



Book Review by Elaine Thomopoulos

George M. Shirinian (editor), *The Asia Minor Catastrophe and the Ottoman Greek Genocide: Essays on Asia Minor, Pontos, and Eastern Thrace, 1912-1923* (Bloomington, Illinois: The Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center, Inc., 2012), 306 pages. \$40. Copies can be ordered from info@hellenicresearchcenter.org

I sat next to a white-haired Greek-American businessman at a dinner-dance. His hatred of all Turks dominated the conversation. A woman at the table told him that her mother, a refugee from Eastern Thrace, was helped by a Turkish family, and she spoke kindly about them. Raising his voice, he questioned her judgment. To him, all Turks were bad.

When I was asked to review *The Asia Minor Catastrophe and the Ottoman Greek Genocide: Essays on Asia Minor, Pontos, and Eastern Thrace, 1912-1923*, I wondered if some of the contributors would be biased and if their emotions would color their essays. Several, like this gentleman, had been personally affected by what the Greeks call the Great Catastrophe. I was relieved to discover that on the whole the volume presents an objective and scholarly study. The book is a collection of eight original research papers presented during two conferences in 2009 and 2010. The conferences were organized by the Pontian Greek Society, and the book was published by The Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center.

The scholars, using correspondence and reports from government sources in the United States and abroad, eyewitness reports, and newspaper articles give a comprehensive analysis of why the actions of the Ottoman government against its Christian subjects from 1912 to 1923 can be defined as genocide. The researchers examine the social, economic, and political forces that led up to this genocide and the United States government's reaction.

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In the introduction, George Shirinian presents a history of the Ottoman Empire and an analysis of the forces and political events of the nineteenth and early twentieth century that led the Ottomans to use the genocide of Christians as a way out of their perceived political problems. He describes the policies instituted, including the boycott of Christian businesses, forced relocations where many perished, and the conscription of Christian men of military age into the dreaded labor battalions, a death sentence from which few escaped. Shirinian uses the definition of genocide as put forth by the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Article 2:

“Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

The work of Shirinian and the other contributors show how the deportation and killing of Greeks met the UN definition of genocide in what was “a deliberate attempt of the Ottomans to rid Asia Minor of the 3,000 year-long Greek presence in Asia Minor.” Shirinian does an excellent job of putting the papers that follow into perspective and the essays follow a logical order, “The Genocide against the Christians in the Late Ottoman Period, 1912-1922” by Tessa Hofmann; “The Greek Deportations and Massacres of 1913-1914; A Trial Run for the Armenian Genocide” by Taner Akçam; “The Persecution of Greeks and Armenians in Smyrna, 1914-1916; “A Special Case in the Course of the Late Ottoman Genocides” by Matthias Bjørnlund, “Greece in Asia Minor: The Greek Naval Bombardment of Samsun [Amisos], June 7, 1922” by Harry J. Psomiades; “The Destruction of Smyrna in 1922: American Sources and Turkish Responsibility” by Constantine Hatzidimitriou; “Asia Minor Refugees in Greece: A History of Identity and Memory, 1920s-1980s” by Alexander Kitroeff; “From Lausanne (1923) to Cyprus (2009) Turkey’s Violations of International Law and the Destruction of Historic Hellenic Communities” by Van Coufoudakis; and “U.S. Policy Obstacles in Recognizing the Genocides of Christian Minorities in the Late Ottoman Empire: Challenges and Opportunities” by Robert J. Pranger.

Several of the essays go beyond analyzing the genocide of the Greeks to study the genocide of the Armenians and Assyrians and the interrelationship of all three Christian groups. This is a major achievement of the volume. Shirinian cites the resolution passed by the International Association of Genocide Scholars in 2007, "The Ottoman campaign against Christian minorities of the Empire between 1914 and 1923 constitutes genocide against Armenians, Assyrians, and Pontian and Anatolian Greeks" (p.40).

According to the data offered by Hofmann, three million Christians perished from massacres, death marches, slave labor, and starvation during the last decade of Ottoman rule. In her essay, she compares the Armenians, Syriacs, and Greeks regarding the "key elements of genocide," including elements such as the duration, location, and victim tolls. Her use of a table makes it easy to see, at a glance, the similarities and differences.

In another table, Hofmann presents "Three Ds 'Distort, distract, delay' -- Stereotypes of genocide denial, minimization, and justification of the Ottoman genocide(s)." She illustrates how Turkey and others use the "Three Ds" to deny there was genocide. Her inclusion of tables greatly enhances the value of the book.

The position of the U.S. in regard to the genocide is addressed in the papers by Hatzidimitriou and Pranger. Pranger analyzes the forces that are now acting as obstacles to the U.S. recognizing the genocide. Hatzidimitriou illustrates what influenced the U.S. in 1922. He writes, "I believe the official American documents presented and analyzed in this paper conclusively show that the U.S. State Department had detailed and reliable information concerning the atrocities committed by the Turkish authorities in Smyrna and that their burning of the city was part of a premeditated plan to make certain that the minorities could never return. Additionally, I think it is now clear the U.S. government kept the truth of what they know from the public and Congress in order to maximize economic and political advantages they hoped to gain from the new Turkish administration" (p. 194).

