

Greek Labor Battalions Asia Minor

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The final collapse of the Greek armies in western Asia Minor at the battle of Afion Karahisar, August 13-15, 1922, constitutes the last and decisive phase of the reentry of the Kemalist armies into western and coastal Asia Minor. By early morning of Sunday, August 27, the Turkish irregulars entered Smyrna and by that evening the first detachments of Turkish regulars began their entry into the city. Killings, looting, and the final burning of the city (beginning August 31) were accompanied by comparable events and disasters/victories in the rest of western Asia Minor. The conditions of the defeated armies and the local Christian populations were swiftly and radically transformed by the measures that the Kemalists imposed. These conditions, for some fourteen months after the withdrawal of the Greek administration and armies from western Asia Minor, were followed by a harsh regime that envisaged the final destruction of any Christian (in western Asia Minor primarily Greek) populations. This policy had already been implemented in large parts of this region through the joint efforts of the German general Liman von Sanders and the Young Turk regime. The Kemalist government was to complete this erasure that had already begun during the years of World War I.¹

In this short presentation an effort will be made first to examine one aspect only of this second phase, and this has to do with the conscription of so-called labor battalions of Greeks who were removed from the easily accessible maritime shores of the Aegean, marched off to various inland regions of Asia Minor and there subjected to lethal labors. The utilization of enforced conscriptions of labor battalions was a favorite device of the Young Turks, and one that was revived in 1941 when thousands of Greek, Armenian, and Jewish minorities were marched off into central Asia Minor.² The principal source under discussion here will be the literary-historical work of the Greek prose writer Elias Venezis, who was conscripted at age eighteen in 1922 and who served well into

1924. A native of Aivali, he was conscripted in a body of some 3,000 Greek Aivali males.

The author who will concern us is Elias Venezis, a man of considerable literary stature in the field of Modern Greek literature and generally associated with the so-called Generation of the Thirties. He is not completely unknown outside of Greece, as a number of his works have been translated into at least twelve European languages. As is the case with a number of twentieth-century Greek authors, Venezis was shaped by the wars and ethnic politics that absorbed the Balkans and Turkey and by the dire ethnic consequences that these wars had for the local and regional inhabitants. This is one of the factors and ingredients common to the modern literature of Turks, Greeks, Bulgars, Serbs, Bosnians, Armenians, and others.

Venezis and his family were caught up in the aftermaths of the Balkan wars, World War I, and the Greco-Turkish war of 1919-22. Specifically, he and his family lived in Aivali when the city was an important center of Greek culture, second only to Smyrna/Izmir in what the Greeks referred to as Aeolia and Ionia.

After the collapse and final defeat of the Greek armies in western Asia Minor in the fall of 1922, the return of Turkish military administration brought in its wake a complete reversal of the fate of the Greeks in this region. Those who did not manage to escape were subjected to the rage and violent measures of their conquerors. What occurred in Smyrna was in part repeated in Aivali (that is, massacres and burning of Greek, Armenian, and foreign dwellings and businesses).³

Venezis, conscripted into these slave labor battalions at the age of eighteen, remained a slave without any rights and even without any official recognition of his existence for fourteen months. He entered as a youth who had enjoyed the ease, comfort, and education of a middle-class family. When he was finally exchanged fourteen months later, he was almost twenty and no longer a youth, but a man grown old as the result of all the difficulties and cruelties he had suffered at the hands of his military guards and often of local Turks. Later, when he compiled his individual essays on his captivity into a book of twenty chapters, each chapter was given a title, all of which were direct quotes from the lamentations in the Book of Psalms.

Soon after his liberation in the massive Greco-Turkish exchange of populations in 1924, Venezis wrote down his impressions and memories from the period of his "maturation" in the slave labor camps where he had been subjected to these harsh conditions. His work was thus written in its first form at the young age of twenty to twenty-one years and appeared as a serial in a local Greek newspaper on one of the isles from which he could see the Asiatic shores of his beloved fatherland. He later relates that he could not really face the text again until later when he polished it and turned it into the first of many editions in 1931. It may be that upon later reflection he introduced the stanzas from David's Psalms as titles for the various chapters.

The very title of the book, *To noumero 31.328: To vivlio tes skiavias*, is highly significant. By and large those thousands of Greeks in the slave labor camps had received no official identity as such. Therefore, they had no legal or official existence, and without this formally acknowledged identity their fate was of no consequence. They could (be made to) disappear quietly and without any fanfare.

