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Tess Hofmann, Matthias Bjørnlund, Vasileios 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,
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The use of the term “genocide” to describe the fate of the Greek Orthodox populations during the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire (1912-1922) continues to generate deep divisions in Greece. The Greeks used the term “Asia Minor Catastrophe” to describe the death and uprooting of over a million Greeks for several decades, until the Greek parliament accepted demands by organizations of descendants of the victims and labeled the events as a genocide in the 1990s. The passage of the relevant bills in parliament was not controversial or contested, but the official renaming of the “Catastrophe” spawned extraordinarily deep divisions among historians, public intellectuals, the refugee organizations and anyone with a strong interest in the fate of the Greeks during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and in its memorialization. On one side, supporters of the recognition of the genocide believe this action was overdue and represents an acknowledgement of the historical truth, honoring the thousands of Greek Orthodox who were victimized during the last decade of the Ottoman Empire’s existence. However, there are many that doubt whether the series of complicated events that entailed two wars between

Greece and the Ottomans and Turks, in 1912-1913 and from 1919 to 1922, and atrocities against civilians committed by both sides can and should be termed as a genocide against Greeks.

There is disagreement on the basic facts, including the population numbers before the massacres unfolded, and this leads to wide variations in counting the number of victims. There is no middle ground between the two sides and no meaningful exchange of views. Each side presents its own version of what happened and, crucially, its own set of figures about the numbers of Greeks in the Ottoman Empire prior to the collapse and, by the same token, the numbers who were killed or deported. Each side accuses the other of being politically motivated, either by anti-Turkish nationalist fanaticism or by a naïve attachment to modern academic disdain for nationalist narratives. The exchanges are sharp and venomous and occasionally include attempted character assassinations of the prominent personalities involved. Political differences maintain diametrically opposed views of the concept of nationalism and deepen the divide. There is also an institutional split, with those disputing the usefulness of the term genocide belonging

to the mainstream of the historical profession in Greece.

As its title suggests, this volume falls clearly on the side of those who wish to affirm that genocide was committed against the Greeks of the Ottoman Empire between 1912 and 1922. The publisher, Aristide Caratzas, summarizes the purpose of this book in a prefatory note: "The efforts to eliminate the Greeks, the Armenians and the Assyrians, peoples whose biological presence in that geographic space goes back millennia before recorded history, are integral to the process that led to the creation of what became the modern Turkish Republic. The predatory methods used, and indeed what may be called a policy of effective physical elimination of populations, as well as of the cultural traces of their presence in areas they inhabited, bespeak of planning at the highest levels of government and its systematic implementation." Further on he adds, "Greek scholars, with some significant exceptions, have been less active in researching the subject of the violent elimination of the Greek presence in Asia Minor and eastern Thrace, which spanned three millennia. The avoidance of the subject of the genocide by many mainline academics in Greece is a convergence of factors, which range from governmental reticence to criticize Turkey to spilling over into the academic world, to ideological currents promoting a diffuse internationalism cultivated by a network of NGOs, often supported by western governments and western interests." Then he concludes: "This volume represents a kind of scholarly opening statement to an international audience on the subject of the extermination or expulsion of

Ottoman Greeks, as part of the genocide of the Christians of Asia Minor." (pp. ix-x)

Thus, this book has a dual purpose, to present information that highlights the extent of the massacres suffered by the Greeks, and to argue that the massacres qualify as a genocide and, also, to implicitly criticize those who do not agree with this perspective. Its value will depend on the reader's perspective. It makes a compelling case for understanding the events as much more than simply a series of deportations and massacres. It is unlikely to persuade those who believe the term genocide should not be used, because the book is not primarily concerned with addressing their concerns: the need to contextualize historically the events to account for the clash between Greek and Turkish nationalism; and their suspicions that the genocide campaign serves a nationalist, anti-Turkish critique. One scholar among them has recently suggested that the term genocide is an *ex post facto* legal labeling and thus should not be telescoped backward to the decade between 1912 and 1922. That said, all those interested in this pivotal period of the history of the Greeks of the Ottoman Empire should take this book very seriously. Admittedly, it is not an easy read in parts, there is dense prose with long sentences in some sections, and in some chapters the footnotes are copiously long in some cases. Yet readers who do not agree with the use of the term genocide would do well to put aside their objections at least temporarily and consider the detailed and well-worked documentation offered throughout this volume, because it makes a significant contribution towards shedding more light on the fate of the Greeks of the Ottoman Empire.

This is certainly the case with the nine historical essays in this volume, which are followed by a cluster of more interpretative essays that focus on the genocide issue. There is an introductory chapter by the three editors, Tessa Hofmann, Matthias Bjørnlund and Vasileios Meichanetsidis, and a personal reflection by Israel W. Charny, a pioneer of “genocide studies”. The introduction seeks to frame the book’s general approach, echoing the publisher’s note in a more academic tone. It raises issues such as assumptions about the innocence of genocide victims and the reasons that Greece (the Greek State, according to the authors) understood the events at the time not as a genocide but as the Asia Minor Catastrophe and then goes on to discuss Greek attitudes towards Turkey and the eventual rise of a movement to promote the idea of a genocide belatedly in the 1990s. The authors are critical of the silence of the Greek State and believe that, “the primacy of foreign relations seems to have been the more important factor in determining how to officially remember and categorize the destruction of the Ottoman Greeks [by Greece]” (p. 10).

