

## Reviews

**Speros Vryonis Jr.: *The Mechanism of Catastrophe: The Turkish Pogrom of September 6–7, 1955, and the Destruction of the Greek Community of Istanbul*. New York: Greekworks, 2005. 660 pages. ISBN 978-0-9747660-3-4. \$75. Reviewed by Evaggelos G. Vallianatos.**

In a few hours in the evening of 6 September and early 7 September 1955, guided mobs of Turks attacked savagely the Greeks of Istanbul and, by means of fire and the crowbar, left forty-five Greek communities in ruins. The Turks, in a performance reminiscent of the 1453 capture of Constantinople by their Ottoman ancestors, terrorized the Greeks while smashing their homes, businesses, churches, cemeteries, schools, libraries, newspapers, and medical clinics. This pogrom effectively ended millennia-old Greek civilization in Asia Minor.

At the time of the 6–7 September 1955 atrocity, Speros Vryonis, author of *The Mechanism of Catastrophe* and an eminent scholar of Greek history and civilization, was a junior fellow at Dumbarton Oaks, a Byzantine research library of Harvard University in Washington, DC. He was startled by the indifference, nay hostility, of his colleagues toward the Greeks of Istanbul who had suffered at the hands of the Turks. Those Byzantine scholars, who in theory were interested in the history of medieval Greeks, did not think the current crime of the Turks against the Greeks was a moral issue. Vryonis was also disappointed with the shallowness of the reporting in the American and British press, praising Turkey for ending the violence but not questioning the role of the Turkish government in the violence. This experience introduced Vryonis to a steady diet of anti-Greek and pro-Turkish sentiments and policies in America and England. The result, fifty years later, is the present book. “Apparently,” Vryonis laments, “human and democratic rights are for the select.”

Vryonis, astonished at the readiness of the US government and academics “to prostitute the truth for money, recognition, and/or political acceptance,” uses *The Mechanism*

Evaggelos G. Vallianatos holds a doctorate in Greek history. He is the author of *From Graikos to Hellene* and other studies.

of *Catastrophe* to expose the slanting and distorting of history for political reasons and personal agendas. But, above all, Vryonis wants his book to show that “distortion of truth is an immoral act in and of itself.” He did that by building a wall of fact. Whatever the political preferences of the innumerable sources of information on the pogrom, the fact of the atrocity stands on its own. Those studying it gain an understanding of certain basic truths and grasp its significance.

Vryonis used American, British, Greek, and Turkish archives to reconstruct the night of terror on the Bosphorus, bringing out of darkness the violence and politics of the vandalism of September 1955. His book, probably the best and most comprehensive study of that monstrous event, answers the questions of who organized the pogrom and why. He combines the findings of the archival testimony with first-person accounts on the pogrom. The result is a dramatic testimony of the ferocity of the pogromists next to an analysis of the cataclysmic effects of the Turks’ vandalism on the Greek community of Istanbul—and beyond. Vryonis also takes advantage of the rich secondary literature on the pogrom, especially the Greek books published immediately after the catastrophe. He complements his meticulous scholarship and powerful narrative with the reproduction of a select number of photographs by Demetrios Kaloumenos, a Greek photographer living in Istanbul. Kaloumenos, ignoring the danger of the Turkish mobs and police, followed the pogromists, documenting their work. He took about fifteen hundred photographs of the ruined homes, shops, churches, monasteries, cemeteries, and print shops. These photographs are an indelible image of the pogrom, its terror, and its material effects.

The organized Turkish violence against the Greeks of Istanbul in 1955 is like a mirror revealing the Turkish, Greek, British, and American interests and policies toward each other. The pogrom expressed the massive fury of the Turks who, in about nine hours, wrecked the Greek communities of Istanbul. This act was full of hatred and rage as well as religious fanaticism and economic envy—all having roots in a former empire that had decimated Greece and Greek civilization for centuries. Adamantios Koraes, the father of the Greek Revolution of 1821 and a seminal thinker who was born in the Ottoman Empire in the middle of the eighteenth century, said in 1806 that all of Greece under the Turks was like a concentration camp. In Greece, he said, one hears murmurs of sorrow, feeling the silence of hopelessness and the coldness of heart. The terror appears with gallows and death.<sup>1</sup>