Very soon the anxiety over this condition spread throughout the labor camps, and the fear that they might be killed permeated the immediate atmosphere. Thus the acquisition of an official number of each conscript became a general subject and accompanied all the expressions and discussions as their ultimate fates were foremost in both the minds and the conversations. Venezis was young, highly intelligent and sensitive to the almost innate differences of Greeks and Turks. With these qualities he managed to squeeze through the various tortures, beatings, killings, and illnesses that beset him. The title he has given to this book is thus doubly meaningful and is a direct reflection of the fact that the work is autobiographical. The first part of the book includes the official number that the Turkish authorities finally gave Venezis toward the end of his term as a slave laborer: No. 31.328. And the subtitle, *Vivlio tes skiavias*, translates as "The Book of Slavery."

How then does Venezis see his book? One literary critic wrote, "it is a work notable for its warlike style and tone." To this Venezis replied:

But I do not speak of style and tone. I speak of burned "matter" (*hyle*), of the flesh which drips blood and thus floods the pages of the book; of the human heart which is being torn apart and not of the soul. Herein there is no soul whatsoever, for there is no space for a trip into the regions of the metaphysical. Then flesh when it is scorched as it is here with the red-hot iron, the flesh rises to the heights as an all-powerful deity, and all else becomes mute in its presence. It is often said that there is no pain which is the equal of a moral pain. Such things are uttered by wise men and by books. If, however, you go out on the streets and you inquire of the martyrs, that is to say those whose bodies were tortured while death commands them from above (and it is an easy thing to find such humans as our era has provided an abundance) and should you ask them, you will learn that there is nothing—indeed nothing—in existence which is more profound and more holy than a body which is suffering torture.

And, he concludes: "This book is a dedication or offering to this suffering that comes from pain." Indeed, as noted above, the twenty short chapters of the book carry titles that contain the moaning and weeping of the stanzas of the Psalms. The first chapter is headed by the Davidic phrase: "The travails of death consumed me and the horrors of death encircled me." And the second chapter: "They placed me in a deep grave in the darkness and shade of death." The descriptive narrative has a triple basis of mortal fear, cruel physical pain, and grim death (a death stripped of all alleviating niceties and honor).

Forced conscription of the eighteen-year-old Venezis into the slave labor battalions held but one promise: an anonymous but harsh death. He writes of

his reaction and the reactions of the Greek male conscript upon learning of the conscription order:

"This news brought disaster on our people. For the labor battalions had a long past from the Great War. They had become legend. Thousands of Christians had left their bones in the labor camps. And the tears of their mothers had not yet dried."

Thus it was that Venezis' parents, four smaller sisters, and one young brother were able to take the last boat out of Asia Minor, whereas Venezis was prevented from disembarking with them and was taken instead to the dark, crowded basement of the Aivali jail. He had already been beaten savagely prior to the departure of the boat. This proved to be a ceremony that would constitute his daily diet for the better part of the year that was to follow. On three successive nights, the chief selected eight, then five, and finally two conscripted Greek laborers and had them marched outside the town to be bayoneted to death.

Eventually, the remaining forty-three Greek males were awakened during the night and ordered outside the camp there to begin their long trek (for the few who were to survive) to the various labor camps in the Turkish towns and villages of western Asia Minor. His was the fourth such recruited group that had been sent out from Aivali by the Turkish authorities. His group learned from a wounded recruit that all three of the previous groups, numbering in the hundreds, were bayoneted to death by order of the Turkish authorities. The night was cold, and after a period of some two hours of marching they were ordered to halt. The laborers feared that they were now going to be killed:

They ordered us to sit down, and then they surrounded us at a certain distance. One says that they are going to shoot us. Another says that this cannot be the case for they would in such a circle be shooting at one another. Another replies, no. They will kill us with their bayonets. . . . The guards take two conscripts at a time down the hill and soon they were out of sight.

Since the remainder of the conscripts heard nothing, it was obvious that they were not going to kill the first two conscripts taken down the hill. Then the guards took Venezis and one other Greek down the hill in the same direction. The guards told them to take off their coats and then their jackets, then their pants, socks and shoes, "and we remained only with our undershirts and undershorts."

It was the end of October 1922 and though the sun during the day remained hot, the nights were very cold and accompanied by frost. The first torture had been physical and psychological: the murder by bayoneting of hundreds of Greek male conscripts from Aivali. This second exercise was not only psychological (denuding the conscripts) but also physical, as they were left unprotected from the extremes of the weather. Henceforth, the long and painful marches were carried out without the proper shoes and clothing necessary for sustaining such marches.

