

RECENSIONS/BOOK REVIEWS

Speros Vryonis, Jr., the Mechanism of Catastrophe: The Turkish Pogrom of September 6-7, 1955, and the Destruction of the Greek Community of Istanbul, New York: greekworks.com Inc., 2005

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In the annals of historical writing, one would be hard pressed to find a book that has “the power to profoundly influence minds with its compelling weight and wisdom of its facts and arguments and with the movingly restrained passion of its compilation”¹. Professor Speros Vryonis’ massive and majestic work, *The Mechanism of Catastrophe: The Turkish Pogrom of September 6-7, 1955, and the Destruction of the Greek Community of Istanbul*, is such a book.

No reader of this work could emerge unmoved by its power of the marshalling of the facts of the pogrom that destroyed the Greek Community of Constantinople-Istanbul – a community which traced its roots to its founding by the Megareans several thousands of years ago. Though the Greek population in Istanbul had decreased from about 300,000 in 1922 to about 100,000 in 1955, the Greek community persevered, despite exceptionally trying and difficult circumstances, and managed to remain vibrant and robust. Regrettably, the tragedy of the September Events, is practically unknown to the western world, historians and lay people alike. The book, coming on the fiftieth anniversary of the events of that September night, comes to fill that void.

Working in 16 languages, including Turkish, Arabic, several Slavic languages, English, French, German and Greek, Professor Vryonis has used original documents from the secret archives of Turkey (some 30,000 pages) and primary sources to compose his compelling work. Included in his sources are secret, but surviving materials from the mostly destroyed archives

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of the perfunctory, but secret initial trials following the events, as well as from the more “public” trials held in the 1960s.

Right from the outset, Professor Vryonis treats us to a most captivating account of the meticulous planning and synchronized execution of the horrible events of that September. With every word on every page, one is immediately disabused of any notions that those events materialized out of thin air or that they were spontaneous. The scrupulous analysis that follows irrefutably and persuasively argues that the motivations behind this government-hatched and executed plan had at its core the following two objectives: firstly, the destruction of the Greek Community of Istanbul and secondly, at the urging of the British, the creation of a pretext or an “incident” that could be utilized by Turkey to make a claim in Cyprus.

It will be recalled that following the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, Cyprus, though possessing a predominantly Greek population (80%), had been placed under British protection in 1878 by the Cyprus Convention. Following the outbreak of the First World War, with Turkey siding with Germany and Austria-Hungary, Cyprus was annexed by Britain. Any remaining vestiges or ambitions that Turkey might have had on Cyprus were renounced with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923.

Cyprus, having suffered centuries of domination, occupation or influence by countless forces and powers and witnessing the crumbling of colonialism in the twentieth century, began a drive for self-determination. Britain vigorously resisted such manifestations and Greece attempted to bring this issue to the United Nations sensing that that was the only option to resolve the impasse. According to Professor Vryonis this attempt by Greece to internationalize the plight of the Greek Cypriots “constituted the turning-point that would lead to Turkey’s decision to make serious claims on Cyprus” (page 30), even though it had relinquished all rights with the Treaty of Lausanne.

Fearing that any internationalization of the Cyprus issue might find allies at the UN, and in view of the looming Suez crisis and the impending loss of British hegemony in Egypt, Britain was determined to thwart any autonomy attempts since Cyprus became an ever increasingly vital part of Britain’s imperial plans in the Middle East. She therefore began to energetically court Turkey to make claims on Cyprus, despite Turkey’s initial reluctance having

declared through its Foreign Minister that “Cyprus was not a Turkish issue”, (p 31). As the author states, “Macmillan prevailed upon Turkey to alter its policy on Cyprus and make vigorous representations as to its claims and rights on the island.” (p 84)

As Professor Vryonis further points out “the crisis leading to the pogrom was not fated by an ostensibly long history of territorial truncation of the once-extensive Ottoman empire that modern Turkey felt obliged to reserve” (p 30). Rather, it was “a reaction to the external dynamic of British imperial concern over and fear of, the success of Greek Cypriots bringing their cause” (p 30) to the UN. It was therefore in pursuit of its own “imperial concerns” that the British urged the Turkish government to become “involved” in Cyprus. But having relinquished all rights, how was Turkey to become re-engaged? It was widely suggested that by manufacturing the appropriate “cause” or “incident” Turkey would be able to lay her claim on the island. That “incident” was the well planned and equally well executed pogrom that is the focus of this book.

