Morgenthau did not reflect on any of his problematic traits, which surely he must have had like us all. Whatever they were seemed to emerge in the public figure afterwards.

Development of Morgenthau’s Character:
Trust and Self-Confidence

Morgenthau’s persistent reporting of horrendous wrongs and his commitment to making a better, more democratic world can be understood as the result of his many outstanding personal attributes. His energy, stamina, and intellectual capacity were probably largely genetic in origin. But others that may well have been influenced by his family and upbringing—ambition, competitiveness, courage, humanitarianism, likeability, prudence, responsibility, determination, self-awareness, and self-discipline—even if in-born, were cultivated by him during his lifetime in response to ordinary and extraordinary challenges. This combination of attributes made the man, and produced a remarkable voice.
In the list of Morgenthau’s attributes I did not yet include the most fundamental: self-confidence and trust in life. From the moment of his birth in 1856 as the ninth of ultimately eleven children, he was loved, appreciated, and respected, especially by his mother. He returned her feelings. His admiration for her rested on the “beautiful spirit... my mother had early given me good ideals and a love of purity...[and] an irrepressible ambition...to try to attain a standard of thought and conduct consonant with (her) fine concepts”. At some point his relationship with his father soured, but not in his all important early years.

Morgenthau’s self-confidence and trust were further grounded in the secure, pleasant, even enchanting childhood in Mannheim, Germany. He wrote of those years:

...[t]hose were the days of idyllic simplicity ... the highest pleasure of children was netting butterflies in the sunny fields.... The recreation of elders was at little tables in the public gardens, where, while the band played good music and the youngsters romped from chair to chair, the women plied their knitting needles over endless cups of coffee, and the men smoked their pipes and\(^1\) sipped their beer and talked of art and philosophy—of everything in the world, except world politics and world war.... My father was prosperous... my mother... [had a] passion for the best in literature and music.\(^2\)

**Sudden Uprooting and His Development of Ambition, Prudence, and a Sense of Indebtedness to the Community**

In Mannheim, Morgenthau’s father, Lazarus, made comfortable living exporting German cigars to the United States. When a large tariff was unexpectedly imposed, Lazarus suddenly became poor. Feeling humiliated and without prospects, he decided to move his newly impoverished family to New York City. Thus, in 1866, the nine-year-old Morgenthau was uprooted and became an immigrant. From a home with servants, he now saw his mother doing the housework as well as taking in boarders to make ends meet. He became critical of his father who continued in New York to live above his reduced means. He held his father responsible for the family’s financial situation because he had not saved while in Mannheim.

Morgenthau later saw these events as shaping his own ambition to make enough money to enable his mother to live comfortably again. He believed that there was almost no hindrance in the United States to such ambitions despite his being a Jew. He became self-disciplined about spending and saving money. As an adult he was cautious about not trying to push his own financial success too far. In 1905, when his instincts foretold economic downturn in the United States, he took appropriate
action and lost little. He felt intense gratitude for the opportunities in the United States and believed therefore that he owed a debt to his country.

**Sources of Humanitarianism and Overall Self-Discipline**

Morgenthau, of course, did not make his name as a financier, although the experience, knowledge, connections, and wealth he acquired in that role enabled his development into a humanitarian. But it was primarily the circumstances under which the young Henry and his family left Germany for the United States that initially shaped his humanitarianism. Although incomparably less onerous than the losses experienced by Armenians and Greeks during the Great War and by most ethnic Greeks and ethnic Turks in 1923 in the “Population Exchange”, Morgenthau’s own sudden losses as a child—the uprooting from Mannheim and the marked downward shift in socio-economic status—taught him much: what it was like to make a sudden forced move from one country to another, what it was like to lose worldly goods, community, and place in the community, and what it was like to begin again. As he grew older he also became aware of the reality of and limits imposed by prejudice against those who are different, in his case anti-Semitism in Germany, and to a much lesser extent, in the U.S. Both his experience of loss and of prejudice help account for his unwavering commitment to protect Armenians, Greeks, and other Christians in Turkey and later to help settle those forced to move to Greece.

When the adolescent Morgenthau encountered people of different backgrounds, his mind opened alike to unconventional Jewish and non-Jewish influences. “Pursu[ing] a rather carefully ordered course....I formed the habit (mid-teens) of visiting churches of many denominations and making abstracts of the sermons that I heard ...”3 He found mentors with open and compassionate minds, two of particular note. The first, a boarder, was a hunchbacked Quaker doctor, who demonstrated kindness to less fortunate individuals, in spite of or perhaps because of his own suffering. Morgenthau wrote that he was “a beautiful character, softened instead of embittered by his affliction.... [He] gave half his time to charitable work among the poor. I frequently opened the door for his patients ...and we became friends. I remember his long, religious talks...”4

