

The Smyrna Death Marches

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Turkey has long been a great favorite among American politicians, academicians, and journalists concerned with events in the Near East. Especially since the fall of the USSR in 1991, they have argued that Turkey is an Islamic nation that can serve as a model for the new states emerging from the turmoil in the Middle East. Not only is this view ill-informed, it is extremely dangerous to the United States and does not even serve the best long-term interests of Turkey. The shallowness of American thinking has been underlined by the emergence of the increasingly dictatorial Recep Tayyip Erdogan who has consistently eaten away at secular institutions since becoming Prime Minister in 2002 and then President of Turkey under a new system that went into effect in 2014.

A key to why the view of the American elite is so off base can be seen by considering the Turkish actions that transpired in Smyrna in 1922 and how that conflict has been subsequently explained by Turkish diplomats and taught in the Turkish educational system. The Turkish establishment readily admits that crimes were committed at Smyrna, but it states they were mainly the deeds of irregulars, part of the fog of war, and had no sanction from

Turkish authorities. Similar false claims are made regarding the Pontian Genocide and the Armenian Genocide.

George Horton, the American Counsel General in Smyrna in 1922, who was highly critical of how the Allies always appeased the Turks, wrote the following on this topic, “Turkish massacres are always carried out by orders of superior authorities. This is a well-known principle and the way in which various historical massacres have been conducted abundantly proves it. Such was the case in Smyrna and Mustafa Kemal’s statement that he could not control his troops is false.”¹

Establishing an accurate historical memory regarding these events is far more than an intellectual exercise or nationalist quibbling. Today, Turkey wishes to join the EU where it would be the state with the largest population. Turkey wants to divide Cyprus into two separate states. Turkey wants to act as mediator for the West in its dealings with the Islamic world. American military aid has helped to advance the Turkish agenda. We must ask what historical credentials Turkey possesses to justify the key role in international affairs that it seeks to play.

The modern Turkish state arose from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. During World War I, the Ottomans joined the Central Powers to hang on to its last holdings in Europe. Greece, in contrast, allied with the

alliance of western nations in which the United States played a decisive role. At the conclusion of the war, the Ottoman system collapsed and its remaining fighting forces retreated to Central Anatolia. Given that Greece was on the victor's side, Greece was given control of the Aegean coast of Anatolia, which had a Hellenic culture even though it was home to a host of ethnic groups. Its fabled central city was Smyrna, a metropolis a historian has dubbed a lost paradise.²

When the Greek army entered Smyrna in the spring of May, 1919, some units began to viciously attack resident Turks. Aristides Steriadis, the Venizelist who headed the new Greek protectorate not only stopped the violence; he put some Greek soldiers on trial. They were subsequently found guilty and executed for murder. The Venizelist plan was to stabilize the two hundred mile-long Hellenic zone around Smyrna and make a diplomatic bid for control of Constantinople. Whether this could have materialized can never be known as the monarchists won the elections of 1920 and restored King Constantine to the throne.

The new royalist regime put in control of Smyrna felt it was possible for the Greek army to move into the interior of Asia Minor and establish a modified New Byzantium or Magna Grecia (Greater Greece). The first acts of this campaign involved ethnic cleansing of some Turkish villages in the

Hellenic area. No less an authority than Venizelos would apologize for these actions when he returned to power some years later.

The actual offensive into the interior was poorly planned. The Greek army was weary, having been in combat for a decade with increasingly strained resources. The Allied powers that had sanctioned Greek control over the Smyrna area were opposed to an advance and withdrew their assistance. At first the Greek army was successful, but as it left the Hellenic coastal culture and increasingly entered primarily Turkish areas, the advance floundered and the strained supply system supporting the Greek army came under increasing attacks from Turkish irregulars. In Central Anatolia, Mustafa Kemal (later Mustafa Kemal Atatürk) had reorganized the remnants of the Ottoman army into well-organized units. On August 26, he unleashed an offensive that broke the Greek lines.

