

GEORGE HORTON

AN AMERICAN WITNESS IN SMYRNA

presented by

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Introduction

Exactly eighty-four years ago yesterday (September 13, 1922), a massive fire broke out in the Armenian quarter of Smyrna (modern-day Izmir). Ever since, controversy has raged over who started the fire, whether it was an intentional act of genocide, and how many people were killed. Estimates range from one or two thousand to over 100,000. There is no dispute, however, that this was the 20th century's first holocaust.

In 1922, Smyrna was a large and important commercial port on the Asia Minor coast. Its population was about 400,000. Roughly 43% were Turkish Muslims, 45% were Greek and Armenian Christians, 6% were Jews, and 5% were foreigners. The Greek and Armenian Christians had deep roots in Smyrna going back countless generations. Many owned successful and long-established businesses. Others were professionals, artisans, or educators. They had a thriving cultural life.



The Smyrna Quay Before the Fire

The fire raged for four days. A strong breeze drove the flames away from the Turkish quarter and toward the waterfront, and with it the city's horrified Greeks and Armenians. The fire eventually consumed all of the city except the Turkish quarter.



Smyrna Burning

By late afternoon of the 13th, the fire had pinned thousands of victims on the harborside quay, where they had fled hoping to find means of escape. On the narrow quay they found themselves trapped between the raging fire at their backs and the deep harbor in front. There they were subjected to unspeakable atrocities while the uncontrollable fire burned itself out. And over the following weeks and months, more perished from starvation and exposure while waiting to be evacuated.



The Quayside Crush After the Fire

Tragically, the entire scene was witnessed by representatives of the Allied

Powers. They had pledged themselves to neutrality at the Paris Peace Conference following World War I, and so they watched from warships anchored about 250 yards offshore. All vessels that had been tied up along the quay (including the U.S. destroyer *Litchfield*) had to move off due to the intense heat of the fire. The foreign crews evacuated their respective nationals from any danger in Smyrna and plucked from the sea as many victims as could swim out to the ships. At night, the foreign vessels drowned out the terrible screams coming from the quay with band music and tried to keep rapes and murders to a minimum with occasional sweeps of their powerful searchlights.

Some Turkish apologists contend that resentful, demoralized retreating Greek army troops started the fire. Others contend that Armenians, some disguised as Turkish soldiers, started the fire. They also question why Turks would want to burn such a rich city.

By contrast, the Greek and Armenian version of events is that regular Turkish army soldiers started the fire by spreading and igniting petroleum in houses and other locations, and that the numbers that perished are at the higher end of the estimates. This version also contends that Turkish nationalist troops rampaged through the city before and during the fire, assaulting, looting, and killing Christians. The Greek and Armenian case is persuasively supported by the testimony of an American eye-witness: George Horton.

Biographical Information

Horton was a literary man. He was a scholar of both Greek and Latin. He translated Sappho. He wrote a guide for the interpretation of Scripture. He wrote several novels and was a renowned journalist in Chicago, a member of what was called the "Chicago Renaissance."

He was also a professional diplomat who loved Greece. He became U.S. Consul in Athens in 1893, where he actively promoted the revival of the Olympic Games and inspired the U.S. team's participation. He wrote a lyrical visitor's guide to Athens and composed a reflective description of a few months' stay in Argolis. And he married Catherine Sacopoulo, a Greek American woman.

He served twice as U.S. Consul in Athens (1893-1898; 1905-1906). He also

served in Thessaloniki (1910-1911) and then in Smyrna up to the U.S.'s break-off of diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire (1911-1917) in World War I. He served again as consul in Smyrna after the war (1919-1922) and remained in Smyrna until after the fire began on September 13, 1922, spending the last hours before his evacuation signing passes for those entitled to American protection and transportation to Piraeus.