The other was Felix Adler, who would become the major figure in the development of “secularized Judaism” in New York’s Society for Ethical Culture5. Adler demonstrated what it meant to give service to a people rather than to individuals. Probably Morgenthau was also inspired by
how Adler “had voluntarily abandoned an honorable and care-free career...and undertaken the harassing and difficult task of satisfying the unexpressed yearnings of these people... discontented with the existing requirements of their religion and [who] ...hopelessly sought for moral guidance”\(^6\) Morgenthal retained his connection with Adler, in later years helping him establish New York City’s first Ethical Culture School.\(^7\) These people and experiences must have led the adolescent Morgenthal to formulate a set of ethical precepts, which he tested himself against:

I composed twenty-four rules of action, tabulating virtues that I wished to acquire and vices that I must avoid. I even made a chart of these maxims, and every night marked against myself whatever breaches of them I had been guilty of.... indulgence in sweets, departures from strict veracity, too much talking, extravagance, idleness, and vanity—a heavy indictment!... The fact is that I had acquired an almost monastic habit of mind and loved the conquest of my impulses...\(^8\)

**A Husband and Father of Four**

The “almost monastic habit of mind” gave way a decade later to uninhibited, blissful sensuality with his wife, Josephine, whom he married at age 26.\(^9\) Each of their four children was remarkable. The eldest, Helen, a magnificent gardener, founded The Herb Society of America and authored many books on garden design and history. Their second child was the one boy. Henry, Jr. served for eleven years as U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Secretary of the Treasury. Not of his father’s temperament, he was wise, however, in his willingness to manifest from a high position humanitarian concern that was no part of his job description. Long before the U.S. entered World War II, he early and alone in Roosevelt’s administration voiced urgency about the Nazi threat to the Jews. His view about how to prevent Germany from again becoming a threat to peace culminated in his proposal for the “pastoralization” of post-war Germany. The “Morgenthal Plan” went nowhere, but its brief, not dismissible history as a possible solution is fascinating and telling about the complexity of dealing with a powerful state that has committed such a crime against humanity.

His two youngest children were girls. My grandmother, Alma, became a fine singer, pianist, and painter—a “patroness of many of the arts”\(^10\). Music, her chief love, led her to found the Cos Cob (music) Press, the Locust Valley Musical Festivals, and to co-found the League of Composers, identifying and helping establish such figures as Aaron Copeland and Virgil Thompson (see discussion in *Cultivating Music in America*)\(^11\) and
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in Making Music Modern12) The youngest, Ruth, most fully reflected her father’s non-sectarian commitment to giving back to the community. She founded Fountain House, a home in New York City where schizophrenics, including men leaving jail, could restart their lives by learning to work at jobs, pay bills, and not live on the streets. The residence pioneered in providing psychological counseling. Fountain House still thrives and may deserve the credit some give to it of introducing and developing the idea and embodiment of community mental health. As a board member of the Manhattan School of Music, Ruth also established a fund to provide counseling for troubled music students. In Pound Ridge, New York, where she had a country home, she conserved her acres in perpetuity, began a summer theatre workshop for teens, an organization that also offered counseling for participants, co-founded a public library, and donated a baptismal font to a local church.

Inner Conflict: Success at Making Money versus Promoting Humanitarianism

Although Morgenthau’s formal education culminated in a law degree, he made his fortune in real estate development and finance. At mid-life he became aware of an inner conflict:

...My spirit was in a never-ceasing conflict with itself... between idealism and materialism. My boyish imagination had been fired with a vision of life of unselfish devotion to the welfare of others.... But the necessity of earning a living had early thrust me into the arena of business. Once there, I became absorbed in money-making. It challenged all my powers of brain and will to hold my own and forge ahead in the fierce competition of my fellows. I lived business, ate business, dreamed business.... [but my boyhood vision] asserted itself during business hours and again and again demanded opportunities to exercise itself...13

Eventually he resolved his conflict:

At fifty-five years of age, financially independent, and rich in experience ... [my conscience] ceaselessly confronted me with my duty to pay back, in the form of public service, the overdraft which I had been permitted to make upon the opportunities of this country....

...I [had] found...that I had a special gift for making money. By the time I had attained the competency which had been my ambition, I had become fascinated with money-making as a game. ... Like all my associates, [I] was deeply absorbed in the chase for wealth....

... In 1905 I foresaw the Panic of 1907; and, while others all around me plunged onward to the brink, I paused and ...began to sever my financial con-
nections. This process of slowing down my business pace gave me time for other introspection...I was ashamed to realize that I had neglected the nobler path of duty. I resolved to retire wholly from active business, and to devote the rest of my life to making good the better resolutions of my boyhood. 14

In her essay about her grandfather, the historian, Barbara W. Tuchman, my aunt, cites two other factors that helped Morgenthau resolve his inner conflict: “...Woodrow Wilson’s appearance on the political scene...and ... a doctor’s warning that a loud heart murmur left him not long to live (a prognosis happily wrong by thirty-five years”15

**Morgenthau Resists the Ambassadorial Appointment**

One of Morgenthau’s first steps in his “nobler path of duty”, his new career path to “repay the overdraft [made] upon the opportunities of this country”, was to support Woodrow Wilson as the Democratic Party’s candidate for the U.S. presidency. Morgenthau regarded him as “a practical reformer”. 16 Once elected, Wilson offered Morgenthau the ambassadorship to the Ottoman Empire and then found he needed months to persuade him to accept this position rather than another he had let it be known he would prefer. Because of its proximity to the Holy Land and Zionists, and therefore the opportunity to oversee the interest of Jews settling there, it was considered the “Jewish” post. Morgenthau hesitated because he agreed with his Jewish friends who told him that they were against Jews being limited to this post only.

