

Memorial for the Victims of Genocide -We do not Forget

Every year in the month of May and on Sunday closer to May 19th, we gather in churches for the annual memorial service to honor our parents, grandparents and for the thousands of victims of the Genocide against the Greek people in the Ottoman Empire, some 90 years ago. Over 700,000 Greeks souls from the region of Pontos, the rest of Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace became victims of the Genocide.

The presence of Hellenism in Anatolia dates back 3,000 years. The Greeks of Anatolia created thriving communities and produced high culture. During the Byzantine times, the Pontian dynasty of Κομνηνοί, produce emperors that rule the Eastern world for more than 200 years. The Empire of Trebizond finally falls in the hands of the Ottomans in 1461, 8 years after Constantinople. For four hundred years the Greek world remains under the Ottoman rule, until the Greek revolution in 1821 and the subsequent creation of the Modern Greek state (Βασίλειον της Ελλάδος). The Greek state, however, is small, and many Greek communities still remain under Ottoman rule: Northern Greece and Anatolia. As subjects of the Ottoman empire, and despite the apartheid and hardships, Greeks thrive as merchants and intellectuals. At the beginning of the 20th century, they controlled much of the economic activity of the empire—and constituted approximately 20% of the population (two million people).

By 1908, the Ottoman Empire is losing territories, especially in the Balkans during the Balkan Wars 1912-13 and World War I. This creates a surge of extreme nationalism. One of the strongest organizations, the Union and Progress Committee (CUP), emerged as a savior of the ailing Empire by promoting Turkish racial supremacy and a plan for ‘Turkey for Turks’. This plan wants to create a Turkish state out of the multi-ethnic Ottoman empire, and this means that all non-Turkish minorities must be exterminated. This plan sealed the fate of the Christian populations (Greeks, Armenians, Assyrians).

Persecutions started by pillaging villages (Φόκαια, on the north cost of Asia minor, in 1914), boycotting businesses, and targeting Greek and Armenian men. In 1914, for first time, Christian men were conscripted into the Turkish army. They were sent to labor battalions to build roads in the Caucasus and other places. Greek and Armenian men died by the thousands from cold, hunger and other privations. **According to the late historian, professor Harry Psomiades "the**



average life-span of a Greek or Armenian men 17 to 45 years in the labor battalions was generally two months." My grandfather lost his life at the age of 44 in the labor battalions.

Once the Christian men were eliminated, the CUP put into effect a relocation plan for

women, children and old men. In 1914 there were mass deportations of Greeks in Eastern Thrace and along the Aegean coast. In 1916 Pontian women, children and old men are deported to the interior of Turkey and as far as Syria. Thousands of them died or killed on their route to the interior.

From 1914 to 1917, more than 500,000 Greeks were expelled from their homes and deported to the interior, with much loss of life. In 1919 more atrocities and deportations continue in the Pontos region while in September of 1921, the CUP campaign of terror and extermination resulted in the arrest and execution of hundreds of prominent Pontians on trumped-up charge of treason for an Independent Pontos.

May 19, 1919 marks the emergence of the national leader Kemal Ataturk who appeared in Samsun to organize the Turkish armed bands to save Turkey from the Allies i.e., the foreign powers who were to partition the Ottoman empire. Kemal met with the notorious Topal Osman giving Topal, the executioner of the Pontians, the green light of extermination of Greeks as well as the remaining Armenians who survived the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1916.

The same month and year, May 1919, the Greek army landed in Smyrna following the Allied Powers decision to protect the ethnic Greeks in the region. The next three years of the Greco - Turkish war, the defeat of the Greek army in August of 1922 and the Destruction of Smyrna in September marks the end of the Greek presence in Anatolia and **The Great Catastrophe**. Those who survived were faced with the choice of leaving Anatolia by the end of September 1922 as ordered by Kemal Ataturk, convert to Islam or sent again to the interior which meant death. Before 1908, Greeks were approx. 20% of the population (2 million). By 1923 and the subsequent exchange of populations they are 0.0025 % (just a few thousand, including the Greeks of Constantinople who were exempted from the exchange).

A mass exodus started in the Pontos region while those in the quay of Smyrna during the great fire were desperately trying to save themselves from the engulfing fire, the raping and killing by the Turks while waiting for the ships to carry them across to the Greek Islands. For weeks the allied American, British, French and Italian war ships under strict orders by their governments stood by observing neutrality not to offend Kemal who gave orders to separate men from their families and to be sent to the interior. Thousands of exiled men died leaving behind widows and orphans. The Allies not only betrayed the Greek people but turned a blind eye to a crime against humanity.



The years 1922 and 1923 mark the mass exodus over a million desperate souls who survived the expulsions and massacres. Boats from Smyrna unloaded destitute

Greeks to refugee camps in Chios, Mitylene, and other islands of Greece as a first location before they could be relocated to mainland Greece. Makronisi island was established as a quarantine station for incoming refugees to avert the horrors of a plague-swept Greece. Typhus and smallpox yielded a death rate of 1,000 people daily.

Others from the Pontos region were not allowed to Greece because most were infected with various illnesses. As a first stop, they were brought to holding camps in conditions unfit for animals such as the notorious Selimyeh Camp, the Turkish army barracks. In this camp between **30 and 300 refugees died daily from typhus, cholera or smallpox according to the late Professor Psomiades.**

My father had to go through Selimyeh bringing his orphan siblings to Greece. It was his worst experience and never forgot the horrible ordeal.

The history of Anatolian Greeks is, sadly, not remembered as much as it should. The Greek Prime minister of Education himself, Nikos Filis, has repeatedly, on record, denied the genocide. Denial is the last phase of genocide—and Turkey still denies that the genocide of Greeks, Armenians and Assyrians ever happened. Turkey, in fact, spends thousands of dollars to lobbyists in the US and other countries every year to promote genocide denial activities.

Today, a hundred years later, refugees are trying to escape the war zone in the Middle East. Among them, many Christians; their villages burned, their churches and homes destroyed. Many lives are lost as desperate refugees are trying to escape to Greece and Europe. Here again, a hundred years later a similar tragic story unfolds in the Aegean. Destitute people uprooted from their homes are seeking to stay alive.

Today, the Greek people are distinguished for their compassion and kindness towards the thousands of the refugees. Despite Greece's economic crisis and hardship, the people of Greece provide

whatever help they can, and support those humans in need. **Recognizing the first genocide of the 20th century against the Greeks, Armenians, and Assyrians is a necessary step, for humane societies, in order to devise strategies of preventing crimes against humanity to happen again. Our gathering eve year in May for the memorial service honors the lives of the hundreds of thousands of Greeks that were lost in the genocide.**

Δεν ξεχνούμε! We do not forget! Αιώνια τους η μνήμη!

George Mavropoulos, Director

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