In a portent of things to come, as the Turkish forces advanced they ravaged all non-Turkish villages with systematic pillage, rape, murder, and arson. The retreating Greek soldiers could not offer an organized resistance. The Greek and Armenian civilian populations in the path of the Turkish army had to flee their homes if they wished to stay alive. All roads led to Smyrna, where the refugees came in the thousands, then in the tens of thousands, and eventually numbered over a hundred thousand.

The Turkish army entered Smyrna on September 9, 1922. Their first decrees carried assurances that non-Turks would not be harmed, but pillaging began on the first day. On September 10, Ataturk arrived in Smyrna and took up residence in a luxurious house in the suburbs. On September 12, an edict was issued that all non-Turks who remained at the city at the end of the month would be relocated to the interior, which was code for announcing a death march. A day after the eviction edict, September 13, a fire began in the Armenian quarter that, with the exception of the Turkish quarter, would destroy the entire city.

Turkish authorities have always stated that the fire that consumed Smyrna was set by Greeks and Armenians. They assert that extremists burned their own homes rather than have them seized by the victorious Turks. Numerous Western observers have reported otherwise. They personally observed Turkish soldiers setting the flames, often using kerosene.³ American Consul General Horton and the American Ambassador to Turkey Henry Morgenthau wrote at the time of these events that they believed that the Turks had set the fires.⁴ Although the evidence for the Turks starting the fire is far more weightier than the arguments against, one could argue that the Turkish authorities did not wish to burn a premiere city

and the fire, even if set by Turks, was done by errant soldiers. Possible, but not probable.

What is absolutely clear is those responsible for the death of Metropolitan Chrysostomos, the Orthodox prelate of Smyrna. In the Ottoman system he was recognized as the leader of the Greek population. French officials had offered to evacuate him as they were sure he would face death if he remained. The Metropolitan had refused, saying, “I am a shepherd and must stay with my flock.”⁵ On September 10, two soldiers and an officer came to the Cathedral and took him to the headquarters of General Nouredin Pasha, the military governor of the city appointed by Ataturk. Although pessimistic about the future, the Metropolitan thought he would be briefed on what was now expected of the Greek population.

Following a ten-minute meeting behind closed doors, General Nouredin appeared on the balcony of his command post and told an assembled crowd of ten to fifteen hundred Muslims that they could do with the Metropolitan as they saw fit. The crowd seized the Metropolitan and literally tore him into pieces.⁶ General Nouredin had clearly given his approval to this action, and no troops were summoned stop the savagery. The chief military commander of the new Turkish government had allowed the murder of the de facto leader of the Greek community.

The martyrdom of Metropolitan Chrysostomos exposes the meaning of the official slogan the Kemalist movement: Turkey for the Turks. That might have simply meant that all foreign troops must leave Turkish territory and allow the local inhabitants to govern themselves. In that sense, Turks would mean Turkish citizens, not an ethnicity or a religion. If we look at Egypt we have a comparable mid-century slogan: Egypt for the Egyptians. But when that slogan became operative policy, the Greeks in Egypt were given the choice of becoming cultural Egyptians. That meant mastering the Arab language, having the Greek schools follow the same curriculum as Egyptian schools, and generally ending Greek separation from mainstream Egyptian culture. The Greek population overwhelmingly rejected that option and departed Egypt in a bloodless exodus.⁷ The large Coptic Christian population in Egypt was included as part of the Egypt for the Egyptians slogan as were those Greeks who chose to remain. In contrast, Turkey for the Turks did not apply to Christians. Following the Smyrna Catastrophe and more assaults on Pontian Greeks and Armenians, the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 would formalize a forced expulsion of 1,500,000 Greeks from Asia Minor and 500,000 Turks from Greece, whether they wished to leave or not. The only major Greek presence that would remain in Turkey would be

Greeks living in Constantinople and the only Turkish population center in Greece would be the Turks in Thrace.