At their first nighttime stop, Ayasmat, other tribulations awaited them again. Venezis gives a graphic and dramatic description of the first night outside Aivali. They were quartered in a Greek church now converted into a stable and storehouse. In the meantime, they had taken on a Greek family of three: father, mother, and a young child:

So soon as we had entered it we were assailed by the strong stink of animal dung, sulfur, and "holiness." Deathly silence prevailed. But soon we unleashed our noises from our bitter tasting mouths. We eventually stretched out on the floor tiles wherever we chanced to find ourselves. . . . In the depth of the church there "bedded down" near the altar the family. I understood that it was they from the crying of the little child. It must have been frightened by the darkness. . . . At about eleven, nighttime, the door of the building began to creak. Two or three soldiers began whispering quietly. I edged closer to Argyris, who came close to me as we began to observe. A light was lighted, a candle. And the soldiers began to search. They bent over the sleeping faces as they examined them. They were searching. Soon they reached us, the two male youths, and paused:

"Do you want him?" the one said to the other as he pointed to Argyris.

"Not for the moment."

"Do you want the woman (the mother of the crying child)?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Then you must await your turn."

"I shall await my turn."

They move away from us. Argyris understood all the conversation since he knew Turkish . . . as he lies very close to me I hear his heart beating rapidly, indeed, very rapidly. . . .

"Eli," he murmurs, terrified: "Not that! Not that!" And I also was bathed with sweat from fear.

The candle of the soldiers finally reached its destination, at the church's altar. We suddenly hear a female scream, which comes from that direction, as the screech slaps the bitter air. Then a second outcry, but it is abruptly halted as a hand stifles her mouth, for the soldiers do not want an uproar over the approaching issue. My comrades and I quietly and carefully moved toward the altar so that we can see. . . .

The wife was holding on to her husband with both hands, not wanting to unglue herself from him. The small child lay between the father and the mother as it had not yet awakened . . . it was so calm and was probably immersed in its dreams. . . . In the beginning the soldier pulled the woman gently, but he began to pull more violently. His eyes were swollen with lust and as the resistance of the woman continued and as she continued to resist he pulled all the more violently.

"Save me! Save me!" she cried out. The husband heard her, but he remained speechless and was unable to utter a word, though he tried. The wife cried out to him, "Why do you not kill me? Why do you not kill me?" Moved by her words he manages, desperately to beseech the soldiers: "Have mercy upon us! Have mercy upon us!"

The soldiers gave him a kick in the ribs, and his great mass of a body suddenly reeled back. His wife lost physical contact with him. In an effort to grab at some firm object on which to base her desperate resistance, she accidentally grabbed the leg of the small child alongside her. And now, suddenly awakened, the child began to cry out, "Little mother! Little mother!" For a short while she dragged the child with her. Later she finally released it from her grasp.

They exited from the altar and the soldiers and the woman came to a halt behind a column near the door. One of them took a nearby wooden plank . . . and rested it alongside the column to guard against the sight of the prisoners, but the plank was small and could not hide very much from our view. . . .

And as we watched silently . . . one soldier was struggling to throw the woman down on her back. But she refused to fall. Then two of them grabbed her by her hands and the third soldier grabbed her legs. By now they had abandoned any gentleness as their own hands and bodies labored with rapid spasmodic movements, for they could no longer control themselves. They stretched her out on her back. The middle soldier was trying rapidly to remove her clothes as the others restrained her with their hands pressing down on her breast. In one last desperate effort she struggled to gather her last ounce of strength to resist. She would continue to slip out of their grasp and in doing so would bend and move like a serpent, all the while wailing, "Kill me! Kill me!"

Finally she became calm. There could only be heard a weeping murmur, a complaint. And sporadically she continued to strike her head on the tile floor . . . and we could hear those who were "expressing themselves" on top of her.

To the violence of bayoneting, to the extremities of cold and heat, and to the unhealthy conditions of night stops and exposure to illnesses, now was added the violence of brutal rapes and the violation of the sanctity of the family. Rape was to become a daily exercise to the point that female prisoners were turned to prostitution to sate the appetites of the Turkish soldiers as well as local Turkish villagers. Many of them died from sexual abuse, while others became ill and shamed. Venezis had experienced all this in the first two days of his labor battalion's march from Aivali. All the above scenes were to be repeated ad nauseum for more than a year along with the appearance of ever-newer forms of dehumanization.

Unfortunately for the Greek male conscripts, their human environment underwent constant change because their fellow laborers were being murdered or were dying from the atrocious conditions placed upon them; all the while newer slave laborers supplanted those who fell by the wayside. In addition, guards were periodically changed most likely to prevent the development of close ties between them and their captives.

The unending itinerary brought Venezis to at least seven towns and villages in western Asia Minor. In many of these marches, Turkish cavalry units replaced the foot soldiers as guards. This signaled the beginning of other travails: during these journeys many laborers began to die off almost as if from preplanning:

The new guards that took over were cavalry. They had the bright idea of abandoning the level road and of proceeding through the fields. This was a merciless trial for our naked bodies and swollen legs (and shoeless feet). The earth mounds were dry and hard from the sun as it had not yet rained. We tried to avoid them (the hard mounds) as they throw you off balance . . . but in avoiding them we fell in the thorny bushes which drove us mad:

"I can no longer continue! I can no longer continue!"