Horton's Book: *The Blight of Asia*

Today, George Horton is best remembered for his book about the events leading up to and during the fire. The book was published in 1926, and its title, *The Blight of Asia*, unabashedly refers to the abominable behavior of the Turks. By the time of publication Horton had resigned his diplomatic commission, and he wrote strictly in the capacity of a private citizen, drawing on his own observations and those of the people he quotes. In these remarks, I draw mostly on Horton's book, but also informative is the long cable he wrote to the State Department from the Athens consulate two weeks after the fire.

Horton wanted his book to make four main points. **First**, he wanted to illustrate that the catastrophic events in Smyrna were merely "the closing act in a consistent program of exterminating Christianity throughout the length and breadth of the old Byzantine Empire." **Second**, he wanted to establish that the Smyrna fire was started by regular Turkish army troops with, as he put it "fixed purpose, with system, and with painstaking minute details." **Third**, he wanted to emphasize that the Allied Powers shamefully elevated their selfish political and economic interests over the plight of the beleaguered Christian populations of Asia Minor, thereby allowing the Smyrna catastrophe to unfold without any effective resistance and, as he said, "without even a word of protest by any civilized government." And **fourth**, he wanted to illustrate that pious western Christians were deluded in thinking they were making missionary headway in the Muslim world. I will address only the first two points.

Historical Background

To understand these two points, we first need to review briefly the key events in Asia Minor in the period leading up to 1922.

In World War I, the Ottoman Empire sided with Germany. Horton, you

will recall, was at his consular post in Smyrna during the war until 1917. After the war, the victorious Allies gathered at Versailles to formulate peace terms. Among the Peace Commission's thorniest tasks was partitioning the defeated Ottoman Empire.

Greece entered the war late, but sided with the eventually victorious Allies. At the Peace Conference, Greece's prime minister, Eleutherios Venizelos, lobbied hard for the annexation to Greece of Eastern Thrace, Constantinople, and a large territory along the Asia Minor coast. In all of these areas there were large populations of indigenous Greek Christians engaged mostly in commerce and agriculture.

In May 1919, the Supreme Council of the Paris Peace Commission endorsed the Greek army's landing at Smyrna and the establishment of a Greek administrative zone. From Smyrna, the Greek army pushed eastward into Anatolia, the Turkish heartland, successfully expanding the Greek zone; and Greece's claims not only to this zone but also to Eastern Thrace were ratified by the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which the Great Powers imposed on the humbled Ottoman Empire.

There remained, however, the problem of a rising Turkish nationalist movement in Anatolia led by a charismatic former Ottoman army officer, Mustafa Kemal, whose military strength the Great Powers and Greece dangerously underestimated. The result was the rout of Greece's over-stretched, war-weary army by Kemal near Afyonkarahisar on August 30, after which Kemal's nationalist troops began a relentless advance toward Smyrna. Before them they drove the remnants of the Greek army and hordes of frightened Christian farmers and villagers.

According to Horton, news of the Kemalist advances began reaching Smyrna soon after the Greek defeat and produced immediate panic among the Christian population. Their panic was completely understandable, he said, as he had predicted in a consular dispatch that if the Greek Army retreated in Asia Minor it would be followed by the entire Christian population. His prediction was based on his nearly thirty years of consular service and, as he put it, on "some things which all men who have had long residence in this country absolutely know."

First, the city filled with refugees from the interior, mostly small farmers, who were lodged in the churches, schools, and other public institutions. Many got away in the first days on steamers and sailboats. "Then," says Horton,

the defeated, dusty, ragged Greeks soldiers began to arrive,

looking straight ahead, like men walking in their sleep. . . .
 In a never-ending stream they poured through the town toward the point on the coast to which the Greek fleet had withdrawn. Silently as ghosts they went, looking neither to the right nor the left. From time to time some soldier, his strength entirely spent, collapsed on the sidewalk or by a door.