Hatzidimitriou tempers his critical analysis of the U.S. government at the time of the Smyrna disaster in 1922 by pointing out the heroic actions of individual Americans. He tells the story of Asa Jennings, a YMCA official who witnessed the slaughter that was taking place in Smyrna in September 1922. Jennings reported, "I have seen men, women and children whipped, robbed, shot, stabbed and drowned in the sea. And while I helped to save many it seems like nothing compares it to the great need. It seems as though the awful, agonizing, hopeless shrieks for help would forever haunt me" (p. 217).

Jennings, appalled by the suffering he saw, convinced the Greek navy to use their vessels, with himself as commander of the fleet, to save thousands of refugees. Hatzidimitriou concludes his chapter, "Many American unsung heroes and heroines risked their lives and welfare, ignored and bent the rules, worked inhuman schedules and did not give up, saving thousands of innocent lives from the Turkish slaughter. It is to them that the victims and humanity owe eternal gratitude."

The atrocities committed by the Ottomans toward the Greeks are forefront in this volume, but the scholars do not ignore the atrocities by the Greeks toward the Ottomans. In his chapter about Smyrna, Hatzidimitriou says, "The reality of Greek atrocities against Turkish civilians that were committed as their defeated army disintegrated and fled toward the coast, cannot be doubted. Greek soldiers and civilians committed heinous acts, and all civil and military authority fell apart in the Turkish countryside" (p. 166).

He goes on to state that "this factor was cited as justification for the general expulsion of the Christian populations and formed the context for whatever violence occurred in Smyrna and other largely Christian population centers along the Anatolian Coast." Hatzidimitriou doesn't accept this justification of the genocidal nature implicit in the Kemal Atatürk's position of Turkey for the Turks. Hatzidimitriou cites George Horton, the U.S. Consul at that time, who in his report to the State Department saw quite a difference between "excesses of a furious and betrayed army retreating through a country which it had held for several years and without its officers, and the conduct of the victorious Turkish army, which, instead of protecting the helpless people which it had in its power, deliberately set about massacring and outraging it" (p. 166).

Each of the papers complements the others and brings to light new information. Psomiadis describes what led to the decision to use the Greek navy to bomb Samsun in 1922 during the Greco-Turkish War and looks at the consequences. Three of the papers deal with Smyrna. Hatzidimitriou writes about the 1922 Smyrna holocaust, while Bjørnlund uses original Danish and Norwegian sources to explore the persecution of the Greeks and Armenians in Smyrna during 1914 to 1916. Taner Akçam relates the Greek deportation and massacres of 1913-1914 in Smyrna to the Armenian genocide that followed.

Alexander Kitroeff explores what transpired when the 1.5 million refugees (a quarter of Greece's indigenous population) settled in Greece as a result of the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922 and the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey that followed. The lives of the refugees were turned upside down, and they were forever haunted by their experiences. He explains that the

Greeks used epithets such as *Tourkoi* (Turks) or *Tourkosporoi* (of Turkish seed) and *yaourtovaftismenoi* (baptized in yogurt) to refer to the refugees. Using the archives of the New East Foundation, refugee publications, newspapers, journals, and photographic evidence, he traces the evolution of Greek refugee identity and memory from the 1920s to the 1980s. He notes how the status of Greco-Turkish relations shaped the identity of the refugees.

Although the book concentrates on the Asia Minor Catastrophe, the essay by Van Coufoudakis brings things into perspective by looking at more recent events, including the 1955 pogrom in Istanbul and the current situation in Cyprus and in Imbros and Tenedos. Using these and other examples, he shows how the modern state of Turkey continues to flout international law.

One weakness of the volume is a paucity of photographs and visuals that can contribute to the discussion. Only two photographs appear – Eleftherios Venizelos with refugee children and the first Christian refugees from Asia Minor to arrive at Thessaloniki. In contrast, there is a beautiful book jacket designed by Sotirios Gardiakos. The foreground shows a long line of people traversing a mountainous terrain. They carry their possessions on their backs or on beasts of burden. In the background is the faint outline of a Greek ruin.

This volume is not a “happy” read, but all Americans needed to be aware of the danger signs that lead up to genocide, especially in this time of difficult economic times and the distrust of the “other.” All Americans needed to understand the brutal circumstances surrounding the birth of modern Turkey and how such an orientation might still affect Turkish policy. I agree with Theofanis G. Stavrou, Professor of History, and University of Minnesota, who writes on the dust jacket, “This volume is indispensable reading for individuals concerned with the promotion of human rights and democratic values in our time.”

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