



# **The Objectives of the Persecution of the Greeks of Turkey during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and an Assessment of the Anti-Greek Riots of September 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of 1955.**

**Professor Neoklis Sarris**, Department of Sociology, Panteion University, Athens, Greece.

The Peace Treaty of Lausanne which was signed on July 24 of 1923 stipulated the reciprocal exchange of populations of "Orthodox" Christian Turkish citizens with the "Muslim" Greek citizens who lived in Turkey and Greece. Reciprocity here is a manner of speech. In point of fact, the exchange was not a reciprocal exchange of "one-to-one" but rather 1.200.000 "Orthodox Christians" to 400.000 Muslims. (let us not forget that more than 2.200.000 Greeks lived within the borders of contemporary Turkey at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century)— using simple arithmetic this follows from the number of victims of the persecutions who were expelled by the extreme nationalists of the Neo-Turk *komitat* "Union and Progress" and the sectarian following of Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the New, modern, Turkey. In any case, it is a fact, as the prominent Turkish researcher Taner Akçam states, that contemporary Turkey *"has been founded with the blood of hundreds of thousands of innocent people"* (referring to the Christian populations). In effect, the exchange followed the ratio of "one-to-three."

In order to understand the events that followed, it is crucial to keep in mind the history of the exchange of populations, which was criticized then by the international community as an inhuman measure. The demand for such an exchange was first put forward by the Neo-Turks, especially after the Balkan Wars, and in parallel to a wave of expulsions that took place aiming at the expulsion of Greek origin citizens from the territory of the Ottoman Empire.

As soon as the negotiations started in Lausanne, in October of 1923, a committee of "Minorities" was constituted and charged with the task of formulating protective clauses – especially for the minorities of Turkey. This is made clear in the relevant articles of the Treaty that attribute obligations to Turkey—and only in the last article is it mentioned that the same applies to Greece, in respective measure. The Peace Treaty of Lausanne is a revisionist pact since it revises the Treaty of Sevres. As is known, World War I ended with two Treaties, the Treaty of Versailles for Germany and Austria-Hungary, and the Treaty of Sevres for the Ottoman Empire. For example, Hitler was a revisionist since he sought to reverse the first Treaty but in the end was not able to. Ustafa Kemal, however, was able to reverse the Treaty of Sevres, which did not focus on Greece alone. Suffice it to say that less than 5% of those affected concerned Greece territorially (keeping in mind that 18% of the population was Greek). To a much greater percentage it concerned Kurds and the Armenians, since it foresaw the foundation of the Armenian and the Kurdish states. Thus, despite the fact that the Treaty of Lausanne is a revisionist Treaty, the only difference, and it is a slight difference, from the respective Treaty of Sevres is regarding the protection of minorities. And this is almost entirely due to the impact the persecutions of Christians during WW I and its aftermath had on international public opinion.

These articles concerned those who would remain – since any exchange of populations had not been decided upon from the beginning. During the time that transpired between the loss of the Greek forces in Asia Minor and the initiation of negotiations in Lausanne -approximately two months- over half of the Orthodox Christians had been violently persecuted and had fled to Greece, abandoning their homes. It was estimated that in the end approximately 500-600 thousand would remain, roughly as many Muslims were residing in Greece. It was for this group initially that the articles for the protection of minorities were formulated. The Turkish

representative Rıza Nur Bey felt that there should not be any protective clauses, first because he recognized only religious minorities. His opinion was that there were no national minorities, as Venizelos had insisted on the part of Greece. There were two nations in Turkey, was the claim, Turks and Kurds. The Kurds, however, had identified with Turks. On the other hand, Jews did not express a desire for any special protection and Armenians had already been massacred. Would the entire Conference for Peace focus on Orthodox Greeks? The end result of these positions was the recognition that there are no national minorities but religious ones.

However, as long as the discussions of Lausanne continued, more and more Christians entered Greece and their numbers dropped dramatically day by day. In other words, there was a sense that by the time the final document of the Peace Treaty would be signed, there would be no minority population to protect. Thus, around the end of January in 1923 the "obligatory exchange" of populations was decided. This document accepted what had already been done and, at the very least, protected the life of those who had not yet left for Greece. And Greece's problem of adjusting to the influx of refugees was dealt with by evacuating 400,000 Muslims.