Then they learned that the Turkish army was moving on the city. The Turkish cavalry units arrived on the morning of September 9, filing along the quay toward their barracks at the Konak (the Turkish administrative headquarters building) at the other end of the city. In the evening of the same day, the looting and killing began in the Armenian quarter. The following morning, Americans began to report seeing corpses lying in the streets in the interior of the city. Horton himself saw Turkish civilians armed with shotguns watching the windows of Christian houses ready to shoot at any head that might appear. The shooting continued in the Christian quarters the night of September 10. Throngs of frightened people were begging to be let into various American institutions. After the Armenian quarter had been thoroughly sacked for nearly four days, the fire erupted in the Armenian quarter.

The "Closing Act"

The Blight of Asia begins with the evidence to support the case that what occurred at Smyrna was merely the closing act in a long-standing effort by Turks to exterminate the Christian populations of the region. Horton pointed to the advent of the so-called Young Turks in 1908 as the real beginning of the end. Their motto was "Turkey for the Turks," which Horton interpreted as signifying the final extermination of the Christians.

In Thessaloniki, where Horton was posted for two years shortly after the Young Turk uprising, he learned first-hand of generalized Turkish persecution of Greeks, Bulgarians, and Serbs. First the community leaders and other notables would be shot, often at their doorsteps as they returned home. Then men of lesser standing simply began to disappear, leaving their wives, mothers, and sisters distraught. Their pleas for answers were met with cynical replies from Turkish authorities. Horton says the favorite ones were: "He has probably run away and left you," and "He has probably gone to America." Shepherds began turning up corpses in ravines and

mountain woods. Then came the order to disarm the Christian populations and the arming of the Turkish population, accompanied by various forms of torture. These conditions eventually brought about the First and Second Balkan Wars (1912-1913), in which Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia briefly united to successfully evict the Ottoman Empire from all but a tiny portion of Europe west of the Bosphorus.

Horton next turns to the persecution of Christians in the Smyrna district between 1911 and 1914. A general boycott was declared against them. Posters were put up in schools and mosques calling on Muslims to exterminate them. The posters were cheap lithographs that showed Greeks cutting up Turkish babies or ripping open pregnant Muslim women. Turkish newspapers published articles that, in Horton's judgment, "excit[ed] their readers to persecution and massacre." These articles, he said, appeared unexpectedly and without cause, from which he concluded that they were inspired by the Turkish authorities. This campaign, he said, "set the Turk to killing."

Just as in Thessaloniki, sporadic murders began in Smyrna, the newspapers reporting twelve to twenty per day. Peasants going into their vineyards to work were shot down from behind trees and rocks. Eventually, he said, "several hundred thousand" Ottoman Christian subjects were driven from their farms and villages. Some were deported into the interior; others escaped by *caiques* to neighboring islands; still others, both before and during World War I, were drafted into the Turkish army, where Horton said they were treated as slaves. They were not given guns but were employed to dig trenches and perform other menial work. Nor were they given food, clothing, or shelter, so "large numbers of them perished of hunger and exposure."

He next cites the testimony of four Frenchmen who in June 1914 witnessed organized bands (armed with Gras rifles and cavalry muskets) effect the total sacking of Phocea, a village near Smyrna. The bands terrorized the Christian inhabitants, killing some in cold blood and bludgeoning and robbing others as they tried to flee. Turkish soldiers who later arrived from Smyrna, ostensibly to restore order, continued to plunder instead.

As evidence of the organized Turkish extermination of Armenians in 1915-1916, Horton quoted, among many other reports, a long previously unpublished written account by Walter M. Geddes, a Smyrna-based executive of the New York licorice firm, McAndrews & Forbes. Between September and November 1915, Geddes traveled from Smyrna to Damascus and back and witnessed the horrible realities of what Horton called the "slow torture of deportation." Geddes saw hundreds of

thousands of emaciated Armenians, who had been trekking for months from their Black Sea homelands in a desperate effort to reach safety in Aleppo or Damascus. He described filthy, disease-ridden encampments and brutalities and extortions by the Turkish gendarmes who oversaw the grotesque processions, standing by with spades ready to bury individuals as they dropped. He wrote of emaciated walking skeletons, some so demoralized that they refused alms or aid, saying it would merely prolong their suffering and expressing the preference to die.