We were all screaming, and yet we all ran that we might not be left behind and thus killed by the guards. So one was trying to run past another—an insane competition that was drowning our complaints. We would remove the thorns from our feet while trying still to continue running. The cavalrymen ran behind us and were striking us with their rifle butts so that we could not stop. We were like a disheveled herd of animals that run about on the plain in search of some shelter as they smell the oncoming storm.

Earlier, both Venezis and Argyris had been forced to surrender their shoes and had managed to get the soldier's ill-fitting pair of army shoes—they were far too large, so the two laborers had split the pair so that one wore the right shoe and the other the left shoe. But, because of its ill-shaped form and poor manufacture, the single shoe proved to be an instrument of torture in their long and difficult journeys.

"I could not raise the weight of the comrade's large shoe. The sweating, stinking foot would slip and dance within this ill-fitting shoe. I took it off and held it in my hands. But then my instep, so used to its protection, began to tremble from the [hard] field. It became hot and threw off sparks. I tore a piece of my underwear that had been left me, and I bound the foot."

The forced removal of their shoes and clothes began to join in the assault on the health of the conscripts. To these were added severe thirst and hunger:

The sun was ascending the skies, burning, hostile and merciless. And so, thirst began to burn us. The dust became glued to our tongues which came in and out of the mouth as though they had been wound up. We were spitting in order to get rid of the bitter taste . . . but our mouths were completely dry . . .

We cried out, "Water, water!"

"What?" replied the officer of the guard.

"Su, su [water]," we would shout out in Turkish.

"Water?" the guard responded. "Well [we shall see]."

We arrived near a spring. But they kept us some 20 meters distant from the spring. The soldiers went in order, drank, watered their horses, and filled their canteens. They were drinking water by the handful, and much was falling and dripping about. The prisoners cried out, "Mercy," but to no avail. They kept us far from the water. They allowed only the females and the little child to go and drink. Then they marched the prisoners off for about half an hour until they came to a swamp, and there was deep green grass growing nearby. There were many mosquitoes. And the trees close by provided shade, and there were also small birds mating in the leaves.

"Here, drink!" the commander ordered. We fell on the swamp water and were drinking it by the handfuls . . . this polluted water. We poured it on our burned faces and chests so that all our blood and life might be flooded with water . . . water. One of our comrades shouted, "Don't. Do not drink it, comrades. It is the white death."

We responded: "White, black, green, let it come, comrade!" Our comrade made one last effort: "Dysentery will assail us." But, in the face of all this water in our mouths, and the latter were dripping water, and in the face of this challenge, our

comrade was seized and so finally he buried his face in the swamp water where he drank and drank.

Thus our thirst was assuaged. I stretched out on the grass. . . . Someone near me was chewing quietly. I gazed at his mouth and saw that he was eating grass and when he would spit it out he would proceed to chew fresh grass. I bent over the earth and I began to chew myself. For some time I chewed the bitter substance of the grass. I did this from a hidden joy of remembering how it is and what it was that a human eats.

It was not long before dysentery appeared in the labor battalion, which was so weakened by the lack of clothing, healthy water, and food, and by the beatings and exhausting labors. The office of the guards knew full well that the swamp waters, grasses, and encampments filled with urine and excrement would eventually lead to death. Often there was no roof to shield the workers from the cold and rain, and so the human population of the work battalion was constantly changing, decimated by deaths and replenished by other equally suffering laborers. The drinking of swamp water became a regular part of the diet and those who survived, survived. The others met sorrowful and painful demises.

At one point, Venezis met up with a group of thirty Greek Orthodox priests from Aivali who had also been deprived of their clothing, save for their under-clothing. On observing the beating of one of the priests, Venezis remarked that this particular man had given him Holy Communion in Aivali when he was still a child. On marching out of Fergamon, the priests had joined Venezis' labor caravan. The old priest gave out and could no longer walk:

The column halted. Trouble. The soldiers were cursing. The old priest did not wish to continue. He fell. The commander ordered: "Grab him by the hands." Two of us grabbed him by his armpits and we continued the march. But his legs could not walk and so he was dragged. We halted once more. By now furious, the commander came from behind and struck him thrice in the small of the back . . . in order to "enliven" him. He slipped out of our hands . . . and fell. The soldiers dragged him to the side of the road and they released him face down and then began to beat him with their rifle butts. He did not even groan, only his tongue began to lick the earth to see if it were dry or bitter.

From the heights of Attalus, a few meters from where we were, the Turkish children were playing, and they ran downhill to the scene. The soldiers withdrew in order to continue our march and the children began at once to stone the body which was in its death throes. For some time we could hear the dull thud of the stones as they began to accumulate atop the priest.

