

“History from the Bottom Up”

by Ron Levitsky

Joseph Stalin reportedly said, “If only one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that’s only statistics.” This cynical comment contains some truth. For example, the horror of genocide is difficult to comprehend. Perhaps that is why individual stories, such as the Diary of Ann Frank or Elie Wiesel’s Night, so vividly convey the Holocaust in ways that cold, impersonal statistics cannot. There also is the concern that statistics can be manipulated by governments wishing to hide the truth. In the Soviet Union of the 1930’s and 1940’s, Stalin tried to cover-up the economic failures of his Workers Paradise, the number of political prisoners sent to the Gulag, and those starved to death in the Great Ukrainian Famine.

So too was the truth manipulated during and after the Ottoman and Kemalist genocide of their Christian population. The Turkish government still denies this genocide and makes it difficult for scholars to access its official documents.

At the end of the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922), even the Greek government was complicit in manipulating the truth. For example, in 1922 journalist Kostas Faltaitis traveled with the Greek army in Asia Minor. When the military advance turned into retreat, he urged the army to encourage the residents of Smyrna to evacuate via a sea route. The army refused. Nor did publications warn the public, characterizing survivor testimonies as “exaggerated.”

When Faltaitis complained to his editor, “Lachanokardis angrily tossed into the dustbin the articles Faltaitis had written about the massacres that followed the capture of Smyrna.

“They are lies,’ he tells Faltaitis.

“Passengers on board boats in the harbor of Smyrna who could see the massacres told me these things!’ Faltaitis responded.

“The government denies all. It says almost nothing of this has happened.” (1)

Unfortunately, such government cover-ups are not uncommon. Concerning the Darfur and Rwanda Genocides, Sheldon Wardwell warns that “powerful interests” often suppress information dealing with genocide and crimes against humanity. Therefore, researchers need to work from the “bottom up. Wardwell contends that researching “...through repeated individual accounts is a necessary practice for changing the scholarly, legal and political climate around genocide.” (2)

Genocide scholar Paul Bartrop agrees. In “Considering Genocide Testimony,” he contends that “...survivor testimonies play the most crucial role in forming our understanding of what life is like at such times. Regarding the Christian genocide during World War I, “...they are our primary links to the atrocities.” (3) Bartrop contends that genocide testimony is “subjectively true,” in that those giving such testimony either directly witnessed the events or were told them by others at the time of incarceration. (4)

He distinguishes between a judge in a court of law and a historian. A judge looks for specific evidence that will determine an individual’s guilt or innocence. In contrast, a historian is seeking “textures, smells, sights, and contours of a person’s experience,” as well as studying the context of the event. Even if only one witness has survived a genocidal event – especially if there is only one witness – the survivor’s testimony is extremely valuable. (5)

Regarding those who endured the Greek Genocide of Asia Minor, Alexander Kitroeff notes how the very identity of these people shifted in the eyes of the Greek government. Prior to 1922, they were referred to as “unredeemed Greeks,” who would be liberated from foreign (i.e., Ottoman) rule to become part of a greater Greece. After the Greek army’s defeat at the hands of Kemalist forces and a peace treaty signed, the Greek government, not wishing to provoke Turkey, eliminated the label of “unredeemed Greek.” Those Greeks forced from their homeland in Asia Minor became “refugees.” Over 1.2 million of them. (6)

During their forced exile, these refugees endured harassment by Turkish officials and assaults by local banditry. Families became separated, often permanently. Placed in detention camps – often without proper food, shelter, and medical care – thousands died of disease and malnutrition. Add to that the psychological damage of being forcibly removed from the village where their family had lived for multiple generations.

These refugees continued to face difficulties in their new homeland. They often were settled in their own neighborhoods on the outskirts of established towns and, thus, were separated from indigenous Greeks. They were viewed as competitors for limited resources and opportunities. Indigenous Greeks, viewing the newcomers’ accents and other customs as foreign, called them “Turks” and chided them for being “baptized in yogurt.” Refugee women were dubbed “*Smyrnia*,” reflecting how women of Smyrna were viewed as more sophisticated, and therefore less lady-like, than women of Athens. (7) Such difficulties hindered these refugees from speaking-out regarding their experiences during the genocide.

Other factors may have contributed to such reticence. In 1930, Greece and Turkey signed the Ankara Convention, which called for neutrality and cooperation between the two nations, but also eliminated the latter’s obligation to pay the difference between properties abandoned during the population exchange. Such a payment could have brought the refugees much needed financial assistance. The 1940’s were dominated by World War II’s Axis occupation of Greece and the 1947-49 civil war. Greece and Turkey both became members of NATO and were expected to cooperate on international defense.