Later chapters then chronicle the looting, brutalities, and murders that accompanied the final destruction of Smyrna, perpetrated by Turkish civilians and soldiers on Christians after the Turkish army entered the city on September 9, 1922. I will not sensationalize today's remarks by reciting the gruesome details. If you want to learn about them you can read the book, which was re-issued in paperback in 2003.

The point I would like to emphasize today is that what Horton described is credible either because he witnessed the events with his own eyes or learned of them from the multitude of credible American or European eye-witnesses he quoted or referred to. In other words, his assertion that the events of Smyrna were merely the closing act of a campaign of extermination is very well substantiated.

A Turkish Fire

As for whether the Smyrna fire was started by the Turkish army, *The Blight of Asia* expresses no doubt. Based on Horton's long observation of Turkish behavior and the facts he either observed or that were reported to him by credible eye-witnesses, Horton states that regular Turkish army troops started the fire, and that its simple object was the extermination of the Christian population of Smyrna.

As he saw it, the Turks' immediate objectives were directed against the Armenians and were accomplished by nearly four days of mass murder, rape, and robbery followed by the fire. Later, they turned their attention to the Greeks. Males between eighteen and forty-five were taken as prisoners of war and large bands of them were seen being marched away into the interior by Turkish guards. Those few who returned, said Horton, told terrible tales of their fellow prisoners being shot down or killed in squads. All were starved, and thousands died of disease, fatigue, and exposure. American relief workers told of small bands of Greeks found far inland that had started out thousands strong. And it was not just the men who were carried off.

Horton refers to a League of Nations report stating that upward of fifty thousand Greek women were carried off to become slaves and concubines.

Horton's conclusions about the fire are all the more credible in view of his fear, expressed more than a week before the fire, that retreating Greek troops might themselves set fire to the city. On September 2, 1922, before the retreating Greek army had arrived in the vicinity, he cabled Assistant Secretary of State Phillips that he predicted "serious trouble" when the demoralized Greek army reached Smyrna:

My opinion is that situation is so serious that it cannot now be saved. Panic spreading among Christian population foreigners as well as Greeks and many are trying to leave. When demoralised Greek Army reaches Smyrna serious trouble more than possible and threats to burn the town are freely heard. In view of the above I respectfully request that cruiser be despatched to Smyrna to protect consulate and nationals.

He repeated the same prediction two days later in another official dispatch.

Events in the days following Horton's two cables, however, made it irrefutable that Greek troops did not start the fire. The best circumstantial evidence is that the fire did not start until September 13. By then, all Greek troops had passed through Smyrna and the city had been securely occupied by Kemalist troops for a full four days. But Horton did not rest his case on circumstantial evidence alone. One of Horton's chief witnesses was Miss Minnie Mills, Dean of the Inter-Collegiate Institute, an American school that catered mostly to Armenian girls. Mills told Horton that she "saw Turkish soldiers go into various Armenian houses with petroleum tins and in each instance after they came out, flames burst forth." Three years later, she confirmed this to Horton adding: "There was not an Armenian in sight, the only persons visible being Turkish soldiers of the regular army in smart uniforms."

The essential facts, all supported by the reports of credible eye-witnesses, were as follows:

- (1) The last remnants of the Greek army passed through Smyrna on the evening of September 8; the first Turkish contingents arrived the next morning, and the city was in the complete and undisputed possession of

the Turkish army for four full days before the fire broke out;

