

THE GREEK GENOCIDE AND SMYRNA'S CATASTROPHE: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Genocide is a crime against humanity which should be universally condemned. Regardless of the time that passes or the scope of the crime itself, there should be no reduction of the importance of a crime against humanity or the responsibility of those who commit genocide. The 20th century is, without a doubt, an era where the crime of genocide appeared and reappeared consistently. The Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian Genocide and the Holocaust, constituted important genocides perpetrated by illiberal governments that violated numerous human rights, taking millions of lives and eliminating the history and civilization of cities dating backthousands of years. From World War II onwards, “genocide” was coined as a criminal form of behaviour that constitutes one of the most violent crimes one could be charged with.

The Greek Genocide, one of the first genocides of the 20th century, is one of the big crimes against humanity that remains unpunished to this day since a large part of a nation that lived on the territory of the Ottoman Empire was murdered. The Smyrna Catastrophe of 1922 constituted the symbolic end of the Greek Genocide.

Keywords: Greeks, Ottoman Empire, Moustafa Kemal's regime, genocide, Smyrna, catastrophe.

This article was submitted on 01.11.2022 and accepted for publication on 06.04.2023.

How to cite: Theofanis Malkidis, “The Greek Genocide and Smyrna's Catastrophe: An Overview,” *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 8, no. 1 (2023): 73-82.

The Greeks of Asian Minor, Thrace, Pontos, and Cappadocia

The earliest presence of the Greeks in Asian Minor, Thrace, Pontos, and Cappadocia (within the former Byzantine Empire) as places where exchange and commerce prospered from the days of antiquity as a crossroad between the Mediterranean and the Aegean, Caspian Sea and the Caucasus – begins in myth and ends in reality. A famous legend brings Hercules to the Caucasus in order to free Prometheus, who was imprisoned for stealing fire from the Olympian Gods and giving it to human beings. The legend continues with Frixos and Elli, who travelled in Pontos on the Golden Fleece to avoid being sacrificed by the Olympian Gods; Elli's subsequent fall at the sea's entrance (creating its namesake “Ellispontos”) further led to the safekeeping of the precious Fleece by king

Eitis.¹ The Argonautic crusade led by Jason and a crew composed of representatives from every Greek city strove to regain the Fleece and comprised the first attempt to colonize that rich area.²

The era of Greek colonization began immediately after the Trojan War, in 1100 B.C., with Militos' first contacts in the region in search of precious metals.³ From the 9th until the 6th centuries B.C., a long succession of immigration waves ensued: Iones, Aiolejis and the Dorians reached the coasts of Asia Minor as tradesmen, colonists, adventurers and soldiers. They built their cities (Fokaia, Klazomenai, Erythraia, Kyveleia, Pinnacle, Efesos, Militos, Pergamon, Adramytion, Alikarnassos, Kizikos, Lamsakos, Smyrna – one of seven cities of Revelation, with Pergamon, Theiatira, Sardeis, Philadelphia, Laodikeia, Efesos), Sinopi (founded in 785 B.C.), it was followed by Trapezunta (756 B.C.), Kerasunta (700 B.C.). Amisos (Sampsunta – 600 B.C.), Odessa, Dioskouria (Sokhumi), Pitiunta, Archaeopolis (Nikolakevi), Kotiora, Tripolis and other cities. The presence of Greeks brings the natives of the area, in touch with the Greek civilization.

Greek immigrants to Asia Minor were credited with the creation of the Greek language and pioneered several forms of science (philosophy, mathematics, geometry, architecture, history, etc.) planting the seeds of a flourishing cultural life in the region. During the Roman era, Christianity appeared as an *ally* to Hellenism; the faith was spread by apostles Andrew and Peter, while the Christian convents formed centres of faith and national conscience.