It took some months before changing his mind and then enthusiastically taking up the ambassadorship in late 1913, nine months before the start of the Great War. As ambassador he was sometimes addressed by various officials as though he were representing only Jews. He let it be known that he represented all Americans. He would say, “I am not here as a Jew but as an American Ambassador. My country contains something more than 97,000,000 Christians and something less than 3,000,000 Jews. So at least in my ambassadorial capacity, I am 97 percent Christian”.17

Morgenthau’s account of his arrival in Constantinople, as the city was known until 1930 when it officially returned to the Turkish name “Istanbul” (in this essay I use “Constantinople”, the name Morgenthau used), reveals him as very successfully forging all the usual relationships and many more. He rapidly built what in conflict resolution community is called “working trust”18 with the large international community in Constantinople and with important Turks, official and unofficial. He often cited the American ideals of tolerance, decency, and opportunity for all peoples. He may have come across to some as an idealist, but like Wilson he believed that these ideals were as practical as they were humane.
The Ambassador Builds His Connections and Publicizes His Views

The Ottoman Empire had been known as “the sick man of Europe” for decades and was visibly at the end of its life when Morgenthau arrived. Once installed in its capital, Morgenthau’s close connections included Talaat Pasha and Enver Pasha who, together with Cemal Pasha (then ruling Palestine), were the three leading Young Turks of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the real governing body in Turkey, the Sultan being only nominal head of government. In a speech to an audience that included Talaat, in February, 1914, six months before the start of war, he later recalled, “I felt I could point out to them in my address, by indirection, the path along which they might lead Turkey to regeneration...”

This was a bold but also generous intervention at a time when Turkey might well have heeded the advice. For Morgenthau wrote that he believed the Young Turks had been sincere in the liberalism they stood for when they first took office in 1908. No doubt pleased with his metaphor, he quoted this speech in one of his books:

...being in Turkey I want to say that I have shown you the wonderful, national rug that we have produced in the United States. It was woven by the millions that inhabit our land, natives and foreigners, whites and blacks, people from the North, South, East, and West, men and women, and from materials produced in our own soil and imported from all countries...it makes a fine, harmonious whole...

Morgenthau was reflecting on a fledgling theme in American foreign policy, that American values, democracy, and the multicultural, multi-ethnic American experience were right for other peoples.

The U.S. entered the Great War only in 1916, after Morgenthau had resigned his ambassadorship. While ambassador, his country’s neutrality and great potential power were taken, respectively, as his attitude and his ability to influence, surely contributing to making him someone everyone talked to. By careful cultivation of these connections, he kept himself remarkably well informed. His frequent meetings with Talaat and Enver and other important figures enabled his recording his historically important impressions and conversations with them, thus providing significant documentation of their attitudes and actions regarding Armenians and other Christian minorities.

The Rubber Meets the Road

Most important was Morgenthau’s clarity that the CUP was trying to save their country and empire by eliminating the Armenians (and, history reveals, other Christian minorities). I noted above that Morgenthau
believed the Young Turks were initially sincere in their liberalism. But since 1908 circumstances had greatly changed and the CUP along with them and Morgenthau re-evaluated the nature of that sincerity:

Having lost their democratic aspirations, these men now supplemented them with a new national conception. ...They resurrected the idea of Pan-Turkism; in place of equal treatment of all Ottomans, they decided to establish a country exclusively for Turks. I have called this a new conception; yet it was new only to the individuals who then controlled the destiny of the empire, for, in reality, it was simply an attempt to revive the most barbaric ideas of their ancestors.... [The barbaric ideas] represented, as I have said [elsewhere in his memoir], merely an atavistic reversion to the original Turk. We now saw that the Turkish leaders, in talking about liberty, equality, fraternity, and constitutionalism, were merely children repeating phrases; that they had used the word “democracy” merely as a ladder to climb to power.23

He replaced his understanding of their sincerity by a different view, seeing it not as core belief, but as manipulation.

His view went further. He appears to have seen the Ottoman leaders in what today we might call essentialist terms, reverting rather than regressing to primitive, ancestral behavior—it is impossible to say for sure which.

After five hundred years’ close contact with European civilization, the Turk remained precisely the same individual as the one who had emerged from the steppes of Asia in the Middle Ages. He was clinging just as tenaciously as his ancestors to that conception of a state as consisting of a few master individuals whose right it is to enslave and plunder and maltreat any peoples whom they can subject to their military control.24

Morgenthau was not psychologically sophisticated in any formal way. I note that he wrote this condemnatory description two decades before the publication of Civilization and its Discontents (1930), Sigmund Freud’s similar essentialist view, but crucially different in its potential applicability to all of us. Below we will find that Morgenthau moves away from this essentialism, if that is what it was, adding another layer to his view of Turks and Turkish behavior when he demonstrates understanding of their post-war fears.