Exempt from this obligatory exchange of populations were the Greek Orthodox Christians of Constantinople and the Muslims of (Western) Greek Thrace. For centuries, Greeks in Constantinople constituted a steady 30-40% of the population. The calculation of these figures usually occurred within the administrative borders of the central district of Constantinople. It is important to remember however that the surrounding area consisted of villages and towns with a Greek population, which, for unknown reasons, was not calculated even by Greek authors. Whatever the reasons for this, Lord Curzon, who was presiding over the Lausanne conference, reported the number of 396,000 Greeks from the very first session. (From a total of 1,000,000—in addition to the Greeks, keep in mind that there were more than 100,000 Armenians, 50,000 Jews and 40,000 assorted Europeans). The Greeks of Constantinople met the same plight as the other Greeks of Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace. From their fear and uncertainty, day by day more of them abandoned their homes and fled, mostly to Greece. While the obligatory exchange of populations was being discussed, their numbers had dropped to 250,000 and when the Treaty was signed in August of 1923, barely 120,000 remained.

Why were the Greeks of Constantinople rendered exempt from the obligatory exchange of populations? The logic which prevailed on the Greek side was the following: Greece did not have large cities to absorb this size of an urban population. In 1922, the largest city—Athens—had a population of no more than 120,000. From Smyrna alone, 300,000 urban Greeks had departed for Greece. In the beginning of the 30s, in a report issued to the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mavridis, a diplomat who was dispatched to the Greek-Turkish negotiations, suggested that it would be best for the Greeks of Constantinople to remain there. In 70 years, he estimated, only a few would be left due to the pressures they would suffer. In the interim, they would leave for Greece slowly, in small numbers, taking their possessions with them and thus not causing a serious refugee problem. These predictions were prophetic since today there are no more than 1,500 Greeks remaining in Constantinople, most of whom are elderly.

One might argue that the parallel exemption of Muslims in Greek Thrace was a counter-weight acting as an assurance for the correct fulfillment of Turkey's obligation to protect the Greek minority in Constantinople. This follows from a simple reading of the articles of the Treaty of Lausanne that concern the minority. Coupled with the observation that the 'Rumioi' (Greek) Orthodox population of Constantinople had almost entirely disappeared, while the Muslim minority in Thrace was thriving we see that, far from reciprocal in their implementation, the Treaty's articles concerning minorities ended up working against Greece's interests.

There was another reason for the exemption of the Greeks of Constantinople from the obligatory exchange of populations. This was much more important, and it affected both Turkey itself and the European powers, especially England and France. According to the official statistics, at the start of the century "Muslims" only had the control of 10-15% of industry of the country, although they accounted for roughly 72% of the population. Domestic commerce as a whole was controlled by Greeks, whereas in the Eastern districts, domestic commerce specifically was under the control of Armenians. The financial superiority of Greeks in Western Asia Minor was absolute. The same for the International trade.

This strange phenomenon was due to the particular structural relationship of the state and society, and the state and the economy. The state, instead of being a *creation* of society, *controlled* both society and economy. In effect, the state was "introduced" to society as a type of "foreign body." In this instance, the state was a class of military bureaucrats, who "presided" over society, draining it of the economy's surplus with which the society could have thrived and even funded its imperialist wars. This schema was absolute during the so-called Classic Ottoman period, during the 15-16 century, and it did not change in important ways after the efforts towards westernization undertaken by Tanzimat during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We are talking about a clearly brigand (or predatory) economy on the part of those making up the state: they were interested in the taxes they would receive which were basically coming from non-Muslims. Taxation was both direct and indirect, as bribery was a healthy and routine occurrence. Aside for this, from a platonic perspective, the cultural concomitant of a religious belief (Islam valued commerce) meant that economic transactions that were unrelated to agriculture were considered "lesser" and not honest activities. Thus, as has been graphically said, even the last grocer of the last village was Christian.

The problem of the expulsion of the Christians, parallel to the resurgence of nationalism in the lower and middle level officers of the Military and the respective bureaucracy of state administration, and in contrast to the nationalism of the Christian populations which was fueled from their lack of opportunity to meaningfully participate in political affairs, in the end led the Greeks of Turkey to gaze towards Greece and the Armenians to create a nation-state. This development had two dimensions:

The first had to do with their refusal to share political power with the Christians that were controlling the economy and the second had to do with the physical debilitation and persecution of Christian populations with the aim of privatizing and securing their properties and the businesses of those who were being persecuted and killed. All the large financial conglomerates of Turkey today, aged roughly 80 years old now, have a nucleus of one or more of the seized Christian operations. For example, the large holdings of Koç and Eczacıbaşı have Greek operations as their foundation while Sabancı's is based on an Armenian business.