Even before the arrival of the Turkish army, the French, British, and American, and various smaller European communities in Smyrna, were evacuated by their national navies. The Greek navy evacuated the remnants of the Greek army that straggled into the city. Left abandoned were the huge Greek civilian population and the Armenian minority. For a full week after the arrival of the Turks, all ships flying the flags of western nations were specifically ordered not to accept any refugees. Ships of the Greek navy were mainly at sea or stationed in Mytilini awaiting orders from Athens.

One famous exception to this indifference to human rights was a Japanese cargo vessel. The captain was so stunned by the human misery at hand that he dumped most of his cargo into the bay and took on refugees. Recently one author has suggested this ship was probably mythological. It was not. My mother, then twelve years of age, and my uncle, then ten years of age, were saved by that ship.⁸ My grandfather had already immigrated to North America and my grandmother had been dead for a number of years, so relatives were caring for my mother and her younger brother. Deserted or lost by those relatives in the panic generated by the Turkish advance, the children fled from their village on foot and unaccompanied. By sheer luck

they made it to Smyrna where a human rights group was able to place them on the Japanese vessel. My mother told me about that ship when I was a little boy. At that time, I had no knowledge of the broader tragedy of Smyrna. The *New York Times* and American Counsel Horton, among others, refer to the Japanese ship that acted so righteously in those desperate days.⁹ Recently, scholars have found a contemporary Greek newspaper article that gave the ship's name as being *Tokei Maru*.¹⁰

On September 19, Asa Jennings, a ranking staff member of the YMCA and American naval commanders, arrived in Smyrna with a fleet of ships. The extraordinary efforts undertaken by Jennings to make this happen are too complex for this account, but his personal integrity was instrumental in getting Athens to release the Greek fleet for its rescue mission.¹¹ In the ensuing weeks, a quarter million persons would be evacuated from the docks of Smyrna and adjoining ports. Greek vessels, usually under protection of American war ships carried out some 200,000 of these refugees. American and British ships carried out the bulk of the others. There was also the phenomena of Greek fishing boats and other small craft coming from nearby islands to rescue Greeks in various small harbors much as British private craft evacuated many troops from Dunkirk. Considerable attention has been

given to this heroic effort and rightly so. This naval evacuation of a quarter million civilians in a time of war is unprecedented in world history

All accounts of the evacuations state that the refugees were mainly women, children, and the elderly. The absence of men was not by their choice but due to a decree of the Kemalist government that no male of fighting age could be evacuated. No birth certificates were involved so that definition, in fact, included husky boys in their mid-teens and hearty men in their fifties and older.

The Turkish army set up five gates through which those to be evacuated had to pass to reach the rescue ships. At each gate, the evacuees would be examined and relieved of all their belongings. Any men present were separated from their families. Young boys sometimes dressed as girls tried to get by the gates, a few men tried bribery, and some simply jumped into the sea to try to swim to a ship. Almost all of these efforts were futile. Eventually some 50,000 men, mostly Greeks but also including many Americans, were detained. These actions were not by irregulars but by the regular army still under the direct control of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

George Horton observed that the men being torn from their families were, “the peaceful farmers of Asia Minor and the citizens of Smyrna who were never in sympathy with the government of Constantine and who are no

wise responsible for the fearful fate which has befallen them. This unrighteous act is being carried out without even a word of protests by any civilized government.”¹²

Horton’s account underscores that these men were civilians, not soldiers of the Greek army. He further notes that they were not even monarchists. One must assume that the men were detained by the Turkish fear that perhaps in the future the Greeks might return as a revengeful military force. What is certain is that by stripping families of their males, the penniless evacuees could form no immediate challenge to the new Turkish state and the stranded families would constitute a huge cultural and economic burden on Greece. One might argue, especially given the treatment accorded to the men that the forced separation was a form of genocide.