The other legacy of the pogromists came from the Turkey of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who convinced the Turks in the 1920s that they were a mother race, speaking a language that was a mother tongue of all languages, including Greek. What he failed to

1. Anonymous Greek, *Hellenike nomarchia etoi logos peri eleutherias*, ed. G. Valetas, 3d ed. (Athens: Vivlioekdotike, 1957), 143. Adamantios Koraes published this book anonymously in Rome in 1806.

tell them is that the Turks appeared in Asia Minor for the first time in the latter half of the eleventh century, the time of troubles that became the theme of Speros Vryonis's dissertation. Once in Asia Minor, the Turks kept fighting the Greeks for four hundred years until, in 1453, they captured their empire, including Greece, which they tyrannized for four hundred more years, until 1821.

The conquered Greeks who stayed home had to put up with the "legal and fiscal limitations, and occasional outbursts of fanaticism of an Islamic state." Nevertheless, the Greeks remained a vigorous and prosperous minority, numbering more than 200,000 people in early twentieth-century Istanbul, or 17 to 22 percent of the city's population. The Greeks were "in the forefront of modernization," earning a living as shop owners, physicians, lawyers, engineers, architects, and agents of foreign companies. The affluence of Greeks provoked a boycott of Greek business by the Young Turks in the early twentieth century, a policy that left a toxic legacy for Turkish-Greek relations. The Greek-Turkish war of the 1920s sealed the fate of the Greeks of Istanbul; thousands left Istanbul for Greece. Those who stayed suffered crippling wounds. In 1920, for example, there were 24,296 students in the Greek schools of Istanbul. By 1928, that number had been reduced to 5,923 students.

Yet the Greeks of Istanbul went through a remarkable revival in the eight years before the 1955 destruction. Since 1947, the competition between the democratic and republican political parties of Turkey made it possible for the Greeks to overcome the previous "asphyxiating conditions and circumstances of political life." American investment also started coming to Turkey in the 1950s, which helped further erode the repressive Turkish measures against the Greeks and other minorities. By 1955, the Greeks of Istanbul were doing well in fisheries, maritime supplies, confectioneries, real estate, wine, and food processing. On the eve of the pogrom, early September 1955, the Greeks owned more than forty-five hundred shops in greater Istanbul. Their Balikli hospitals, founded in the late eighteenth century, but impoverished by the policies of the Turkish republic from 1918 to 1947, were refurbished in 1950 to become a great asset for medical care. By 1955, these renowned hospitals treated thousands of Greeks and hundreds of Turks. The hospitals had specialized clinics for surgery, pathology, ophthalmology, tuberculosis, gynecology, neurology, and orthopedics. The Greeks of Istanbul also had first-rate schools, social services, and cultural activities. The remarkable achievement of the Greeks of Istanbul is that, working under a political system that often violated their human rights and threatened their very existence, they created culture and institutions of national or world renown.

The Turks used the pogrom to silence that renown. They crippled the economic foundations of Greek prosperity and inflicted a mortal blow to the standing of the Greeks in Istanbul, making them, overnight, homeless enemies.

The rare instances of discussion of why the 1955 pogrom took place end up explaining that barbarism away, ignoring its destructive psychological and material conse-

quences for the Greeks. The Turks say the “riot” was a spontaneous outburst against the affluent Greeks, especially against the property of the Greeks: it was merely a property crime. Others insist that Cyprus, and the Cypriots’ struggle for independence, triggered the pogrom. Still other Turks argue that an explosion in the Turkish consulate in Thessaloniki was the fuse for the rage of the Turks in Istanbul against their Greek neighbors. After all, the Thessaloniki incident threatened the house where, myth has it, Atatürk was born. So, with Kemal being the “father” of Turkey, the Turks sought revenge. The Turkish government of Adnan Menderes cooked up the communist bogey man whereby the “riot” was a communist project. It is possible that John Foster Dulles, the US secretary of state, who was visiting Istanbul at the time of the pogrom, urged Menderes to put the blame for the pogrom on the communists.