In 47 A.C., apostle Pavlos (from the Tarsus region of Asia Minor) toured the region to spread Christianity: he would organize the first churches and establish the first Christian institutions in the region. Christianity, through use of the Greek language as means to communicate and mixing with Greek philosophy, spread quickly. It was further established in Pontus as well, contributing to the creation of the Greek-Byzantine Empire.

When Constantinople was taken over by the Franks in 1204, Alexios Komninos, a descendant of the Komninos' imperial dynasty, created the empire of Trapezunta (Pontos)⁴ while Theodoros Laskaris and John Ducas Vatatzes created the empire of Nice (Asia Minor). Trapezunta would be conquered in 1461, eight years after the capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453. The consequences of Trapezunta's occupation included the slaughter, forced religious conversion and the deportation of local populations to other regions of Europe, marking the start of Ottoman domination over the Greeks⁵.

1 Mariana Koromila, *The Greeks at the Black Sea from the Time of the Copper up to the Rising of the 20th Century* (Athens: Efesos Press, 1991), 123-145.

2 Theofanis Malkidis, *The Greek Genocide* (Athens: Euxeinos Logos, 2016), 23.

3 Homer, *Iliada* (Athens: Ekdotiki press, 2020), 461.

4 Bryer Anthony and Winfield David, *The Byzantine Monuments and Topography of Pontos* (London: Dumbarton Oaks Studies Twenty, 1984), 34.

5 Theofanis Malkidis, "Les Communautés Grecques et Religion dans l'espace du Pont Ephxine (Mare Noire). L' Hellenisme de la Roumanie," *Grigorios Palamas* 803 (2004): 651-661.

From the mid-late 17th century and onwards, the Greeks faced persistent persecution. An example of this was the replacement of Greek public officials by “derebeides”, powerful feudal Turk lords who supplanted state authority and levied severe taxes on Greek subjects. Outbreaks of violence fuelled by religious conflict emerged during this period: during the rule of Sultan Mehmet IV, between 1648 and 1687, mass religious conversions of Greek populations took place. Among these Islamized populations are Crypto-Christians, who outwardly converted to Islam while retaining their Christian faith and (when the circumstances allowed it) use of the Greek language. Despite the peril of the religious conversion process, they remained loyal to the Orthodoxy and their national identity.

The Greek Genocide

To this day, the documents of the European and the USA's State Departments, as well as the documents of international organizations, remain vivid witness accounts of the systematic crimes that were committed by the Ottoman state against the Greeks.

The period from 1919 to 1923 is the most intense phase of the Greek Genocide, in which the consolidation of power under Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) in the Ottoman interior concurs with the creation of the Soviet Union and its subsequent assistance to the nationalistic movement of Kemal, further paired with a shift in foreign policy among the powers of Western Europe. The genocide's “epilogue” is the violent uprooting of the survivors. With the treaty of population exchange⁶ the last remnants of the Genocide arrived in Greece. At this time, many sought to emigrate; in less than a generation's time, many Greeks will be refugees again when the civil war ends. There, in the countries of the former Soviet Union, they will find their relatives and neighbours again and will find out what happened to the missing after the Genocide.⁷

The uprooting of the Greeks lists among other forgotten crimes in human history. After 27 centuries of continued presence, a part of a historical nation was uprooted. Expelled populations had to leave behind their family homes, their churches, and the graves of their ancestors while seeking refuge at the Greek coasts.⁸ From this point, Greek Smyrna ceased to exist, and the fate of Greek-inhabited Asia Minor was sealed with the sacrifice of the Greeks of Pontus.⁹

6 Stephen Ladas, *Exchange of Minorities: Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), 98.

7 Michalis Charalambidis, *Aspects of the New Eastern Question* (Athens: Gordios Editions, 1998), 123.

8 League of Nations, *L' Etablissement des Refugies en Grece* (Geneve, 1926), 90.

9 Centre of Asian Minor Studies, *The Last Greek Populations of Asia Minor* (Athens, 1974), 67.

The Smyrna Catastrophe

The ratio of Christians to Muslims in Smyrna remains a matter of academic dispute, as different sources claiming either Greeks or Turks as constituting the demographic majority in the city. For example, according to Katherine Fleming, the Greek population in Smyrna formed the majority of the population, outnumbering the Turkish by a ratio of two to one.¹⁰ Alongside Turks and Greeks, there were also sizeable Armenian, Jewish, and Levantine communities within the city.