The men, supposedly held for military reasons, were not treated as prisoners of war but held in camps without any protection of their human rights. The mortality rate was quite high. Early in October, the survivors began to be marched into the interior. Most died of starvation before reaching the interior and only a handful were eventually saved during exchanges of prisoners under provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne. Today we call that mass murder or ethnic cleansing. This atrocity was not an act of

irregulars. This atrocity was not due to the fog of war. The mass murder was done by a government directly commanded by the “father” of the Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

The subsequent history of the Turkey has continued in the course set in 1922 and even earlier genocidal actions against the Pontian Greeks, Assyrians, and Armenians. Two major assaults on the Greek population engineered by the Turkish government occurred in the 1950s and 1960s.¹³ In 1974, the Turks occupied half of Cyprus, driving out all Christians from its zone of occupation. In Turkey, there also have been numerous laws aimed at non-Moslem citizens regarding taxation and military service. The assault on the Ecumenical Patriarch has never abated and has intensified in the past decade to such a degree that there is serious concern that this Patriarch may be the last to reside in historic Constantinople. This continuous harassment of Christians has been effective, causing a steady decline in the Christian population in Constantinople from 270,000 in 1923 to 1,742 in 2011, many of whom are aged.¹⁴ On the other hand, the Muslim population in Thrace which was 130,000 in 1923 has retained its numbers, elects members to the Greek parliament, and exercises significant local power.

We cannot not hold the present Turkish population responsible for actions by their parents and grandparents, or even more recent actions. We can, however, hold the Turkish government responsible for its deceitful account of these events in the educational textbooks it creates for its grade schools and universities. We must also hold the Turkish government responsible for the reprisals against Turkish intellectuals who want to tell the truth. These genuine Turkish patriots have been put under threat of jail, and in fact, they have been jailed and even murdered. And we must hold the Turkish government responsible for its continual denial in international forums of the Pontian Genocide, the expulsion of the Assyrians, the Smyrna Catastrophe, and the Armenian genocide.

Turkey would do well to follow the example of the United States regarding America's past oppression and quasi-genocide of Native Americans. University and grade school textbooks now acknowledge these ethnic crimes. Let us recall that government actions, sanctioned by the public, including infamous Death Marches eerily similar to those inflicted on the Pontian Greeks by the Turks.¹⁵ These admissions of past guilt may or may not provide solace to the descendents of the oppressed, but they have made it possible to move forward culturally. While still experiencing social problems, Native Americans are now routinely elected senators, governors,

and mayors in various venues. The oppression of Africans in American is more complex, but it, too, is following the same pattern. That story is still unfolding, but African Americans are now a fixture in the Supreme Court, African Americans make up 8% of the generals in the American army, and yes, a African American, one of whose parents was not a Christian, has been elected president of the United States. We cannot imagine a Greek, Armenian, or Assyrian in comparable Turkish offices. In fact, I have yet to uncover an instance where any Armenian, Assyrian, Jew, or Greek has been elected to public office in Turkey.

When addressing the American public about the realities of Turkish governance, we must always speak as fellow Americans and avoid the trap of being perceived as ethno-centric Greeks advancing irresolvable emotional arguments. That is the image Turkey would like us to present, for such an image is easily dismissed by the American public. What we must always stress is that religious and ethnic intolerance have been and remain characteristic of Turkey. Americans who may not care about the fate of Greeks are very concerned about the fate of Christians in Muslim lands. Two cornerstones of the American system are equality of all citizens before the law and separation of church and state. Within this context, we can ask American politicians, journalists, and academics to stop appeasing a state

that mocks these values. Elizabeth Prodomou, of Boston University and Vice Chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom summed up the present Turkish reality by stating, “Turkey is a highly sophisticated authoritarian state speaking the language of democracy but not behaving like a democracy....”¹⁶

What we can ask of Turkey flows from these concern about human rights and democracy. Even a formal apology for past misdeeds would be meaningless if such an apology were not accompanied by reform. This means Turkey must cease its denial of the past before various international forums and Turkey must allow Turkish intellectuals to truthfully discuss the past and how it is presented in Turkish textbooks. Reform also means that the persecution of the Orthodox Church and other Christian entities in Turkey must cease. Absent such actions, Turkey can never achieve the status in the Near East it craves and absent such actions, Turkey can never be a dependable ally of the United States of America.