However, the American and British explanations of the pogrom are more insidious than simply turning the attention of Turkey toward the few and disorganized communists of Istanbul. British and American diplomats concluded that the pogrom was like the weather. It had to happen, being one of the inescapable and fated incidents in Turkish-Greek relations, which mirror age-old hatreds in the Balkans and the Middle East. Looking at Greece and Turkey as underdeveloped and beyond the pale of Western culture and, conveniently, not blaming one or the other, the United States and Britain washed their hands of the moral issues of the pogrom. But behind these fake excuses, the United States and Britain remained vigilant. For Britain this meant enabling Turkey to keep causing trouble to Greece, neutralizing Greece’s efforts to assist Cypriots in achieving political independence from Turkish colonial rule. In fact, Britain knew it probably had pulled the trigger for the pogrom. British diplomats used to urge the Turks to start a riot on their behalf, and the Turks obliged, but for their own purpose. The pogrom meant nothing to America, whose sole preoccupation was to maintain the embers of an anticommunist crusade alive. America told Greece and Turkey to immediately forget the “riot” and shake hands.

But it was never easy to shake hands with Turkey, a country that had been enforcing homogenization of its disparate parts. The crude secularist-militarist model Turkey had in mind had been baked in the West, but its core had its own racist theories. Ziya Gökalp, a Turkish writer, advocated that the Turks were the global archetype of morals. Turkish history, he said, was an exemplar of moral virtues. Atatürk grasped this racist illusion to enforce his Turkification policies. The minorities, however, could not be wished away. The Turks had used genocide against the Greeks and Armenians but did not have enough time to finish them off completely. The Kurds revolted in 1925, demanding independence or autonomy. This disrupted Turkey’s war against its Christian minorities, so it responded to Kurdish aspirations with a ton of bricks. The Turkish army spent a good deal of the twentieth century fighting the Kurds and destroyed some four thousand Kurdish villages, employing murder, death squads, and scorched-earth policies with devastating effects. The remaining non-Muslim minorities in

Turkey—Greeks, Armenians, and Jews—had shrunk to insignificance as a result of the racist, nationalist, and repressive policies that sought to obliterate them in the last days of the crumbling Ottoman Empire and during the life of the Turkish state since 1923.

Vryonis says that Turkey looked at those surviving non-Muslim minorities in Istanbul and the nearby region with suspicion. Its behavior toward them had been “one of grudging and limited acceptance, heavily vitiated by calculated acts of state terror and repression, aided and abetted by significant portions of the area’s dominant Muslim population.” When murder would not do, exile and taxes would and did inflict crippling damage among non-Muslim minorities. In the period between the world wars, the Greeks were proscribed from practicing law and medicine; they could not sell insurance and real estate; and thirty trades, including those of tailor and photographer, were put beyond their reach. Those who could not pay the discriminatory taxes, including many Greeks following the Greek-Turkish war of 1920s, were drafted into labor battalions that, in most instances, meant death.<sup>2</sup> Their properties were also appropriated and sold to Muslims.

Despite the persistent record of hostile policies toward the Greeks in Turkey, the Turkish minister of foreign affairs Mehmet Fuat Koprulu denied that Turkey had vital interests in Cyprus. On the eve of the pogrom, he said the Greek rebellion against the British in Cyprus was the business of Britain and Greece. Turkey had nothing to do with it. Koprulu, however, spoke too fast. Menderes replaced him with Fatin Rustu Zorlu, who supported an aggressive Turkish policy toward Cyprus. The British had won him over. A few days after the pogrom, Koprulu accused Menderes of complicity with those who carried out the vandalism of the Greek community in Istanbul.

British diplomats brought Menderes on board for tying Turkish anti-Greek policies at home to the crisis in Cyprus. Vryonis speaks of England “dragging” Turkey into a “violent” intervention during the London conference on Cyprus among Britain, Turkey, and Greece in late August to early September 1955. The collusion of Britain and Turkey at this conference was part and parcel of Turkey’s unleashing of the pogrom against the Greeks of Istanbul. The two events, the Cyprus conference and the pogrom, became indistinguishable. Britain triggered much more than it bargained for, however. By fall 1955, British diplomats counted on some “riots” in Turkey against the Greeks doing good to British interests in Turkey and Cyprus.