- (2) The streets leading into the Armenian quarter were guarded by Turkish soldier-sentinels; no one was permitted in except armed Turks (including many soldiers) who went through the quarter looting, destroying, raping, and massacring, after which they set fires in various places by carrying cans of oil or other combustibles into the houses or by saturating bundles of rags in oil and throwing them in through the windows;
- (3) The main fire was lit at the edge of the Armenian quarter at a time when a strong wind was blowing toward the Christian sections of the city and away from the Turkish quarter; and
- (4) Turkish soldiers led the fire down into the Greek and European sections of the city by soaking the narrow streets with petroleum or other highly inflammable matter. For instance, they poured petroleum in front of the American Consulate with no other possible purpose than to communicate the fire to that building. Mr. C. Claflin Davis, Chairman of the Disaster Relief Committee of the Red Cross (Constantinople Chapter), and others were standing in the door of the consulate at the time. Mr. Davis put his hands in the mud and it smelled like petroleum and gasoline mixed.

Various other reports, too consistent and too detailed not to be true, supported the account given by Dean Mills. For example, on the day of the fire, as it rapidly consumed the Armenian quarter, American marines sent from the consulate to the Armenian quarter reported that they saw Turkish soldiers throwing rags soaked in petroleum into Armenian houses. An employee of McAndrews & Forbes saw Turks throwing hand grenades into buildings, which later caught fire. Horton quoted a prominent YMCA official as saying he saw people throwing liquid against one of the large buildings on the quay, soon after which the building burst into flames. Turkish soldiers were patrolling in front of the building but did not interfere. And Horton says there was no evidence that Turkish troops did anything to stop or contain the fire. In sum, *The Blight of Asia*, methodically using eye-witness accounts, laid out the facts showing undisputably that regular Turkish army troops started the fire.

Conclusion

Horton's book remains controversial. He is accused of having a pro-Greek bias because of his many years' service in Greece, his evident love of Greece, and his marriage to a Greek American woman. His ardent Christian devotion is also very evident in the book. He claimed to be neither pro-Turk nor pro-Greek, merely "pro-American and pro-Christ." But there can be little doubt that he lacked much real respect for Islam in comparison with Christianity. And today he would surely be accused of bigotry. He was absolutely convinced that Turks, as an ethnic group, were incapable of civilized behavior and were prone to the worst conduct imaginable.

Despite these criticisms, *The Blight of Asia* has the ring of credibility. Its basic contentions are supported by a multitude of eye-witness accounts. Throughout the book Horton purposely quoted only Americans and Europeans, whose credibility was assured by their presumed objectivity and lack of prejudice. He went to this trouble because he was firmly aware of the inadequacy of words to describe convincingly what was happening:

I have often been impressed with the hopelessness of making people who have not been eye-witnesses, comprehend the dreadful character of the massacres which were carried on by the Turks against the Christian population of the Orient. I have never been able to describe sights that I have witnessed in such manner as to make my listeners actually see and understand.

The Blight of Asia also remains immensely important because Horton was one of the very few eye-witnesses who was willing to "go public" about what had happened in Smyrna. Many others were cowed by fear of retribution, or simply remained silent in order not to jeopardize valuable economic concessions, property, or political alliances with Turkey. As he put it, "[t]he unwillingness of all the eye-witnesses to say anything that might offend the Turks and thus compromise their interests, shows how difficult it has been to get the full extent of the hideous and shameful truth."

He also drew the world's attention to the gruesome consequences of Allied inaction. Horton firmly believed that if the Allied commanders who witnessed the tragedy unfolding in front of them had stepped in and emphatically told Kemal

there should be no massacring, none would have occurred. Instead, by silently watching a massacre take place, they emboldened Kemal to commit greater excesses.

Horton's book is also important because it offers a clear rationale for why the Turks would have wanted to start the fire. Disagreeing with an American witness who thought the fire was intended to burn the corpses of all the massacred victims, Horton emphatically stated his belief that the fire was intended to finally exterminate Christianity in Asia Minor and to render it impossible for the Christians to return, *i.e.*, an intentional act of genocide.

Thanks to George Horton and *The Blight of Asia*, we know the truth about what happened in those awful days in Smyrna. His example reminds us of why we must not shrink from speaking out against injustice and hypocrisy in our own time.

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