¹ Marjorie Housepian Dobkin, *Smyrna 1922: Destruction of a City* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1988 reprint of text first published in 1966) p. 151. Useful studies in this regard are available in Tessa Hofmann, Matthias Bjornlund, and Vasilleios Meichanetsidis (eds.), *The Genocide of the Ottoman Greeks: Studies on the State-Sponsored Campaign of Extermination of the Christians of Asia Minor (1912-1922) and Its Aftermath: History, Law, Memory* (NY & Athens: Aristide D. Caratzas, 2011) contains 26 essays by outstanding international scholars.

² Giles Milton, *Paradise Lost; The Destruction of a Christian City in an Islamic World* (NY: Basic Books, 2008). Highly skilled narrative with a focus on the Levantine families.

³ An account written by American Counsel Horton of American eye-witnesses such as Minnie Mills of the American Collegiate Institute for Girls and C. Clifton Davis, Chairman of the Disaster Relief Committee

of the Red Cross is available in Constantine G. Hatzidimitriou (ed.), *American Accounts Documenting the Destruction of Smyrna by the Kemalist Turkish Forces, September 1922* (NY: published by Aristide D. Caratzas, 2005) pp. 66-72.

⁴ Henry Morgenthau, *I Was Sent to Athens* (NY: Doubleday & Co., 1929) p.p. 47-48.

⁵ Cited in Christos Papoutsy, *Ships of Mercy* (Portsmouth, NH: Peter Randall Publishing, 2008) p. 17.

⁶ French eyewitness to these events is cited in Hatzidimitriou, *American Accounts Documenting*, pp. 37-38.

⁷ Accounts of the events in Egypt can be found in a special issue of *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, V.35.2 (2009).

⁸ Dan Georgakas, *My Detroit: Growing Up Greek and American in Motor City* (NY: Pella Publishing, 2006) p. 29-32.

⁹ Excellent summary by Constantine Hatzidimitriou, "The Destruction of Smyrna in 1922: American Sources and Turkish Responsibility," in *The Asia Minor Catastrophe and the Ottoman Greek Genocide* edited by George N. Shirinian (Bloomington, IL: The Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center, Inc., 2012) pp. 115-229.

¹⁰ Stavros T. Stavridis, "The Japanese at Smyrna: September 1922," *AHI Social Policy Journal*, V. 7 (Spring 2016) discusses details about the ship. This past summer Stavridis informed me about the discovery of the ship's name.

¹¹ Papoutsy, *Ships*, deals with this in detail.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Documented in great detail in Speros Vyronis Jr., *The Mechanism of Catastrophe: The Turkish Program of September 6-7, 1955 and the Destruction of the Greek Community of Istanbul* (NY: Greekworks Inc., 2005).

¹⁴ Constantine S. Stirigos, "Prodromou: Turkey Stifles Greek Orthodoxy and Religions Freedom," *National Herald*, May 14-20, 2011.

¹⁵ Some details about the Pontian Genocide are given in Konstantinos Fotiades, "The Pontian Genocide from the Time of the Young Turks to the Advent of Mustafa Kemal," *AHI Social Policy Journal*, V. 3 (Winter 2011-12). This is an excerpt from Fotiades, *The Genocide of the Black Sea Greeks* (Athens: Hellenic Parliament Foundation for Parliamentarianism and Democracy, 1964).

¹⁶ Stirigos, "Prodromou," p. 1.