Shortly before war started, the CUP was persecuting the ethnic Greek minority of Turkey, forcing them to leave25. Morgenthau stepped outside his role to protect them. He persuaded the government to grant a temporary stay on the order that Greeks employed in Smyrna must leave the country. For those Greeks already being held for deportation without food or drink “with greatest brutality”, he was able to order “a boat to Prinkipo [Island] with barrels of water and boxes of crackers...”26
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As the Great War began, the CUP embarked upon planning, authorizing, enabling, and/or looking the other way when every wrong was carried out against its Armenian citizens. The first reports he received did not immediately convince Morgenthau that there was a systematic effort to rid Turkey of Armenians by any and all means.\(^{27}\) The CUP had intended to keep the crimes they had organized secret, but could not for long. Over months, Morgenthau became convinced by the corroborating eyewitness reports from consuls, missionaries, teachers, and medical people from the United States and elsewhere deployed throughout Turkey about how hundreds of thousands who were ordered out of their homes, many at gunpoint, often became immediate victims of massacres. He saw how those who were deported entered what for most became death marches. Records have taught that Armenian lands were never returned to their owners but became the farms of their former neighbors, that their personal property, promised to be returned, instead furnished Turkish homes, that their jewelry decorated other ladies’ throats, and that Armenians’ gold funded Turkish businesses.

It was for stepping outside the usual ambassadorial role regarding the Armenians’ fate that Morgenthau is most known. On different occasions he strongly protested to the CUP leaders and to the diplomatic community, in particular to the German diplomats who were the OE’s allies. He did this privately. But Morgenthau’s eventual public reporting went beyond the actions of the Ottomans. He was to make sure not only that Americans understood the horrors Armenians had gone through, but became aware of German complicity with the CUP’s anti-Armenian policy. If they did not already know, *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story* informed them that the Central Powers were led by a “turcophile” Kaiser.\(^{28}\) The mutually beneficial German-Ottoman connection was not new. The Kaiser’s focus on securing a “place in the sun”\(^{29}\) for Germany had led him to look the other way when the “Bloody Sultan” massacred Armenians in the 1890’s.

Of course the ambassador kept the U.S. State Department fully informed. Morgenthau’s “blistering”\(^{30}\) telegrams to State about the massacres were frequently cited, not only but especially in the U.S. They led to an ongoing humanitarian response. He took numerous other actions even further behind the scenes when he provided different forms of aid or protection to individuals and institutions. That he felt strongly and painfully about this wrong found again powerful expression in *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story*:

I have by no means told the most terrible details, for a complete narration of the sadistic orgies of which these Armenian men and women were the
victims can never be printed in an American publication. Whatever crimes
the most perverted instincts of the human mind can devise, and whatever
refinements of persecution and injustice the most debased imagination can
conceive, became the daily misfortunes of this devoted people. I am confi-
dent that the whole history of the human race contains no such horrible
episode as this. The great massacres and persecutions of the past seem
almost insignificant when compared with the sufferings of the Armenian
race in 1915.31

In protesting the crimes that the CUP committed, Morgenthau did not
lose the awareness that his country, still a neutral, feared pushing con-
cern about Armenians too far. Protest not backed by military force could
easily backfire and ignite even stronger anti-Armenian measures. Finally,
appalled, he decided the time had come when U.S. neutrality no longer
made sense. He decided to return home.

Leaving the Post and Speaking Out at Home
Morgenthau’s wife Josephine had never been an enthusiastic diplomatic
spouse. An independent person, she did not at the start accompany him to
Constantinople.32 She returned alone to the United States, before he did,
at least in part because she was so distressed by the apparently unstop-
pable massacres. At that very moment nearby Bulgaria was deciding with
whom to ally. On her return Josephine paid a visit to the country’s queen
to discuss the situation. Queen Eleanor was receptive, but no more suc-
cessful at influencing her own royal husband than the ambassador had
been with the Young Turks. Bulgaria soon joined “the Central Powers”—
Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire—
becoming another colluder in mass murder.

Morgenthau took a leave of absence from Constantinople in early
1916, shortly before the United States entered the war. At the dock, at the
very moment of disembarking in New York City, he received specific
instructions from Secretary of State Lansing not to speak publicly “in
view of the international situation”. Yet again he went out on a limb and
made a much publicized speech.33 Soon he tendered his resignation as
ambassador. His reasons included his “failure to stop the destruction of
the Armenians,”34 his wish to discuss the situation with President Wilson
in a way that he could not from abroad, and to raise money for Wilson’s
re-election.35 His commitment to Armenians continued from the United
States in various ways. In 1918 he published his Ambassador Morgenthau’s
Story, then widely hailed as one of the important books about World War
I. It still makes compelling reading.
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By now his own ambition had grown. If re-elected, he assumed that Wilson would put him forward for a different diplomatic role. With the exception of his important work in Greece for the League of Nations, his political ambitions thereafter were unrealized.