What was the triggering factor of the pogrom? Very briefly, the irrefutable facts that emerge are that the Turkish government using its own agents placed some explosive devices in the Turkish Consulate in Thessaloniki, Greece. Why was this significant? For two principal reasons: firstly, the Consulate was ostensibly on Greek soil – even though the land of diplomatic missions enjoys immunity in international law — and secondly and even more cogently for Turkey, included in the Consulate complex was the house where modern Turkey’s founder Kemal Attaturk was allegedly born. In the minds of the planners, the combination of these two factors would prove most influential in helping to fuel what was to follow. Firstly, since the triggering “event” would “occur” ostensibly on Greek soil, Greece would be easily “blamed” in international public opinion, thus blunting any internationalization of the Cyprus problem. Secondly, and even more importantly for the planners, the emotional charge that this “incident” of “sacrilege” of Attaturk’s birthhouse would engender in the Turkish population, would almost certainly lead to a “spontaneous” demand for revenge by the Turks against its Greek populations in Istanbul and Izmir (Smyrni).

According to the plan as revealed in the book, the Turks were to use the pretext of the explosive device to “demonstrate” against the Greeks in

Istanbul and Izmir and even Cyprus. But such “demonstrations” can never be fully “controlled” and the subsequent destruction told the tale. As part of the plan and at the suggestion of US CIA Director Allen Dulles who was in Turkey for a meeting at the time, the Turkish authorities initially blamed this “event” on the communists and other anarchical elements; in other words, on the “usual suspects”. However, the facts kept on interfering with the “official” version of events – as facts have a wont to do – and it soon became apparent that it was ludicrous to “blame” the communists simply because they did not have the numbers or the means to carry out such a well executed, wide-ranging and thorough plan. Of course the initial trials were farcical even to the most ardent supporters of the event and it took five years before the real perpetrators, the Menderes government, were put on trial and the Turkish courts handing out death sentences to Prime Minister Menderes, who was the main instigator behind this plan, and some of the closest and highest members of his government.

Within a few hours on that fateful September night forty-five communities were destroyed and pillaged and numerous churches were defiled and desecrated. And such violence was not confined merely to property destruction. Persons of both the Greek and Armenian communities were physically abused and injured, including instances of gang rapes being perpetrated. Passers-by that were thought to be Greek were ordered to strip by the Turkish gangs to determine whether they were circumcised and if not, the perpetrators were more than willing to perform the rite on the spot with knives and other blunt instruments all the while disregarding the pain, suffering and humiliation suffered by the unfortunate captives.

With careful and meticulous detail, Professor Vryonis painstakingly analyzes the events of that fateful night employing a plethora of credible and unassailable sources. He divides his narrative of the destruction into neighbourhoods – just like the perpetrators did – and then with eyewitness accounts from Turks, Armenians, Jews and Greeks, he lays out the facts for all to see and judge for themselves. To these are added the newspaper reports of the day, including Turkish, Greek, British, French and American news organizations. And as if these were not sufficient, he also includes the various diplomatic dispatches from the British, American and of course the Greek diplomats who were themselves on the scene of the destruction, eyewitnesses whose descriptions no matter how “cleansed” in diplomatic language,

nevertheless still have the power to evoke the sense of the tragedy that occurred that night.

With surgical precision, Professor Vryonis unravels the well-planned and carefully calculated plot of the Turkish government. He ably reconstructs in flowing and persuasive prose the historical record from a multitude of original sources by way of fusion and synthesis with the larger view of events rather than as a dichotomy of disparate and disjointed facts of a local incident. From this perspective, the book is not merely a detailed review of the actual events and its inevitable, paralyzing and wanton destruction of the Greek community of Istanbul. Instead it becomes an absorbing commentary of the cultural, political and ideological implications within a larger context, with reverberations continuing to be felt to this day, especially in Turkey's attempt to join the European Union. To quote from the text:

“At the practical level of the regional politics of the time, the pogrom is also a prism that refracts the internal difficulties of the ten-year Menderes government, in which are clearly discernable all the basic issues, both internal and external, that so beset and characterize Turkish society today.... These issues are largely the same, albeit much more magnified, as are the current issues of US foreign policy.”

(p xxxv)

Why has Professor Vryonis written this book, a book that has been in the making over several decades? A partial answer is given by the author in his Prologue:

“What had, early on in my academic career, astonished me was the readiness, not only of the US government and State Department, but also of academics to prostitute the truth for money, recognition, and/or political acceptance. Despite the argument that one can never know the “real truth”, such moral relativism opens the door to arbitrariness, dictatorship, and the violation of any and all forms of justice.”