The policies of the Neo-Turks of the party "Union and Progress"—responsible for the extensive massacres and persecutions of Christian populations—was named, the policy of "national economy." (Milli İktisat). This policy was implemented in the most violent and absolute way by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) whose social movement was sectarian and the most methodical of the respective one of Neo-Turks. This is the reason that Kemal's struggle was called a war of *rescue* rather than a war of *salvation*—"kurtuluş savaşı". In other words the objective was to save one's skin and simultaneously to be "freed." This also shows in the expression Kemal used immediately after the persecution of Christian populations "we are finally free from them (Greeks and Armenians)—"*nihayet onlardan kurtulduk*"

However, when the Christian populations were persecuted, the economy of the country was left "orphan," as a prominent Turkish author, Melih Cevdet Anday, remarks. The resulting void needed to be filled from one day to the next—from the builder to the woodworker, the baker and the miller. For many decades, the ideal for a Turk, as a Turkish author notes, was to "become a businessman like an Armenian" or "a banker like a Greek". In other words, the Christian populations constituted primary reference groups in the Turkish effort for social modernization. In addition, given the schema described above in which the state is not formed by a society but itself forms the society, the Turkish middle class (with its economic, sociological and specific historical positions) is not the product of societal development but a creation of state intervention.

But while 75% of the economy in all of Turkey was controlled by the Christian ethnicities, almost 75% of the total of economic activity was controlled by what was until then the capital of the state, Constantinople. Had the Greeks of Constantinople been included in the mandatory exchange of populations, then who would have conducted all the necessary administrative and other processes supporting economic activity? In fact, The Greeks and Armenians represented and served English and French interests. These two European Powers did not want their interests harmed or delayed in the time that would be necessary to give the necessary training to Turks.

It is worth remembering that in 1912 when the Neo-Turkish government mandated that all accounting and commercial correspondence be done in the Turkish language, instead of French, many foreign business closed because they could not find the right personnel with the necessary skills and knowledge. At this junction, Greeks and Armenians offered their know-how and often even capital. The usual form of cooperation was the association of one Christian, a Greek for example, with one Turk who offered protection and had connections in the government. Once the business venture stood on its feet, it was fully transferred to the Turkish partner, while the Greek partner who would have already sent his property to Greece, bought an apartment in Athens or Thessaloniki and sent his family members there, would himself finally depart. In this way, both Turkey and Greece were satisfied, since Greece was thus saved from a new refugee problem. This was also the foundation of the Greco-Turkish friendship and financial cooperation in so far as the Greeks of Constantinople were concerned. In 1964 this project was somewhat reversed by Turkey. At that time, approximately 30.000 Greeks were summarily evacuated, in response, as Turkey claimed, to the policy Greece was following in Cyprus. The reason for this was that of course there were also those Greeks with less foresight who lost power when their property was confiscated—and remains confiscated to this day- or the poor and disabled whose safety-net has been partially provided by the Greek state (with the recognition of pension rights etc.).

The periodic persecution of the Greeks of Constantinople (Istanbul after 1923) corresponds to the different phases of development of the Turkish economy as these were understood through the philosophy of "national economy" of the Neo-Turks of the party "Union and Progress" up until the phase of the economic "take-off" of the country. Seen from a long-term perspective, these have no connection with the good or bad state of Greek-Turkish relations. Rather, what happened was that during times of good relations, there were intricate legal measures accompanying persecution whereas in times of bad relations, the Turkish state's interventions were blatant and without disguise. One piece of proof for this can be seen in the fact that no sooner had the notorious agreements of October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1930 been signed by Ankara and the Greek Prime Minister Venizelos, that the Law 2007 was passed on June 1<sup>st</sup> 1932,



stipulating that it was forbidden for non-Turks to work as waiters, hotel personnel, taxi drivers, printers, barbers, photographers, workers etc. This measure needs to be seen in the context of the fact that the newly founded technical schools were at precisely that time producing their first graduates, who would have to be absorbed by the local economy. In addition, the practice of law was forbidden to many Greek lawyers, while the permits were withdrawn from many pharmacies run by Greeks. As a result of these measures, approximately 5,000 individuals were transferred to Greece, with Greece footing the bill.