At the end of the 19th century, Vital-Cuinet accounted 96,250 Turks and 57,000 Greeks living in Smyrna. According to the Turkish census, there were, in 1905, 100,356 Muslims, 73,636 Greeks, 11,127 Armenians and 25,854 others; the updated figures for 1914 give 111,486 Turks against 87,497 Greeks.¹¹ According to George Horton, the US Consul at Smyrna, before the Catastrophe, there were 400,000 people living in the city of Smyrna, of whom 165,000 were Turks, 150,000 Greeks, 25,000 Jews, 25,000 Armenians, and 20,000 foreigners – 10,000 Italians, 3,000 French, 2,000 British, and 300 Americans.¹²

Horton further writes:

...the victims of the massacre – Greeks and Armenians – were estimated at 150,000. What was left of Smyrna was only its Turkish suburb. This very old and extremely beautiful Greek city had been founded in 3000 B.C. and restored by Alexander the Great. It used to be one of the most important economic centers of the Mediterranean. It used to be full of life and activity. It used to be prosperous. And now from one moment to the next[,] it was turned into a dead city. To a huge pile of ruins which emitted smoke. Those of its inhabitants who escaped the massacre fled, ousted and miserable, to Greece.¹³

According to Henry Morgenthau and Trudy Ring, before World War I, the Greeks alone numbered approximately 130,000 (excluding Armenian Orthodox Christians) out of a total population of 250,000. The Ottoman ruling class of that era referred to the city as *Infidel Smyrna* (“Gavur Izmir”) due to its strong Christian presence.¹⁴

In her work, literary scholar Marjorie Housepian Dobkin¹⁵ concludes that the Turkish army systematically burned the city and killed its Greek and Armenian inhabitants. Her

10 Katherine Elizabeth Fleming, *Greece – a Jewish history* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 81.

11 Salâhi R. Sonyel, *Minorities and the Destruction of the Ottoman Empire* (Ankara: TTK, 1993), 351.

12 George Horton, *The Blight of Asia: An Account of the Systematic Extermination of Christian Populations by Mohammedans and of the Culpability of Certain Great Powers; With the True Story of the Burning of Smyrna* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1926), 98.

13 Ibid.

14 Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgentau's Story* (New York: Gomidas Institute, 2000), 32.

15 Varoujean Poghosyan (comp.), *Le Desastre de Smyrne de 1922* (Recueil De Documents). Yerevan: Editions de l'Universite d'etat d'Yerevan, 2011, 56.

work is based on extensive eyewitness testimony from Western troops sent to Smyrna during the evacuation, foreign diplomats, relief workers, and Turkish eyewitnesses. A recent study by historian Niall Ferguson arrives at the same conclusion. Each element of the catastrophe was systematically hidden not to incriminate the Kemal regime who created these conditions with the collaboration of foreign forces. These groups interrupted the work of the "Interrogative Committee of East", for the slaughters of Greeks and Armenians and the benefit of each aggravating element.

Nourentin Bey, the Turkish governor of Smyrna, published the following decree regarding the evacuation of Christian populations of Asia Minor (on 3 October and 9 October of 1922): "All the Greeks and Armenians from the 18 to 45 years of age found to the released territories from our army, as well as the Greeks and Armenians transported from the Greek army to beach to embarkation and abandoned then our army should be delivered immediately. They will be kept as captives up to the end of the war..."¹⁶

On 13 August 1922, the counter-attack of the Kemalist forces began. These attacks were supported by signed collaborative pacts with Soviet Russia, and the Entente countries of France and Italy. The agreement reached with the French government, in particular, restored the economic and political sovereignty of Turkish forces in Asia Minor at the expense of Greeks in the region. Two weeks later, on 27 August, the Turks entered Smyrna and began the systematic destruction of the presence of Greeks within the city.