However, during the 1950’s conditions grew more favorable for bringing survivor testimony to light. In 1955 Greek Cypriots, advocating Cyprus’ union with Greece, began a guerrilla struggle against Great Britain. A few months later, the Turkish government sanctioned a “pogrom” against its Greek residents of Constantinople. According to Kitroeff, “...the deterioration of the Greek-Turkish relations on the island of Cyprus legitimized a politically oriented and nationalistically inflected remembrance of the Disaster.” In 1969, journalist Odysseus Lampsides used the term “genocide” to describe the actions of the Turkish irregular Topal Osman. (8)

Therefore, it is not surprising that, within this anthology, many of the survivors giving testimony did so in the 1960’s. As Kitroeff states, this decade lent a more sympathetic ear to their tragic experiences. In addition, 1962 was the fortieth anniversary of the destruction of Smyrna. Did these refugees feel compelled to give testimony before they passed? Perhaps giving such testimony justified why they had survived, while so many of their family and friends had not. Bartrop explains, “...the need to bear witness is often part and parcel of the reason for survival itself.” (9)

This anthology demonstrates that while each survivor testimony is unique, categories emerge that reinforce certain experiences. Experiences which, in turn, may lead to nuances not

as easily observed in more general studies of the Greek Genocide. A few such categories include the following.

The “Turks” -

While both the Ottoman CUP and the Kemalists waged a brutal and carefully organized genocidal campaign against their Greek subjects, not all Turks participated. In fact, some Greeks giving testimony differentiated between many of their Turkish neighbors, who could be kind and protective, versus Turkish outsiders who harassed and brutalized them.

According to Palasa Seitanidou’s testimony, “[Before World War I] We had calm and good days with the Turks, too. We were like brothers and sisters. We never exchanged bitter words with one another.” ... Things changed only when “The Turks ‘on top’ grew fierce.” ... In 1922, when her family returned to their village, they found their house emptied of its belongings. Neighbors told her that, a few days after her family had left, “...some Turks, not from our villages, broke into the house and took whatever they found.” (10)

Gavriil Konstantinidis and Iordanis Petridis stated that when the savage Topal Osman entered their city, “The Turks, who were fond of us tipped us off and told us to hide....” One Greek was hidden by his Turkish boss, who got some of the *cetes* (irregular brigands) drunk and argued successfully for them to leave the narrator, an orphan, alone. The narrator added that, “In the town, Topal Osman killed only a few people. We owe our survival to the Turks of Niksar who told him that we Greeks were peace-loving people and had nothing to do with the revolution.” (11)

While the majority of the Turkish population, whether through action or inaction, was complicit in the genocide, such testimonials indicate that there were individual Turks who acted as Upstanders, risking their freedom and even lives to save Greeks. One could argue that these survivor testimonials make an even stronger case against those Turks who did nothing.

Guerrillas –

General accounts of the genocide emphasize the vulnerability of the Greek population to the Ottoman/Turkish army, *cetes*, and Turkish peasantry. These Greeks endured continuous harassment whether in their villages or on the death marches. Under such circumstances, simple endurance was an act of heroism.

However, testimonials relate many accounts of Greek men forming guerrilla bands in the mountains and forests, often helped by their wives in the villages. These guerrillas were capable of planning sophisticated military operations, even occasionally going on the offensive.

According to Despina Abatzi, the guerrillas “...lived on the mountain, inside caves. They would come down in secret, to get foodstuff. Women would climb where they were, taking them loaves of bread. It all happened in secret, with danger. Pretending to be looking for their cows they would go to a place they knew to meet their kin. ... They would go down to Turkish villages and steal animals and food.” (12).

Kyriaki Kourtidou stated, “In February 1918, we left Tranon Ftelen and never went back. That is when the guerrilla movement happened in the mountains. ... For five years they stayed in the mountains. The Turks were afraid of them, they were trembling. Three times the Turkish state offered them an amnesty to surrender their weapons, and they did not accept.” (13)

Theodoros Athanasiadis recounted, “...one night, five fellow-Christians came and told Kotza Anastas that there were five hundred people trapped in a cave on the verge of surrendering because they had no more food or bullets to go by....” The guerrillas’ captains

“...immediately sent thirty lads with ammunition who caught the Turks by surprise and rescued those trapped inside the cave.” (14)

The Price of Survival –

These testimonials powerfully document what genocide victims had to endure in order to survive. Their experiences included what amounted to both physical and psychological torture. As one victim wrote, “We endured Christ’s passions.” (15)

As Turkish soldiers would search villages for deserters, they would torture the women in a particular way. Despina Hadjivassiliou recounted, “To force a confession out of them they would take cats and put them inside their trouser legs and then beat them so that they would start to bite, fiercely scratch, and rip the flesh of women with their nails. Blood everywhere and heart-breaking screams! Secretly some of us would cross ourselves and others would curse them.”