As they continued their march the same incidents marked their journey, a mere repetition of the hateful events and experiences that had marred their progress from the night that they left Aivali. Venezis now repeats them with almost monotonous regularity: "We began again to thirst mightily However they would not stop so that we could drink."

The soldiers had taken two young Greek girls for their sexual satisfaction. Finally, the commander of the guards realized that the young fifteen-year-old girl had been so brutally and frequently raped that she could no longer walk. As she lay down on the ground from exhaustion, dying, the officer kicked her

with his booted foot and she fell from a height of some 10 meters and rolled into the rapidly flowing river below. So he ordered the death caravan to march on until midnight. The young girl could no longer service his needs.

By this time their thirst was now joined by hunger, both of which would experience constant interruptions:

It was noon on the next day. We were marching on the plain. Suddenly in the middle of this desolation, a group of cavalry blocked our way. They were guerrillas, and they were armed to the teeth.

"Halt!"

What did they want? They took the soldiers aside and spoke with them, in the beginning with low voices which then gave way to shouts and quarrels. They did not agree. Suddenly and by signal these horsemen drew their pistols and aimed at us and at the soldiers. Pandaemonium broke loose . . . each one of us ran for cover behind the trees. When we recovered we saw that the horsemen had quickly disappeared. There were some rifle shots on either side. Later, silence. On gathering we observed that one of the girls was no longer with us. The last female that was now with us was the girl from Ayasmat, and she was weeping over the fate of her solitary female companion. . . . A few hours later hopelessness overcame us once more and we began once more to summon death.

After several days of forced marching they arrived at Kirkagach, where they were quartered in the basement of a church:

In the morning they put us to clean the roads. Those who were ill remained behind where they were beaten for being sick. On the road the villagers gathered and, on spotting us, began to spit on us. Afterwards they took us back to the basement where, in a little while, the small children came to play. They had pieces of bread, cigarette butts, and melon rinds. The children would drop the melon rinds so that they would fall exactly on the beards and stomachs of the priests . . .

The basement was narrow and small and so it was literally impossible for all the prisoners to lie down to sleep. Further, the guards, as usual, would refuse to allow them to leave their prison in order to relieve themselves at night, and so Venezis and the other captives were forced to relieve themselves where they were. But the most frightening event was that the guards removed half of the laborers, tied them together with a rope, and then took them away and murdered them.

In addition to such terrible developments, the weather was also changing:

As the days passed the weather turned very cold and we struggled to cover our nakedness. I had found a sack thrown aside. I made a hole in the middle through which I passed my head and I tied it with string around my waist. It was good. I also managed to gather discarded paper and I fitted it in on my skin. And other comrades did whatever they could. Two had managed to beg for some women's [old and colored] clothing. Thus, when we gathered, these two stood out, like birds of paradise. We still suffered from our feet as we were barefooted. We also suffered from the lack of covers at night. We simply had none. It was thus that we were forced to go to bed one leaning against the other.

Venezis' labor battalion changed with the death of the majority of his original fourth group and by the infusion of remnants from other battalions, which had suffered similar decimations. Eventually, he was taken by train to Magnisa on the Aegean coast, where he received his long-desired official number 31,328 and so felt secure as the exchange of populations was now a diplomatic reality. He was one of the twenty-three survivors of the roughly 3,000 recruited male laborers from Aivali. Less than 1 percent had survived the brutal impositions of the Turkish regime. But even after he arrived in Magnisa in the large concentration camp, safety still was not certain. The weak surviving laborers often fell victim to epidemics of typhoid fever. The presiding officer would come into the camp in the morning and ask:

"Are there any corpses?"

"There are."

And they gathered the corpses in tens or twenties, as many as there were and they would throw them into a ditch.

Indeed, the epidemic of typhoid fever had already destroyed the camp prior to the arrival of Venezis. As precautionary measures he and others were required to take baths and to have their heads shaved by slave barbers in order to do away with the lice:

I had not been able to wash myself since that moment when I was apprehended, many months ago. I now scraped off the filth from my body—filth that was my own possession, and so I was somewhat saddened. My large fingernails were now packed with dirt, which eventually began to run down.