In 1942, during World War II, the Turkish government enforced the notorious property tax "Varlık Vergisi." According to one of its designers, this tax measure was a blend of Ottoman ambition and Nazism. It had been originally designed by the government of "Union and Progress," during World War I, as a final blow to the prosecutions of non-Muslim populations. There had not been time enough for it to be implemented because of Turkey's losing in the war. A vaguely defined "committee" determined the amount of the tax for each taxpayer in accordance with the size of their property. For non-Turks, the tax often amounted to more than the value of the property. The committee's decisions could not be contested. This meant that those who owed taxes would have their property auctioned off and if this did not result in enough money to cover the amount of taxes they were seen as owing, they were sent to work camps in the depths of Asia Minor with very low wages that were "held" to pay off their debt. For many, this meant in effect that they would have to labor in the work camps for two centuries in order to pay off the inordinately high taxes set for them. It goes without saying that this tax law was written and applied in such a way as to apply only to non-Muslims and non-Turks. As a consequence, the land of non-Muslims, and especially of the Greeks of Constantinople, was transferred over to rich landowner villagers of Asia Minor at very little expense to them. Nonetheless, as Doğan Avcıoğlu remarks, *"the control of international trade remained firmly in the hands of Christians,"* who operated of course as representatives of foreign commercial interests and as importers.

On September 6<sup>th</sup> 1955, while the Talks between Great Britain, Greece and Turkey were unfolding in London in order to find a solution for Cyprus, riots broke out against Greeks in Constantinople, Smyrna and wherever there was some population of Greeks. While these riots appeared as an outburst of popular anger, many were organized by the Turkish government and, in particular, as we have found out in recent years, by a military service similar to the well-known Italian "red brigades". The rioters destroyed homes, churches, schools, cultural foundations, even the Greek cemeteries. In addition, many shops, factories, laboratories and storage spaces were completely destroyed. All the wares were destroyed or stolen. Istanbul looked very much like a bombed city.

At first glance, it seemed that this violence was organized in order to blackmail Greece for its support of the Cypriot struggle for self-determination. In reality, however, judging from the attempt to attribute these events to a "communist conspiracy" it seems more likely that something else was at work behind these actions. A closer look at what happened with regards to the policies concerning imports suggests that the real objective was to remove non-Turks from the lucrative arena of imports.

After the economic depression of 1953 that was the result of the destruction of agricultural production, the then government of Menderes asked for an increase in U.S. assistance. This request was not met. As leverage in the negotiations, the Turkish side argued that U.S. assistance to Greece was sizeable. However, the U.S. claimed that while Greece was facing a communist threat, Turkey did not. The attempt to attribute the atrocities to a

“communist conspiracy” can be seen as a strategic effort to argue that Turkey was facing the same dangers as Greece and thus should receive the same type of assistance. In this context, several Turkish leftist intellectuals, including the well-known writer Aziz Nesin, were arrested

A small sample of the accomplishments of the Turkish government in this regard is that with the events of September 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> and the destruction of the supplies of many goods, Turkey was able to secure a credit of 50 million dollars –culminating in 1958- from EXIMBANK, the national U.S. bank responsible for the promotion of Exports. With this capital, along with the capital secured from other U.S. and International sources like the International Monetary Fund, Turkey applied a system of quotas on various goods and thus offered valuable financial support to importers of its choice. Those importers, who did not receive special permissions, were not able to import goods. In this way, well-known Greek importers faced the dilemma of changing occupations or abandoning Turkey and moving to Greece. The “production” of importers who, in effect, represented U.S. commercial interests was crucial since one of the ways of developing Turkish industry was to have importers produce their goods by starting with a fledgling but quickly developing industrial unit. In short, the events of September 6 and 7, 1955 resulted in the eventual exclusion of Christian minorities from international trade, something the heretofore persecutions and sporadically enforced measures had not accomplished.

Without a doubt, the anti-Greek events of 1955 gave the Turkish government the opportunity to reinforce its position in many ways. For example, using the pretext of the violent events a military law was imposed. It imposed also censorship of the Press that controlled publicity for both opposition parties and the dissent that had been building within the government camp of the Democratic Party.

The report in this paper on the financial results has the objective of emphasizing the existence of an unchanged program for the financial debilitation and disappearance of Christian minorities in Turkey. This was a plan, which has been consistently, almost stubbornly, pursued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The last phase has been in 1974 when the invasion of Cyprus by Turkish military forces led even the last of Greek businessmen to move towards Greece. Given all of the above, there is no need to take any further measures both because there are no more noteworthy Greek businessmen left in Turkey and because the “national” Turkish industry has boomed, according to many important indices.

In conclusion, the developmental phases of the Turkish economy coincide with the various persecutions of the non-Turkish (Christian) minorities, and especially of the Greek minority. At the interim historical level of a period of 50 years, the persecutions executed by the official State -despite the existence of various governments- presents the image of an “ethnic cleansing”. It is interesting that this period of 50 years starts in 1922, continues through WW II, but then is completed after the war, while Turkey is a member of the Western Alliance and supposedly well on its way towards democratization. It is also important to note that this ethnic cleansing has occurred with the tolerance of the international community and it has not particularly concerned those who are devoted to the protection of human rights internationally