Whatever did or did not come next, Morgenthau had earned a place in history. His courageous, committed behavior when it counted was to engender a wide public awareness of one of the two crimes against humanity that Raphael Lemkin would, in 1944, label “genocide”36, the other of course being the Holocaust. At the same time, he is remembered for his courageous breaking of new ground for diplomats through his efforts to prevent the mass murder of innocents. Psychiatrist Robert Lifton, a writer on the psychology of war and mass violence, reflects on Ambassador Morgenthau’s voice:

Faced with the overwhelming evidence of the mass murder of Armenians by Ottoman Turks, Henry Morgenthau refused to remain a detached bystander. He chose instead to become a profoundly compassionate witness, to abandon diplomatic coolness, to open himself to grievous suffering, and to tell the story to his countrymen, and the rest of the world.37

II. MORGENTHAU AS CHAIRMAN OF THE REFUGEE SETTLEMENT COMMISSION (RSC) FOR GREECE

The Spoils of War?
The Great War’s Allies, without the United States—primarily Britain, France, Italy, Japan, Russia, and Serbia—had persuaded Greece to fight with them against the Central Powers by promising them Ottoman territory. The Treaty of Versailles concluded hostilities on the western front only. The Sevres Treaty of 1920 was meant to deal with the eastern front. Sevres was imposed by the Allies on the OE, as was the Versailles Treaty on Germany. Initially, the Ottomans accepted the treaty and the Sultan signed it. But it fatefuly divided Greeks. To the followers of the legendary Eletherios Venizelos, who before then, at that moment, and often thereafter, served as prime minister of Greece, the treaty was regarded as a triumph as it integrated eastern Thrace, the islands Imvros and Tenedos, legitimized a Greek presence in Asia Minor, and promised to include most Dodecanese Islands. But to Greeks led by King Constantine, the treaty represented a betrayal by the Allies of promises for other lands. Venizelos may have desired more, but he did not push for it at this time.

The view of King Constantine and his followers won out. Shortly after negotiations concluded on the Sevres Treaty, Venizelos was voted out of
office. Greece did not ratify the treaty. Now a debacle for Greece, already in the making, was fully realized, with the different players acting out of different motives. The year before, the United States, Britain, and France had authorized King Constantine to invade Smyrna on the Aegean coast of Turkey. The proclaimed aim was to maintain order in the region and protect the Christian population until the peace was finally achieved.

The historical record reveals additional motives. The British and French were using the Greek army to pursue their own territorial interests while King Constantine, despite promises made during the election to withdraw the army from Turkey, nevertheless stayed on attempting to reach ever deeper into Turkey in pursuit of his “Megali Idea.” This idea, which would restore the Byzantine Empire, originated in 1844 after some twenty years after Greece freed itself from the Ottomans in the 1820’s. Constantine’s specific irredentist aim was to recover as part of Greece all Ottoman lands that were still inhabited by Greeks.

The Turkish military hero and now politician, Mustapha Kemal Atatürk, was unwilling to see his country submit to the Megali aim or to live with the occupation and partition of Turkey by the other Allies. Once more Commander in Chief of the Turkish forces, he mobilized his troops to repel the Greek forces and other occupiers and save the homeland from partition as decreed by the treaty. This was the start of Turkey’s War of Independence from the Allies, in which 100,000 Armenians and Greeks perished in the Smyrna fire, widely believed to have been started by Turkish soldiers.

The Population Exchange and Refugee Crisis: Morgenthau’s New Job

This war succeeded in nullifying the Treaty, retiring the Greeks and the Ottomans, and replacing the latter with the secular Turkish republic. The death of the Sevres Treaty meant that Great Britain, France, Greece, Italy, and Turkey were forced to re-engage in what were intense, extremely difficult negotiations resulting in the Lausanne Treaty of 1923. Lausanne decreed the compulsory, often bloody “Population Exchange.” It specified that well over a million ethnic Greek Orthodox still living in different parts of Anatolia were to leave for the Greek mainland, while some 400,000 ethnic Turks living in Greek Macedonia were to move to Anatolia.38 The signing of Lausanne also brought international recognition of the new Republic of Turkey.

For both population sets, the “Population Exchange” continued the expulsions, losses, and miseries of preceding years. The ordinary Turk had also suffered in the Great War. Although Lausanne spoke of approxi-
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Ultimately one million Greeks then living in Turkey, only 200,000 reached Greece after 1923. The majority had already fled, and the others burned or drowned. While both Venizelos and Ataturk pushed to achieve it, neither of the peoples who had to make the move had sought the changes. Thus, both the ethnic Greeks and ethnic Turks had to move under the Population Exchange—crossing the same sea, going in opposite directions under terrible conditions; the Greeks having lived in Asia Minor for centuries, and the Turks having lived for centuries in Macedonia.