Though Venezis had survived untold hardships and had defied death in many forms, shapes, and circumstances, he still feared that now he might perish from the epidemic. Further, his diet did not improve much, and his difficult labors continued. The first sign of alleviation came with the announcement that Dallara, a Spanish official, was appointed to examine the conditions of the prisoners and the "care" that the Turkish government was providing them:

Thus it was that one morning they took about sixty of us slave laborers for a small-scale forced-labor. The job was a little outside the town of Manisa. Near the railroad tracks there reaches a huge ravine within Mount Sipyo. It is called [in Turkish] Kirtikdere. It is reckoned that some 40,000 Christian men and women from Smyrna and Manisa were slaughtered during the first days of the catastrophe [the arrival of the Kemalist armies in Smyrna]. The corpses began to disintegrate and the water of the ravine, which descended from mountain, began to drive the corpses to the edge of the ravine where they reached the road and railroad tracks. Since the Spaniard Dallara, seated in his wagon-lit train, smoking a cigar, would have been looking out of his window and marveling at the beauty of the landscape, he would suddenly see the corpses. It would have been like the burst of some bomb-shell. Accordingly, our labor battalion was obliged, all day long, to shove the corpses back into the ravine

so that they could not be seen. In the beginning this labor consisted of grasping and holding in our arms these corpses and thus to carry them away. It was a repugnant labor. But after a few hours these emotional reactions passed and the slave laborers began to make a macabre joke of their task.

"What are you holding?" one would ask.

The other looks down at what he is holding in his embrace, and as he continues walking, he replies: "Two skulls, five shin bones, six teeth."

"Are they male or female?"

"They seem to be male."

"You have not looked carefully, comrade."

On a number of shin and hand bones we found pieces of wire. The Christians must have been tied to one another . . . but with the downward journey [carried by the current of the water] the accompanying skeleton must have torn loose from its partner.

"Look here," he said. It was a little child. On seeing this, the disturbed Muslim guard murmured, "Allah! Allah!"

"How old was it?"

"Well it must have been two years old."

Early in the evening we had finished our job. The sergeant goes to the railroad tracks to see if anything is visible from the tracks. Nothing was to be seen, and he reported:

"Everything is in order."

On our return we stopped at a spring and washed our hands and faces, in order to have some relief. One of our comrades asked, "What will become of the bones?" Miltos looked at him calmly:

"Don't you know what happens to the bones?"

"No."

"They become fertilizer, comrade."

"What?"

"Fertilizer. You will see, for one day it will sell at a good price. You will see."

Miltos was a man who had traveled about, and he knew many things:

"Certainly, it will happen exactly like this: One day there will arrive from Southampton a certain person. He will straighten his eyeglasses, and he will examine the goods [the bones]. . . . He will grade the quality extra-fine for chemical fertilizer. 'How much a ton?' he will ask.

"So much"

And the purchaser will say: "But elsewhere we purchased Turkish goods, Bulgarian goods, Russian goods for less."

But the local commercial agent will respond, "But this is real Hellenic material."

"Really, it is genuine?"

"Yes."

"Well, in that case I shall pay the price."

And so the purchaser will agree to a price one *kurush* higher inasmuch as Pericles and Ictinos have entered the equation.

With this macabre reference to the slaying of thousands of Greek Christians, we abandon Venezis and his account of the life and fate of the conscripted labor battalions in western Asia Minor.

Venezis' account has informed us of the conscripted labor battalions recruited from Greek males in western Asia Minor. A second compact mass of

Greek Christians lived on the Black Sea coast and in the rugged mountain terrain immediately to the south of the coastline in the regions between Inebol and Sinope in the west and Trebizond and Batum in the east. The Greek Christians constituted important commercial and religious entities in the towns of Sinope, Oinoi, Ordu, Kerasus, Trebizond, Surmena, Rize, and Batum, as also in the agricultural zone and area of intensive animal husbandry in the many hundreds of Greek villages in the immediate plains and mountain slopes in the adjacent regions to the south of the coastal towns. The Balkan wars, which constituted an unmitigated disaster for the Ottoman Empire, resulted in the flight of thousands of Balkan Muslims (of various ethnic backgrounds) to what was left of the Ottoman Empire, eastern Thrace, and different parts of Asia Minor. Thus, it came about that many were sent to the Pontus region where the demands of the Ottoman government that they be given shelter and food by Greek villagers and city dwellers caused immediate friction between the newly arrived *muhajirs* (refugees) and the local Greeks. The embittered newcomers thus became the enemies of the local Greek population, an enmity that was to be reinforced by the needs of the Ottoman state, first, and then by those of the Kemalist state.⁴

The Young Turk regime implemented its nationalistic policies at the beginning of World War I, when it violently removed the Greek populations of Thrace and northwest Anatolia and granted their houses, shops, and fields to the *muhajirs* who came to replace them. Many Greeks were murdered.