Hofmann’s chapter, entitled “Γενοκτονία εν Ποίη, Cumulative Genocide: The Massacres and Deportations of the Greek Population of the Ottoman Empire (1912-1923)”, dominates the section of historical overviews, documentation and interpretation because of its content and its length – it runs to 74 pages, double the size of any of the other chapters. The point it makes is crucial: Hofmann presents a detailed account of the massacres and deportations of the Ottoman Greeks, compares them to the Armenian Genocide, and argues the Greek case constituted a

different type of genocide, which stretched over a decade. Bjørnlund echoes this view on the basis of Danish diplomatic and other reports from the Ottoman Empire (1914-1916), as does Nikolaos Hlamides in his account of the destruction of the city of Smyrna in 1922, when thousands of Armenians and Greeks either died or were deported. Essays by Racho Donef on an organization he considers something of a Turkish death squad, by the late Harry J. Psomiades on the American Near East Relief organization and by Stavros T. Stavridis on the International Red Cross provide additional evidence of the extent of the massacres of the Greeks. Two essays, by John Mourellos and by Matthew Stewart, complete the historical section by addressing the diplomatic history context of the events. Taken as a whole, these nine chapters in the historical section present overwhelming information about the extent of the killings and forcible displacement the Greek Orthodox suffered between 1912 and 1923. The authors are operating on the assumption that these events constitute a “genocide”.

The other six essays in the book build on the mass of historical data presented and address the concept of genocide explicitly. In doing so, they make a strong case for understanding the events this volume examines as a genocide based on the standard definition of genocide issued by the United Nations. They also make a case for understanding the decade-long process as a plan enacted by the authorities, though they do not furnish any direct evidence. That remains to be established with any accuracy probably by the work of historians in the Ottoman archives. Indeed, Hofmann, Bjørnlund and

Meichanetsidis state in the introduction that more careful research is required on this general topic. The final chapter, by Abraham Der Krikorian and Eugene Taylor, offers an important reminder that new and old evidence such as photographs has to be carefully assessed and evaluated; and that could be said of the entire corpus of evidence related to this topic.

Beyond what it achieves, this volume does not neutralize the concerns raised by those who believe the term genocide is not appropriate. One of those concerns is the actual historical context. The treatment of the Greeks of the Ottoman Empire in the decade that began in 1912 did not take place in a vacuum or as the result of a one-way set of Ottoman and Turkish initiatives. Instead, it unfolded during two wars launched by Greece, in 1912-1913 and from 1919 to 1922, in which the Greek army committed atrocities, violently displacing and killing thousands of Muslims. This in no way justifies the Ottoman and Turkish actions, but it behooves anyone dealing with this period to include them and weigh their significance. Steven Leonard Jacobs' essay discusses Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term genocide and defined it as the destruction of a nation or an ethnic group. Jacobs writes: "What Lemkin's writing on the genocide of the Greeks by the Turks and the involvement of some among their own leadership historically in creating an environment which fostered hostility between the two groups reveals is the complexities of addressing the topic of genocide in general [...]" (p. 305).

Another contentious issue is whether or not and how modern Turkey's responsibilities are treated. This adds a

new layer of complexity, because unlike countries such as, for example, Germany and Israel, Greece and Turkey are both neighbors and adversaries over current issues such as the status of Greek Orthodox institutions in Istanbul, sovereignty of areas in the Aegean Sea and more importantly over the ongoing Turkish occupation of northern areas of Cyprus. Diplomatic relations remain finely balanced, and in both countries public opinion is divided between doves and hawks. Is, therefore, the labeling of the Asia Minor Catastrophe as genocide an example of political manipulation of history by those opposed to a rapprochement between the two countries? Some of the essays in this volume appear to make no concessions towards Turkey. Alfred de Zayas writes about the culpability of modern Turkey, noting that, "the perpetrators are dead and beyond the reach of criminal justice, but the Turkish state remains liable for the crimes committed by the Ottoman Empire" (p. 311). Ronald Levitsky, in his essay on teaching the Greek genocide, mentions the need to include Turkey's responsibility.

Even though this volume may not bring the two sides of the Greek genocide debate any closer, two of its chapters point to a carving-out of a potential middle position. The chapter by Akis Kalaitzidis and Donald Wallace, "The Eastern Question: Genocide in Support of Nationality", suggests that the causes of the genocide were rooted in a struggle over affirmation of identity. The chapter by Michel Bruneau and Kiriakos Papoulidis discusses the erection of commemorative monuments in Greece by Asia Minor refugees as an expression of the refugees' need to affirm their identity and

heritage. This shift away from a discourse that addresses state responsibilities (on both sides of the Aegean) or focuses on the political manipulation of the affirmation or dismissal of the use of the term genocide may represent a way forward. It changes gears and turns away from the political, moving towards a cultural understanding of the massacres and deportations. Thus it casts the Greek case on the same wavelength as the other campaigns seeking to recognize genocide not as a political tool but in a cultural context. Whether it is the case of the Armenians at the end of

the Ottoman Empire or the Mayan groups in late twentieth-century Guatemala, those current campaigns to gain recognition of past genocides are fundamentally designed to affirm the identity of the victims, to recognize that they were massacred *because* of that identity and to honor those victims. A transition from political to cultural discourse that focuses on the people victimized in these events and the need of their descendants to respect the memory of those persons and their identity may bring closer together the two sides warring over the Greek “genocide”.

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