The Refugee Settlement Commission of the League of Nations was brought in by the Venizelosts to deal with the consequences of the Population Exchange for the Greek side of the Aegean Sea. Morgenthau agreed to address the situation of the Greek refugees. Before he took the job, a committee of Greeks, headed by Epaminandas Chariloas and Etienne Delta, had begun to address the problem with the founding of the Greek Refugee Treasury Fund. Accepting the appointment by the League of Nations to chair the RSC, Morgenthau arrived in Greece in October 1923 to take up the new role, stopping first in Thessaloniki before travelling to Athens.

In the opening pages of his book, I Was Sent to Athens, Morgenthau explained how he saw his mission in Greece. He expressed great sympathy for the refugees from Asia Minor. They must have reminded him of his own early move from Germany to the United States and the misery of being a member of a persecuted minority. As he similarly had committed himself to do for his mother decades earlier, he now committed himself to laying a foundation on which the refugees could thrive. In these pages, Morgenthau also expressed feelings that reflected much more than his own personal early-established self-confidence and trust in life. Those foundational attributes now expanded into a general confidence and overall optimism about what a whole people could achieve. Surely he saw them as needy, but in his soaring admiration for and belief in the Greeks and in their recovery, he was also seeing them as descendants of the ancient Greeks as well as a contemporary people he had come to know and admire prior to this appointment.

Morgenthau described his mission through a highly rose-colored philhellenic lens, with himself as one of the heroes. In his idealization of the Greeks and of his role with them, he resembled many of the Europeans and Americans who had fought a century earlier in the Greek War of Independence. I do not know if he exaggerated his influence on various people and events, but he accomplished very different and very difficult tasks.

Acknowledging and building on the Greek committee’s work, Morgenthau held the RSC position for just over a year. He early recognized
that much more funding and large-scale planning were needed. When he resigned in December, 1924, he felt that he had accomplished both—and more. A Greek, an engineer named Sgouta, for whom he expressed the greatest respect and confidence, took over the post.  

Morgenthalu's achievements in a mere fourteen months as chairman, little known outside of Greece, reflected his lifetime's experience, but also his personal commitment. One project of husband and wife, completely outside the role of RSC chairman, was to fund construction of schools for refugees in Athens and elsewhere in Greece, some still in use today. His primary, interdependent achievements were a consequence of his carrying out the tasks as chairman. The first was the raising of loans to finance settlement costs, beginning with the "million dollar advance," an interim loan from the Banks of England and Greece. Morgenthalu comments on how important it was to the bankers to feel that he "was confident of success." "My career in finance and diplomacy gave them some assurance of my qualifications, but they had to feel that I was heart and soul in the undertaking, and [that] I realized its difficulties from their point of view".  

Morgenthalu had to return to these bankers a number of times to negotiate a second, much larger loan. Each time they challenged his confidence that the domestic political situation in Greece could be counted on to be stable enough for successful settlement and hence loan repayment. They insisted that he ensure that the Greek government not spend the loan on rearmament, a distinct possibility.

The bankers' requirement that Greece be able to repay the loans engaged Morgenthalu in a more challenging purpose, that of helping to establish a constitutional democracy. The constitutional crisis was already upon the Greeks. As is the perennial task and duty of all relief workers and agencies, Morgenthalu moved among the three main political parties, Royalist, Liberal, and Republican, during this critical period. His prior diplomatic experience had prepared him well. His public speeches and frequent private interventions in the changing political scene, often very bold, buttressed a grand goal, the re-establishment of democratic rule. As he had in Constantinople, he again got acquainted with all the players.

Careful to follow the correct form, he met first with the inexperienced, weak King George. Next he met with Colonels Plastiras and Gonatas. Morgenthalu called them "the real rulers of Greece." He found that both
had genuine concern “for the welfare of [their] country” and were “anxious for Greece to resume normal constitutional government, which would make non-constitutional control of the state unnecessary”.45 Finally, Morgenthau met with the various political leaders of different factions. His energy and efforts were unflagging, yet Morgenthau’s optimism sometimes deserted him:

With 1/5 of their population in misery, and facing destruction, even the sincerest patriots among the Greeks seemed unable to agree upon a policy that would satisfy a consistent majority, and a swarm of lesser politicians seem blind to everything but the selfish scramble for place and power.46

To secure “the big loan”, negotiations went on for many months. Morgenthau moved by train between Athens, London, and Geneva like a jet-setter. He was at his best cleverly arguing his case with the then powers of the international monetary scene. At last successful, he recalled the moment just post-triumph:

As I walked away from “the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street” [the location of the Bank of England in “the City,” the financial center of London] it gave me a glow of satisfaction to think that this greatest bank in the world was not just a cold-blooded, impersonal, exacting money-lender, but was, instead, endowed with a heart as well as a brain capable of acting the part of good Samaritan by lending a helping hand to a sister nation staggering under a crushing load.47

Morgenthau was thus the creative force working out the complex deal that finally satisfied the Greek government, the League of Nations, and the Bank of England.48

Neither peaceful transition from monarchy to constitutional democracy nor the floating of a large enough loan would have meant much without land on which to locate, cultivate, and feed the enormous number of landless, moneyless refugees. The last of Morgenthau’s three achievements as chairman of the RSC was his role in the Greek government’s acquiring title to lands, mostly in Macedonia, on which many hundred thousand refugees could settle.