25,000 lives were initially lost in the fire, while 50,000 Greeks alone were murdered between 27 August and 4 September 1922.¹⁷

George Horton writes:

The burning of Smyrna and the massacre and scattering of its inhabitants has aroused widespread humanitarian and religious interest on account of the unparalleled sufferings of the multitudes involved... From the fact that not all the troops of Mustafa Kemal were provided with the smart uniforms of his picked troops, much has been made by Turkish apologists of the difference between "regulars" and "irregulars". Any one who saw those mounted troops passing along the quay of Smyrna would testify, if he knew anything at all of military matters, that they were not only soldiers, but very good soldiers indeed, thoroughly trained and under perfect control of admirable officers. And any one who knows anything of Turkish character will testify that the Turk is essentially a soldier, extraordinarily amenable to the orders of his superiors. The Turk massacres when he has orders from headquarters and desists on the second when commanded by the same

¹⁶ Malkidis, *The Greek Genocide*, 198.

¹⁷ Victoria Solomonidou, *Bishop Hrysostomos and the Destruction of Smyrna* (Athens: Center for Asia Minor Studies, 2008), 50-54.

authority to stop. Mustafa Kemal was worshipped by that army of “regulars” and “irregulars” and his word was law...¹⁸

Henry Morgenthau US Ambassador in the Ottoman Empire reported:

The frightful catastrophe at Smyrna in 1922, when the victorious Turks killed Greeks by the uncounted tens of thousands, and forced the surviving hundreds of thousands to proceed at once to Old Greece, created in that tiny nation of five million people just such an emergency as we have imagined for America – the sudden influx of a 25 percent addition to its native population, requiring instant relief and eventual permanent rehabilitation. The Smyrna disaster of 1922 need only be briefly mentioned here. It was the cause of the great exodus of all the Greeks of Asia Minor, but it happened so recently that many of the details are still fresh in the public memory. Let me itemize a few of these details: the systematic burning of the Greek quarter of Smyrna by the Turkish troops under the very eye of Kemal; All these atrocities were clear evidence of the deliberate intention of the Turks to remove utterly all Greek population from Asia Minor, in pursuance of the programme of the Turkish Nationalists under Kemal, by which Asia Minor was to be completely “Turkified.”....¹⁹.

The Refugee’s Drama

The number of casualties from the fire is not precisely known, but estimates reach up to 100,000 Greeks and Armenians killed in the blaze. American historian Norman Naimark gives a figure of 10,000-15,000 dead,²⁰ while historian Richard Clogg gives a figure of 30,000. Larger estimates include that of John Freely at 50,000 and Rudolf Rummel at 100,000.²¹ Despite the fact that there were numerous ships from various Allied powers in the harbor of Smyrna, the vast majority of ships, citing a cause of “neutrality”, did not pick up Greeks and Armenians who were forced to flee from the fire and the incoming Turkish troops’ seizure of the city after the Greek Army’s defeat. Military bands played loud music to drown out the screams of those who were drowning in the harbor and those who were forcefully prevented from boarding Allied ships. Many refugees were rescued via an impromptu relief flotilla organized by Asa Jennings.

18 Horton, *The Blight of Asia*, 105.

19 Morgenthau Henry, *An International Drama* (London: Jarrolds, 1936), 15, 38, 51-52.

20 Norman Naimark, *Fires of Hated: Ethnic Cleansing in 20th century* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2002), 249.

21 Rudolph Rummel, Irving Horowitz, *Turkey’s Genocidal Purges. Death by Government* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 233.