The Turkish government also reached the same conclusion, but the prize for the Turks was not Cyprus but the affluent if crippled Greek community of Istanbul. The Menderes administration exploded dynamite at its own consulate in Thessaloniki so as to inflame the Turks at home and prepare the grounds for the real violence in Istanbul

2. Elias Venezes, *To noumero 31328: To vivlio tes sklavias* (1931; repr. Athens: Estia, 2004).

while its diplomats met in London with British and Greek diplomats about Cyprus.

During 1954 and 1955, Menderes co-opted civil society organizations, funding committees for spreading his propaganda for Turkish claims on Cyprus. The administration of the pogrom depended on the leadership of Menderes and his ministers, extending the command and control down to the governor of Istanbul, police, armed forces, political parties, labor unions, and student groups. This statewide involvement in the pogrom was necessary because the task was huge, aiming at the destruction of the property and institutions of eighty-five thousand Greeks living in an area of some forty-five-square kilometers, all the way from the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara. Tens of thousands of Turks, working in pitched fervor and violence, spent nine hours in their vandalism. Their barbarian mission accomplished in the early hours of 7 September 1955, they left the Greek community in ruins, never to recover.

KTC, or the Cyprus Is Turkish Association, an instrument of the Menderes Democratic Party, was the gut of the pogrom. It had some 200,000 members; some 10,000 to 20,000 of whom were part of the wrecking crew. These were pogromists with a mission. On the eve of the pogrom, KTC activists marked the Greek homes and properties for destruction. They had learned a lesson from the 1572 Saint Bartholomew Day massacre in France. KTC was also “a cover for the [Turkish] government and its covert policies on Cyprus.” But, once the pogrom was over, KTC nearly disappeared. It had succeeded in its mission beyond expectation. It had provided the Turkish government a fig leaf for the utter destruction of the Greeks of Istanbul. KTC and the Democratic Party merged and worked together in the planning and execution of their monstrous project. They employed some 100,000 to 300,000 men from all sectors of the Turkish government and society, including thugs, for their crime. They even imported pogromists from the provinces, thousands and thousands of them. They divided them into groups of forty to fifty, arming them with the weapons of vandalism and arson (crowbars, clubs, pickaxes, spades, acetylene torches, dynamite, and gasoline), and sending them out with specific instructions for the destruction of everything Greek.

Since government forces led the pogrom, the Greek consulate and the patriarchate did not suffer damage in the Istanbul-wide savage attack against things Greek. And once the Turkish government declared martial law, the very police and soldiers who had participated and coordinated the looting and destruction of Greek property or had been passive witness to the pogrom frenzy intervened and restored order to Istanbul. Of course, the declaration of martial law in the early hours of 7 September 1955 coincided with the end of the complete smashing of the Greek homes and businesses in Istanbul.

Vryonis says the Turks started on the vandalism project with a “Hellenophobic animus,” first targeting the Greeks of Cyprus and Greece and then zeroing in on the Greeks of Istanbul, this being the result of the “continuity of hatred, suspicion, and envy with which a significant segment of the Turkish people viewed the Greek minority among

them.” And once the Turkish government bought the enticing British offer to demand its part of Cyprus, the Turkish hate and envy of the Greeks became a “national hysteria,” which, by late 1954 and late spring 1955, culminated in nationalistic, religious, and racist outbursts against the Greeks that paved the path to the pogrom and set the foundations for an aggressive policy toward Cyprus. The Menderes administration spread false rumors that the Greeks of Cyprus planned to massacre the Turkish Cypriots on 28 August 1955 and, when the pogrom time approached, Turkish officials bombed their own consulate in Thessaloniki.

Vryonis sees the pogrom as an expression of “the depth of the inherited, historical hatred of much of Turkish Islam for everything non-Muslim.” That’s why religious fanaticism was “at the core of the pogrom’s fury.” This invested the pogromists with limitless violence. Their destruction of the Greeks’ property, and household and livelihood, what the Greeks call *noikokirio*, was “the most extensive and intensively organized” in the five hundred years since Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453. The Turks destroyed more than forty-five hundred businesses and thirty-five hundred homes; they wrecked about 90 percent of the Greek churches, showing off their “fervid chauvinism” and “profound religious fanaticism,” desecrating icons and defecating and urinating on altars. They mocked, beat, and circumcised clerics. They exhumed and knifed the dead in the cemeteries, behaving like barbarians.