By the time of its dissolution in December 1930, the Refugee Settlement Commission ... had installed 570,000 refugees—about half the total number—on small holdings in northern Greece. It had built over 50,000 new houses for these farmers, and refurbished a similar quantity of homes abandoned by recently expelled Muslims. Thanks to the combined efforts of the RSC and the Athens government, these newly settled farmers had received about 145,000 horses and cattle, and 100,000 sheep
and goats. In urban areas where refugees lived, the RSC [Refugee Settlement Commission] had by 1929 constructed over 27,000 houses, and the Greek state a comparable number.”

Although Morgenthau convinced the international bankers that the loans would be well-used and repaid in a timely way, we now know that the road to permanent stabilization of Greek democracy was to go on for decades, and that sound fiscal practice would remain elusive. On the day that the Republic was declared March 25, 1924 (for a second time, the first having occurred in 1832 after the Greek War of Independence from the Ottomans), Morgenthau was honored for his efforts. During the ceremonies, the new Premier, Alexander Papanastasiou, spontaneously passed him a card on which he wrote, “This is for the Father of the Republic.”

Today there are three streets in Greece named after Morgenthau.

**Was Morgenthau a Universalist Humanitarian?**

Morgenthau expressed his humanitarianism and promotion of American democratic values as applicable to all peoples. He had been deeply horrified and disturbed by the suffering and wrongs he encountered, close up, in Turkey and Greece, above all by the genocide of Armenians. As a result, he had acted outside the boundaries of the official mission that required him only to represent America’s interests as conceived of by his state department. His feelings and conscience had become his guide.

Bruce Clark, in his book on the Population Exchange, submitted that Morgenthau “quite correctly... sensed that Greek expansionism in Anatolia would have terrible consequences for the Ottoman Christians.” Morgenthau wrote that it was “… frightful mismanagement of the situation by Constantine and his government.” But Morgenthau also understood the Turks’ concern, that the Greek invasion meant that the Turks “felt that their very existence was now threatened.”

In Greece his responsibility for the Greek refugees was laid down by the League of Nations. But as a humanitarian, should Morgenthau have been more widely solicitous of the suffering of both peoples making the enforced move? Clark, while praising Morgenthau “as an international ‘trouble-shooter’ with personal charisma that cut across the barriers of citizenship and culture”, asks that question. Quoting Morgenthau’s observation of the pitiable sight of “7000 people ... [Greeks from Anatolia who] came ashore in rags, hungry, sick, covered with vermin, hollow eyed, exhaling a horrible odor of human filth—bowed with despair”, Clark comments:

... there is no reason to doubt that this man of the world was genuinely moved by the suffering he witnessed at the outset of this commission’s work to alleviate the refugees’ plight. ... What Morgenthau somehow fails
to mention, however, is the other human drama that was unfolding in Salonika Harbor around that time [my italics]. A few days after [my italics] [Morgenthau] witnessed the arrival of that boatload of human misery, consisting of destitute Christians of Anatolia, a small fleet of creaky Turkish passenger ships and freighters began taking people in the other direction.54

Clark correctly asserts that Morgenthau failed to mention this other human drama. However, my study of Morgenthau’s account of his time in Thessaloniki indicates that he may well not have seen it. He was there for only “two days”.55 During that short stay, he was not always in the city but taken to visit refugee camps and factories, etc., away from the sea.56 It seems plausible to me that had he witnessed the scene Clark describes, he would have noted compassionately, as he did in Constantinople, the suffering of ethnic Turks, like the ethnic Greeks, helplessly caught in events utterly out of their control.57

III. “ALL IN A LIFETIME:” MORGENTHAU AND ZIONISM

Even though a neophyte in foreign policy and diplomacy, Ambassador Morgenthau took full charge of his approach and actions. He was anything but a passive or neutral witness to the Ottomans’ crushing of their own Christian citizens, making considerable efforts to prevent what was happening and informing the world about it. In both his relations with Turkish and Greek leaders, he pushed fundamental American democratic values.

Another of his contributions is far more controversial. I mention first, though, what is not controversial, at least to most people. If Morgenthau did not regard his chief task as ambassador to look after Jewish needs, he did not neglect them. Just before the Great War broke out and not long after he assumed his ambassadorial post, Morgenthau facilitated the saving of the lives of the 100,000 Jews in Palestine then living under Ottoman rule but as Russians, and Russia and Turkey were at war. He alerted Jacob Schiff, a Jewish connection in New York, to raise the funds needed for their survival. He next enlisted my 28-year-old grandfather, his son-in-law, Maurice Wertheim, to take the gold to Jerusalem. Morgenthau continued to secure funds for these Jews during the war.58 A street in Jerusalem is named after both him and his son, Henry, Jr.