(p xxxv)

It seems that what infuriated him most was the “attempts of so-called

revisionists to demonstrate that there was no Holocaust or massacre of the Armenians – just to name the two most egregious examples – are enough to demonstrate that *convenience is often far more powerful than truth.*” (p xxxv, emphasis added)

It is worthwhile remembering that at the same time that the pogrom was being carried out in Turkey, America lived its own intense period of anticommunism and “a McCarthyism that diverted the country from its internal enforcement of civil and political rights at a time when segregation, both legal and cultural, was defended by a significant portion of an American electorate that accepted even the most flagrant violations of these rights within its own borders”. (p 27)

Professor Vryonis is the last of a breed of scholars who pursues truth with relentless passion never compromising integrity for political or self-serving reasons or for motives of not wanting to discomfort the complacent and those seeking favours. He follows truth wherever it may lay – which is the mark of the true historian, and true scholar – and uncompromisingly refuses to serve any other agendas of questionable merit.

In reading his book, one realizes the sad fact that even after the destruction, those whose properties and very lives were destroyed were left alone by everyone in the international community, without any reparations or amends, ostensibly sacrificed on the altar of the geopolitics of the region. Fully accepting such a premise, Greece also readily alined itself with this British and American view and downplayed the tragedy and its fateful consequences.

The progression and the unfolding of the events by an almost minute-by-minute account by Professor Vryonis, demonstrate beyond any doubt of the complicity of the Turkish government in the planning and execution of the plan. Professor Vryonis treats us to intrigues and backroom planning by the ruling political party and its membership, including the machinations of the government itself and its party apparatchiks. Woven in his narrative is not only the social and economic catastrophe of this very vibrant and dynamic Greek community, but also its commercial and cultural denouement attributable solely to that night of gratuitous devastation.

The author weaves in absorbing detail the story of the destruction of a

community that existed in Constantinople for over two millennia, and the continued impact today, e.g., in the Cyprus situation and the bilateral relations between Greece and Turkey.

“Although the pogrom of September 6-7, 1955 occurred half a century ago, its legacy is caught up, in a larger web of regional and international interests. This web is, indeed, the key to understanding important parts of this ongoing history”.

(p 571)

This story is truly worthy of the ancient *dramatourgous* (playwrights) as the author uses not only Greek but also non-Greek observers, describes in stark detail the destruction, brings to light heretofore unknown facts, reveals secrets kept in hidden archives, and exposes concealed details of the tragedy. Moreover, everything is recounted by a careful and caring author who has used his archival sources with wit and wisdom to weave a tapestry of wanton destruction and international intrigue. *The Mechanism of Catastrophe* is a fascinating read and a must have for all those who are interested not only on the actual events, but also on the broader implications of the eastern Mediterranean and the geopolitical manoeuvrings of the traditional powers who have had a large say in the region and, of course, the only remaining superpower, the United States.

As if the verbal descriptions were not enough to convey the tragedy, the book is amply illustrated with some 90 pages of photographs taken by the official photographer of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Dimitrios Kaloumenos. Risking limb and life, the photographer ventured out among the destruction capturing for eternity not only the senselessness and magnitude of the destruction but also its ferociousness and totality. These mute but moving photographs speak volumes of what transpired that dark night of September 1955.

This book took years to make as its length (close to 700 pages) and rich and painstaking detail readily attest. At the same time, the strict objectivity of the historian and the unemotional presentation of the facts are never surrendered for partisan, prurient, political or distorted purposes. Professor Vryonis insists on presenting eyewitness testimony from a large array of persons who were there and witnessed the events from their particular perch

and perspective, thus constructing for the reader a more compelling picture of the truth of the events. Though described in a calm, collected but exacting and rigorous manner, Speros Vryonis nevertheless conveys the utter futility of the acts and the sense of despair and resignation on the faces of the victims of this atrocity.

The book is unquestionably the definitive study of the September Events by a world renowned historian and scholar and a great contribution not only to Greek and Turkish studies but it is hoped that it will serve as the impetus for more detailed studies of Asia Minor and the surrounding region. It is also a significant contribution to the geopolitics and Greek-Turkish relations of the area, the evolution of the Cyprus problem and the long and continuous Greek presence in Asia Minor, the Black Sea and the rest of the region.

In the end, if we are to heed the admonitions of the author, the book is not only about the “larger issue of slanting and distorting history to fit various political and personal agendas, but about distortion of truth as an immoral act in and of itself..... It is, above all, a search to ascertain basic truths, not the ‘truths’ of political convenience.” (p xxxv)

NOTES

1. The quotation is most fitting for the Vryonis book. It comes from the review by Gregory Copley in *Defense and Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy* (July 2005), of the book, “An International Relations Debacle: The UN Secretary-General’s Mission of Good Offices in Cyprus 1999-2044” by Claire Palley.