When the war broke out and Turkey entered on the side of the Germans and Austrians, the successes of the Russian armies after the battle of Sarikamish transformed existing tensions in Pontus into the outright persecution of its Greek minority. The Turkish regime under Mustafa Kemal would finally remove all Greeks from the region. This was accomplished through a series of local and state actions that included massacres, the uprooting of most Greeks from their urban and rural habitats, the destruction of hundreds of villages, widespread looting and arson, the confiscation and destruction of property, the institution of massive slave labor battalions and death marches, and the reduction of women to what was often unremunerated prostitution.⁵

Between the persecutions of the Pontian Greeks, there transpired the meeting of the Ottoman Parliament in Istanbul on November 4, 1918, at which time the Greek member of Parliament from Pontus, Emmanuel Emmanouelides, set before the members of that body eight matters, of which the seventh had to do with the labor battalions:

On the occasion of the conscription there were created the labor battalions. They [state authorities] destroyed through starvation and through general deprivations 250,000 from the men thus. . . . We ask: "What does the new government know of the perpetrators? What does it think on this matter? And, when will it initiate the measures that it is able to undertake?"⁶

Here we shall pursue the original sources on the specific matter of the conscripted labor battalions of Greek males subject to military conscription. Thanks to the recent publication of the huge fourteen-volume work *The Genocide of the Pontian Greeks* by Konstantinos Photiades we are faced for the first time with a systematic effort to marshal thousands of documents and to write an orderly history of the event. The first three volumes of the work give Photiades' view of its history based on the following eleven volumes of documents. His documentation is, as a whole, consistent as to the rough numbers of conscripted, but it is not always clear whether the total numbers refer to conscriptions in Pontus or to more general figures of Greeks conscripted everywhere.

Photiades reproduces part of a German diplomatic report sent to Berlin on May 12, 1918, and which informs its superiors that "by the end of 1917 more than 200,000 Greeks were conscripted between the ages of fifteen and forty-eight. Many of them died from abuses, illnesses, starvation, and the cold weather."⁷

On October 12, 1918, the metropolitan of Trebizond informed the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople of the trials and tribulations of his flocks, singling out the creation of the conscripted labor battalions as the most fatal of the many measures that the Turks inflicted on the Greeks of Pontus. Though this document was composed in October of 1918, it is implied that these conscripted labor battalions had begun much earlier. Indeed they were already in the documentary evidence at least from 1916, when the metropolitan sent the patriarch an evaluation of the terrible conditions under which his people struggled to survive:

The indigenous Greeks who have been conscripted, as they are not able to pay the fee for exemption, are forced to transport military supplies, or to work to build military bases, bath houses, and roads while they and their families are deprived of the provision of food. At times they [the Turkish authorities] threaten to deport them to Sivas or elsewhere [i.e., where cold climates increase the likelihood of death], and they are forced to pay money to avoid such movements. This tragedy continues today.⁸

As seen in the memoirs of Venezis, a very large percentage of those condemned to the labor battalions died before their labors could be finished. The contemporary memoirs of Antonios Gavrielides (1924) give a frightful description of the conditions under which the Pontian conscripts lived, worked, and died. Those who could afford to pay the 5 Turkish gold liras for the *bedel* (military exemption tax) had to pay annually and eventually had to sell their property to get the cash. At the same time, the wives, elders, and children of the conscripted laborers who were left behind endured the oppression of those who ruled them: sexual demands, the burning of houses, extortion, and so forth. The laborers, continues Gavrielides, were subjected to frequent and brutal beatings, starvation, illness, and frequent death.⁹

On March 10, 1916, the lower cleric of Argyropolis (Gumuskhane) reported to his metropolitan in Trebizond the conscription of all males between the ages

of fifteen and fifty-one from Argyropolis and its environs into the labor battalions. On March 17, others were marched from Erzerum to Kelkit and Herriana to clean the roads.

On December 13, 1919, the total effect of the labor battalions on the local population was summarized by a document of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs as based on the individual reports of the metropolitans of Trebizond, Chaldia, Colonia, Amisos, and Neocaesarea. The metropolitan of Trebizond reported, in addition, that the total number of his flock had been reduced from 52,000 in 1914 to 23,000 by 1919. He also made specific reference to the devastation wrought by the labor battalions:

The relatively more prosperous were first robbed of their wealth and then sent off to the interior where they died from evil treatment and deprivations, the remainder were first conscripted and were put in the accursed labor battalions where a wretched death awaited them.¹⁰

As late as May 1919, the appearance of the Turkish army in the district of Kars (in Cilicia) brought into action the conscripted labor battalions in the region's twenty-seven villages.¹¹ The physical condition of the conscripted Greek labor battalions was of such poor quality that the death rate was very high. One Greek physician observed the following:

During my stay in Islahiye, I saw labor battalions conscripted exclusively of 5,000 Greeks from Denizli. They were decimated in a very few months. Starvation, forced labor of a daily work schedule of twelve uninterrupted hours of hard labor, sunstroke, illness, and deprivation of all necessities brought conditions in which barely 1,000 managed to survive. There would enter the hospital daily 100 sick persons, the majority of whom would die the following day.¹²