What was controversial was that Morgenthau was anti-Zionist. From the beginning he had hailed the United States as the haven Jews needed, where they could be equal citizens. Post the Balfour Declaration, he spoke out strongly against establishing a Jewish state. Felix Frankfurter attacked him hard for his anti-Zionist stance. In 1981 Tuchman wrote:

...the dominant voice, as in every historical record, belongs to the victors, who in this case are the Zionists.... Because of [Morgenthau’s] opposition,
Pamela Steiner

he saw hazards which the proponents preferred not to look at: that the Balfour Declaration was ambiguous, that the Arab inhabitants of Palestine resented the Zionist program and [quoting an article Morgenthau wrote at the time] ‘intend to use every means at their command to frustrate it.’

Although he did not live to see the establishment of the state of Israel, after the Holocaust and close to the end of his life Tuchman reports that Morgenthau “privately acknowledged that he had read history wrong.” Once the state was established, just how he would have maintained that view is an interesting question. How might he have reacted to the course of Arab-Jewish relations? Today’s vexing problems of that relationship stem from the conduct of both parties to the conflict and might well have influenced his historical as well as contemporary judgments. We cannot say how he would have met the challenges of today’s Zionist state.

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ENDNOTES

2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., 15.
4. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 97.
8. Ibid., 15.
13. Morgenthau, All in a Life-Time, 94.
Henry Morgenthau’s Voice in History


18. Working trust is not the deep, unconditional general trust in life which (I hypothesized above) the young Henry acquired as an infant and child. Working trust permits collaborating with others meaningfully, and at critical moments enables one to gain immediate access to important players, not necessarily on one’s side, and they to him. It grants the psychological space to speak one’s mind and feel confident of being heard. Such trust is conditional: as President Ronald Reagan was known to say, “Trust but verify,” and, it must be added, keep verifying.


23. Morgenthau, Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story, 196.

24. Ibid.

25. Just a few weeks before war started, the New York Times reported that:

…relations between Turkey and Greece have reached high tension over the alleged persecution of the Greeks in Asia Minor, and it is because of these persecutions that many thousands of Greeks have left Turkey or been forced out of the country and are returning to the home land. (6/15/1914. ProQuest Historical Newspapers (1851, 4)


27. Morgenthau, Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story, 224.


29. ‘A place in the sun’ was first used politically by Germany’s then Foreign Minister (later Chancellor) Bülow in 1897: other European countries have their place in the sun (colonies in the tropics), so we should have them too. And…they were not going to do it militarily—they gave no sign of going to war with anyone else over a colony (unlike England and France!), but by buttressing the Ottoman Empire they got a cozy position inside for their investors, advisors, etc. Everyone knew that the Germans were doing in reality what all the Powers gave lip service to: preserve the integrity and independence of the Ottoman Empire. Germany’s ‘place’ in the Empire depended on the Ottomans remaining independent, because otherwise, the Russians, French, and British, all much better positioned, would move right in. Germany befriended the Ottoman Empire in hopes of getting, eventually, some kind of commercial priority; but, more important, in fears of being locked out, commercially, if another power got there first.” (Margaret Lavinia Anderson, “Private Correspondence,” 2014 and 2010.)


31. Morgenthau, Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story, 221.

32. Morgenthau III, Mostly Morgenthau, 110.

33. Morgenthau, Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story, 173.

34. Ibid., 262.

35. Morgenthau III, Mostly Morgenthau, 173.
36. In 1943 Raphael Lemkin coined the word “genocide” to characterize the intentional mass murder of a whole people, basing the concept on the Nazi extermination of Jews and the Ottoman massacres of Armenians. He worked tirelessly to achieve the United Nations Convention against Genocide.


38. Although the Treaty of Lausanne spoke of approximately one million Greeks then living in Turkey, only 200,000 reached Greece after 1923. The majority had already fled, and others had burned or drowned.


41. Ibid., 273.

42. “By the time of its dissolution in December 1930, the Refugee Settlement Commission ... had installed 570,000 refugees—about half the total number—on smallholdings in northern Greece. It had built over 50,000 new houses for these farmers, and refurbished a similar quantity of homes abandoned by recently expelled Muslims. Thanks to the combined efforts of the RSC and the Athens government, these newly settled farmers had received about 145,000 horses and cattle, and 100,000 sheep and goats. In urban areas where refugees lived, the RSC [Refugee Settlement Commission] had by 1929 constructed over 27,000 houses, and the Greek state a comparable number” (Bruce Clark, *Twice a Stranger: The Mass Expulsions That Forged Modern Greece and Turkey* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 206.)


44. Ibid., 121.

45. Ibid., 122.

46. Ibid., 162.

47. Ibid., 205.

48. At the time of the founding of the Refugee Resettlement Commission, the Greek government had promised absolute title to over a million acres. Those acres, improved by settlers, it had been understood, were to form part of the collateral for the loan. It turned out, however, that there was no clear title to the land. Moreover, the land was anything but unencumbered. Some of it had been settled some time before the so-called Exchange and was owned by Greeks. Much was still owned by Turks from the time it has been conquered centuries before. Those titles had yet to be worked out by the signatories to the Lausanne Treaty.


52. Ibid., 7.

53. Ibid., 25.


56. Ibid., 97.

57. Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story*, 43.


59. Ibid., 211.

60. Ibid., 217.