The total number of refugees often fluctuates, according to each respective source. Some contemporary newspapers claim that there were 400,000 Greek and Armenian refugees from Smyrna and the surrounding area who received aid from the International Red Cross immediately following the destruction of the city.²²

In 1922, roughly 1,5 million Greeks were forced to emigrate as refugees from Greece.

The majority of the refugees settled in Attica and Macedonia. The official refugee population in 1928 was divided as follows (per number of refugees and approximate percentages of the total refugee population):

Macedonia: 638,253 (52.2%) (with 270,000 in Thessaloniki alone)

Central Greece and Attica: 306,193 (25.1%)

Thrace: 107,607 (8.8%)

North Aegean Islands: 56,613 (4.6%)

Thessaly: 34,659 (2.8%)

Crete: 33,900 (2.8%)

Peloponnese: 28,362 (2.3%)

Epirus: 8,179 (0.7%)

Cyclades: 4,782 (0.4%)

Ionian Islands: 3,301 (0.3%)

Total: 1,221,849 (100%)

Numerous suburbs, towns and villages were established to house the additional population of Greece, which rose by about 1/3 in just a few months. To this day: every town in Greece has a quarter named in honour of the place of origin of their refugee inhabitants. In September 1922, a wide array of boats transported refugees, mainly women and children, to Piraeus and outlying islands. Morgenthau's report compares this movement of Greek refugees with the 26.000.000 men, women and children which had arrived on American shores at a similar time.²³

Conclusions

With the establishment of the Young Turk movement in the Ottoman Empire, the entrenchment of a nationalistic ideology formed following their rise to power in 1908; with it, a drive to eliminate all Christian populations of the Empire was expressed. That very same will was ultimately realised during World War I, and the Greeks of Asia Minor were a main target. The procedures aimed at eliminating the Greeks were similar to those

²² Edward Hale Bierstadt, Helen Davidson Creighton. *The Great betrayal: A Survey of the Near East Problem* (New York: R. M. McBride & Company, 1924), 218.

²³ Morgenthau, *I was sent in Athens*, 245.

perpetrated against the Armenians: large-scale massacres, brutality against civilians, instances of mass violence, arrests of women and children, forceful religious conversions and death marches. Proof of these atrocities have been confirmed by first-hand accounts of survivors of the genocide, in addition to those furnished by foreign witnesses. In addition to the aforementioned atrocities, the burning of many Greek villages and towns and the destruction of cultural and religious sites of historic significance also took place during the course of the Greek Genocide.

The Smyrna Catastrophe constituted the fiery, symbolic end of the Greek Genocide. According to witness Giles Milton:

One of the first people to notice the outbreak of fire was Miss Minnie Mills, the director of the American Collegiate Institute for Girls. She had just finished her lunch when she noticed that one of the neighbouring buildings was burning. She stood up to have a closer look and was shocked by what she witnessed. “I saw with my own eyes a Turkish officer enter the house with small tins of petroleum or benzine and in a few minutes the house was in flames.” She was not the only one at the institute to see the outbreak of fire. “Our teachers and girls saw Turks in regular soldiers’ uniforms and in several cases in officers’ uniforms, using long sticks with rags at the end which were dipped in a can of liquid and carried into houses which were soon burning.”²⁴

Every human has a right to memory; everyone further has the right to demand recognition of the crimes and injustices committed against them from the perpetrating authorities. The larger the injustice and the longer the duration of repression, the more intense the will is for such recognition. The recognition of atrocity constitutes an essential way to fight against the plague of Genocide – such recognition provides a confirmation of a people’s right to exist in peace, in accordance with international law.

The Smyrna Catastrophe and the Greek Genocide, which encompasses it, is an issue with multiple intersecting dimensions. The current political circumstances both in Europe and across the globe render it an important matter for the protection of democracy, human rights, freedom, dignity, and collaboration in hopes of achieving a victory in the fight for the historical truth.

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²⁴ Giles Milton, *Paradise Lost: The Destruction of Islam’s City Tolerance* (London: Sceptre; Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 2008), 306.

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