The costs of this destruction were enormous, and the Turkish government refused to pay and could not pay. But the moral costs of the pogrom, the violation of the well-being of the Greeks of Istanbul, the terror of the experience, and the elimination of their security, were more brutal and devastating than the economic costs. The pogrom was “a crime of the state,” but it was also “first and foremost, a project of terror.” It came down on the Greeks like a thunderbolt. Its “organized ferocity” and “the brazen nature of the attacks” filled the Greeks of Istanbul with shock, outrage, and fear. In a few hours of vandalism, the Turks wiped out the Greeks’ savings and hopes, abolishing their *noikokirio*, including the dowries they had been accumulating for their daughters. Suddenly, the affluent Greeks of Istanbul had nothing but the clothes on their back. The Turks had also violated the Greeks’ homes, smashing furniture, stealing all valuables, and making the houses uninhabitable. They killed more than thirty Greeks and raped about two hundred Greek girls and women. They insulted the Greeks’ religion, humiliating them, and trampling on their human rights and dignity.

In the aftermath of such a catastrophe, Greek-Turkish relations took the form of a nonshooting war. Greece kept sending Turkey one memorandum after another, reminding Menderes of his responsibility to compensate the injured Greeks of Istanbul while punishing those who destroyed the Greek community. Menderes ignored the pleas of the Greek government but kept making the life of the Greeks in Turkey unbearable.

Finally, on 27 May 1960, a military coup brought down the Menderes government, putting to death Menderes and his two closest associates. But the generals continued

Menderes' policies. Their "neo-Ottoman imperialism" armed Turkey to the teeth, crushing the Kurds. In 1974, Turkey, guided by the military, invaded and occupied a third of Cyprus, where they put into practice the cleansing policies Menderes tested in 1955 against the Greeks in Istanbul. The Turks, emboldened by the tacit approval of the United States, which has been funding their armaments, continue to violate Greek airspace, an aggression they have been carrying out since 1964.

And yet, despite this Turkish record of enmity against Greeks and Greece, a behavior bordering on perpetual war, Greece persists in being friendly to Turkey, a paradox that Vryonis fails to address.

Is Greece supportive of Turkey because the United States dictates such a humiliating, nay cowardly, policy on Greece? Or is it because aggressive Turkish policy has cowed Greece into submission? One hopes that the Greek policy is merely defensive, allowing Turkey its exhausting, if fake, challenge of Greek aircraft over the Aegean Sea, showing the Europeans the real face of Turkey and Islam embedded in that country.

This is particularly important in this age of troubles. Vryonis is right. Turkey crushed the Greeks of Istanbul because the Greeks persisted in being Greeks. Islam is a land of Muslims. It is probably incompatible with Western values. In 1955, there were eighty-five thousand Greeks in Istanbul. There were about fifteen hundred Greeks in Istanbul in 2005. What happened to the Greeks in Istanbul in 1955 is revealing of both Turkey and Islam. The Europeans should think twice before accepting the application of Turkey to join the European Union.

*The Mechanism of Catastrophe* is a great book because it is based on a foundation of fact, thorough and precise in its narrative and analysis, allowing all voices to be heard, the victims and the victimizers, shedding light on the fanaticism of most Turks but, also, on the kindness of a few Turks who rushed to protect the Greeks from the violence of their government. So Vryonis's book is more than a recitation of who did what when in the pogrom. It is a history of a calculated moment seen in the context of a millennium of Greek-Turkish relations. In addition, the book shows that slanting or distorting the truth about the pogrom, as Turkey, the United States, and Britain have in the past fifty years for the promotion of their geopolitical interests, is an immoral act. With Vryonis's book out, however, it will be difficult to continue to ignore and rationalize the 1955 Turkish pogrom, the "exterminationist strategy" of Turkey against the Greeks who had lived in Istanbul for well more than a millennium before the Turks appeared in Asia Minor.