Despina also spoke of hiding in a cave while being “...tormented by thirst. We were packed like sardines and had no water at all. We fought over who of us women would drink the urine of the others. Piss is a remedy for dehydration. There was no fear of poisoning.” (16)

But perhaps worst of all was the sacrifice parents had to consider as they and their fellow villagers attempted to sneak through enemy lines. Any noise might lead to discovery and death. According to Dimitrios Vassiliadis, “We stayed on the mountain until 1922. They [the Turks] didn’t leave us in peace, though. Once, the troops came and surrounded us and we had to go through hell to move from one place to another. They even had to strangle children to stop them from crying, for fear of the Turks hearing us; this is how they got through.” (17)

“Textures, Smells, Sights” –

In 1924, for thousands of refugees, Constantinople, held by the Allies, was the first stop on the way to Greece for thousands of refugees. As Professor Harry Psomiades described their situation, “These wretched souls were held in holding camps, in conditions unfit even for animals. In these camps, especially those in the notorious Selimyeh Barracks, between 30 and 300 refugees died daily from typhus, cholera or smallpox. One observer described the camps as ‘a veritable morgue.’” (18)

A powerful description. But add to it this witness testimony: “There were big rooms full of people there. If you found an empty place you just lay down. The people there went through hell. We would eat bread as bitter as quinine and the food ration was but some dark water with a few maggoty beans in it. The Turks wouldn’t give us anything. The food was sent to us by the Americans. No one escaped illness there. Their bellies got all swollen, they grew yellow and then they died. And the doctors who were coming to visit us caught the disease themselves as well. Three doctors died like that.” (19)

There are the undeniable “textures, smells, sights” that, according to Bartrop, make witness testimonies so compelling and, therefore, so necessary.

Alexandra Vasiliadou, the woman who gave testimony to the above horror was eventually moved, with her family, from Asia Minor and settled in Greece. Alexandra said, “But we didn’t really move on. We never stopped thinking of our homeland...”

Thanks to her powerful testimony, as well as others in this anthology, neither can we.

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2. Wardwell, Sheldon (2012) "An Oral and Documentary History of the Darfur Genocide; We Cannot Forget: Interviews with Survivors of the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda," Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal: Vol. 7: Iss.2: Article 9, p. 268.
3. Bartrop, Paul R., "Considering Genocide Testimony: Three Case Studies from the Armenian, Pontic, and Assyrian Genocides." Genocide in the Ottoman Empire – Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks. Edited by George Shirinian. NY: Berghahn, 2017, p. 135.
4. Bartrop, p. 143.
5. Bartrop, pp. 143-144.
6. Kitroeff, Alexander, "Asia Minor Refugees in Greece: A History of Identity and Memory, 1920s-1980s." The Asia Minor Catastrophe and the Ottoman Greek Genocide – Essays on Asia Minor, Pontos, and Eastern Thrace, 1912-1923. Edited by George Shirinian. Bloomington, IL, The Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center, Inc., 2012, pp. 232, 235.
7. Kitroeff, pp. 236-237.
8. Kitroeff, p. 244.
9. Bartrop, p. 144.
10. Palasa Seitanidou (Kavala), interviewed by Eleni Gazi, 4.12.1961. Volume D, p. 255.
11. Gavriil Konstantinidis and Iordanis Petridis (Sevasti, Katerine), interviewed by Aglaia Loukopoulou, May 1957. Volume C, p. 273.
12. Despina Abatzi (Katerini), interviewed by Eleni Gazi, 21.5.1965. Volume C, p. 293.
13. Kyriaki Kourtidou (Nea Sanda), interviewed by Eleni Gazi, 23.11.1968. Volume D, p. 474.
14. Theodoros Athanasiadis (Kleitos, Kozani), interviewed by Eleni Gazi, 26.11.1962. Volume C, p. 349.
15. Kyriaki Kourtidou.
16. Despina Hadjivassilou (Neocaesarea, Katerini), interviewed by Hara Lioudaki, December, 1965. Volume C, p. 216.
17. Dimitrios Vassiliadis (Pilori, Kozani), interviewed by Sophia Dondolinou – Goraniti, 19.5.1965. Volume C, p. 56.
18. Harry Psomiades, Fridtjof Nansen and the Greek Refugee Crisis, 1922-1924. Bloomington, IL, Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center, 2011, p. 44.
19. Alexandra Vasiliadou (Diastavrosi, Kavala) interviewed by Eleni Gazi, 1.12.1961. Volume D, p. 259.