

AHI NOON FORUM---SEPTEMBER 7, 2006  
THE 1955 POGROM IN CONSTANTINOPLE

Thank AHI for the invitation to speak at today's forum.

Last year, Speros Vryonis, the internationally acclaimed historian, wrote the most documented history of the 1955 pogrom against the Greek minority of Istanbul. The Mechanism of Catastrophe, is a magnum opus in the tradition of his earlier The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor.

In recent years, dissident Turkish historians living and working abroad have now written and spoken about these events. The list includes historians like Professor Gocek (Michigan); Tamer Akcan (Minnesota) who was prosecuted in Turkey for his writing; Samin Akgonul (Paris); and the novelist Aziz Nesin.

Vryonis' book is based on major Turkish archival and other sources, and contains photos from the archives of the late Dimitris Kaloumenos, the photographer of the Patriarchate who was able to smuggle out of Turkey 1500 photos he took in the week following the pogrom. His book, I Stavrosi tou Christianismou is the major photo archive of the pogrom.

What is a pogrom?

A government or public authority organized and sanctioned attempt to destroy and eliminate an ethno-religious group regardless of rights enjoyed under domestic or international law.

Causes of the pogrom in Constantinople:

- Economic jealousy
- Religious fanaticism
- Hatred against the Greek minority
- Turkey's involvement in Cyprus

The involvement of the Turkish government in the pogrom:

- Documented by the Turkish military in Prime Minister Menderes' trial following the 1960 coup in Turkey.
- It involved the movement and participation of at least 100,000 rioters from all parts of Turkey.
- Organized by the Turkish secret services and the terrorist organization of the Democratic Party.
- The demonstrators were transported, fed, equipped and organized by the state.
- The attack involved three distinct groups of rioters each carrying out a specific act of destruction.
- Turkish properties in Greek neighborhoods of Istanbul were clearly marked before the pogrom to avoid damage.
- Turkish MIT and foreign office agents set the bomb in Ataturk's birthplace at the Turkish Consulate in Salonica. The bomb explosion became the cause of the pogrom.

The timing of the pogrom:

- Istanbul was hosting a meeting of the IMF.
- Istanbul was hosting a meeting of Interpol. Allen Dulles, CIA head and brother of Secretary of State J.F. Dulles was present!
- The London Tripartite Conference on Cyprus was taking place in the UK.  
I will return to this point.

While the pogrom and its aftermath was widely covered by international media both the US and the British governments worked hard to defuse the incident and remove any guilt from the government of Turkey.

- Britain wanted to assure Turkey's cooperation in the CENTO/Baghdad Pact.
- Britain wanted to assure Turkey's support on Cyprus.

- The United States wanted to assure Turkey's cooperation against the USSR. This is why the Dulles brothers and Turkish authorities attempted to attribute the pogrom to Turkish Communists, 47 of whom were arrested and temporarily detained. Washington also pressured Athens to look beyond the "unfortunate events" and concentrate on fighting communism.

The issue of material damage and compensation. The damage was estimated at 1 billion TL's (1955 value):

- Greece, under US pressure because of "Turkey's economic condition" agreed that damages be set at 135m TL.
- In further negotiations with the Turkish government Greece agreed that Turkey compensate the victims with a total of 50m. TL's.
- Greece also agreed to drop charges against the two Turkish agents who planted the bomb in Salonica.
- Greece stopped the publication of a "Black Book" by the Greek Information Office detailing the pogrom. I have seen the "stop" order and the volume in the Alexander Pallis archives at the National Research Center in Athens.
- The final settlement came well under the 50m. TL agreed with Greece. There was no appeal from the decisions of the Turkish Commission that examined the claims of the Greeks of Istanbul.

Some additional conclusions from the 1955 pogrom:

- (1) In Lausanne, in 1923, Turkey failed to get all the Greeks out of Istanbul, Imbros and Tenedos, and remove the Patriarchate from Istanbul. The Lausanne Treaty provided various protections to the Greek minority and its institutions. How did the destruction of Hellenism in Turkey come about since then?
  - Planning and patience on the part of the Turkish government.

- Adoption of restrictive legislation on the status and operation of Greek minority institutions.
- The Varlik Vergisi (Capital Tax) implemented in 1942 against the Greek, the Armenian and the Jewish minority, along with hard labor camps in Anatolia. The policy led to the impoverishment of the community and to thousands of deaths. The book, The Tragedy of the Capital Tax, by the Turkish administrator of the varlik Mr. Faik Oktay details the disastrous effects of this policy on the minority communities of Istanbul.
- The pogrom of 1955 that destroyed the economic base of the community as it has started recovering from the impact of the Varlik.
- The expulsions of the Greek minority in 1963-1965 because of the Cyprus problem. The expulsions also involved confiscation of Greek properties. NOTE: this may become a new issue against Turkey in her talks for EU accession.

(2) The consequences of a policy of concessions on the part of successive Greek governments are felt to this day. In the 1950's, political weakness in Greece, ideological choices and American pressures have led us to the systematic challenge of Greek sovereignty and rights by Turkey.

(3) Turkey shows that in the aftermath of the 1960 coup the guilty parties including Prime Minister Menderes, Foreign Minister Zorlu, and Minister of Finance Polakan were given the death sentence and executed by hanging. President Celal Bayar was spared because of age. Minister of the Interior Namik Cedik committed suicide while in jail. Other 592 members of the Democratic Party received various jail sentences. REMEMBER: these sentences were imposed for domestic reasons. While the pogrom was one of the reasons that led to their conviction, successive Turkish governments did NOT stop their repression against the Greek minority and its institutions. Thus, the expulsions of the Greeks in 1963-1965.

(4) CYPRUS: The foremost English historian on this subject is Robert Holland from the University of London. Until the early 1950's Cyprus was not an issue in Turkish foreign policy. It became one for various reasons, including:

- The replacement of Fuad Koprulu by nationalist Zorlu as foreign minister.
- The domestic pressures facing the Menderes government because of corruption and economic problems.
- Britain's encouragement of Turkey to get involved in Cyprus.
- Turkey's attempt to curb the Patriarchate having accused it of financing and fomenting the revolt in Cyprus.
- The Turkish government's sponsorship of radical organizations such as those of the "Refugees of Western Thrace" (1953) and Hikmet Bill's "Cyprus is Turkish" (KTC—1954). The KTC circulated the rumor generated by Dr. Fazil Kucuk (who became the Turkish Cypriot Vice President of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960) that during the London Tripartite Conference on Cyprus, all Turkish Cypriots would be massacred by the Greek Cypriots (August 28).

The 1955 pogrom has been described by Elias Manglinis as the equivalent of the "krystal nacht" in Nazi Germany against the Jews. Like the case of the Armenian and the Pontian genocides, and the invasion of Cyprus, Turkey and its supporters have systematically attempted to downplay these events. At best, they describe and rationalize them as "isolated events" that took place in the past. They have done so with success, thanks to good PR, external political support, the exploitation of the international and regional environment, their infiltration of universities and think tanks, and so on. Turkey would like us to forget these events and claim its status in Europe. However, we must not forget events like the pogrom of 1955. Our Jewish friends have not forgotten krystal nacht. Why should we?

Van Coufoudakis