The Kemalist regime continued the brutal conscription into slave labor battalions in both western and northeastern Anatolia after the fall of the imperial Ottoman regime. It was doubly "profitable" to Kemal and his new government since it destroyed the military and economic force of the Greek male population, all while utilizing the very last strengths and abilities of the Greek conscripts to build much of the material base and infrastructure of Turkey. As one Greek physician in the Turkish military service observed:

I shall only describe here what I observed during my four-year military service [in the Ottoman armies]. I covered Anatolia from Erzerum to Kaiseri and from Kaiseri to Baku! I am bound to note here that the great highway from Erzerum to Ulukishla, with all its crossroads, were built during this war and they were built exclusively by Greek hands, that is by the (Greek) conscripts of the *amele taburu* [labor battalions] who labored and who died under the well-known circumstances.¹³

The testimony of Eleni Karipoglu concerning the final phase of the destruction of much of Bafra's Greek community by the Kemalist forces also contains

a description of her sixty-day flight, along with women and children, in the snow-laden mountains toward Tokat. It is similar to the account of Venezis on Mt. Sipylon: "During this march we encountered thousands of corpses, some were frozen, and others had been killed, all surrounded by wild dogs which were eating the corpses."¹⁴

The pairing of the lethal but constructive labor of the Greek male conscripts with their death out of which the material foundations of the modern Turkish republic were often created calls to mind a medieval anecdote from the life of the famous Persian mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi, who lived in thirteenth-century Konia among Turks, Persians, Greeks, Armenians, and Jews with whom he had close relations. The anecdote is related by the fourteenth-century Mevlevi dervish biographer of Rumi and his successors as heads of the dervish order. On seeing that his friend Salah al-Din Zarqubi had hired Turkish workers to build and create a garden, Rumi chided Zarqubi, stating that for works of construction he should hire Greek workers; for work of demolition he should hire Turkish workers, as Allah had endowed the former with strength and stamina to build and had created the latter with the power to destroy. Though this is a myth of sorts, in the case of the situation in Anatolia during World War I and in the Greco-Turkish war, the Turks certainly destroyed the homes of their Greek neighbors, while the conscripted Greek labor battalions proved essential for the building of public works for the Turkish government.¹⁵

Notes

1. Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism & the Armenian Genocide* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2004), pp. 143-149, and more generally the entirety of chapter 4, "The Homogenizing and Ethnic Cleansing of Anatolia," pp. 115-156. For the collapse of the Greek front in western Asia Minor, see *Istoria tou ellenikou ethncus*, vol. 15, *Neoteros Ellenismos apo to 1913 os to 1941* (Athens: Ekdotike Athenon, 1998), pp. 98-247.
2. 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, 2005), p. 33. Alexis Alexandris, *The Greek Minority of Istanbul and Greek-Turkish Relations 1918-1974* (Athens: Centre of Asia Minor Studies, 2003), pp. 213-214.
3. All that follows in the first part of this study has to do with labor battalions in western Asia Minor as they appear in the book of Elias Venezis, *To noumero 31.328: To vivlio tes skiavias*, 41st ed. (Athens: Vivliopleion tes Etias, 2000). The translations are my own.
4. Konstantinos Photiades, *E genoktonia ton Ellenon tou Pontou*, 14 vols. (Thessaloniki: Herodotus, 2002-2005).
5. For the detailed history of the region during this period, see Photiades, *E genoktonia ton Ellenon tou Pontou*, vols. 1-2. Volumes 4-14 contain a massive and rich collection of important archival documents.
6. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 548-549 and note 415.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 569.
8. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 169.

9. Antonios I. Gavrielides, *Seledes ek mauri ethniki symphora tou Pontou* (Athens: Eleuthere Skepsis, 2002), pp. 9ff.
10. Photiades, *E genoktonia ton Ellenon tou*, vol. 4, p. 237.
11. Ibid., p. 345.
12. Ibid., vol. 4, p. 564.
13. Ibid, vol. 1, pp. 565-566.
14. Ibid, vol. 6, p. 638.
15. This narrative is preserved in the fourteenth-century author Shams al-Din Ahmad al-Aflaki, *Manaqib al-Arif in*, ed. Tahsin Yazıcı (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basimevi, 1980), vol. 2, p. 721. For translations:, see John O'Kane, *The Feats of the Knowers of God* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2002), pp. 502-503; Tahsin Yazıcı, ed., *Ahmet Eflaki, Ariflerin Menkabeleri* (Istanbul: Hürriyet Yayınları, 1973), vol. 2, p. 153; Claude Hurat, *Les saints des derviches tourneur* (Paris: Editions Ernest Leroux, 1922), vol. 11, pp. 208-209.

