

4-1-1994

The Greek Minority of Istanbul and Greek-Turkish Relations 1918-1974, by Alexis Alexandris

Gerasimos Augustinos

University of South Carolina - Columbia, augustg@mailbox.sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/hist_facpub



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *American Historical Review*, Volume 99, Issue 2, 1994, pages 606-607.

<http://www.indiana.edu/~ahrweb/>

© 1994 by University of Chicago Press

This Book Review is brought to you by the History, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 1993. Pp. xii, 242. \$25.00.

This book is a history of Armenian-Turkish relations during World War I. There have developed in the historical literature two opposing views of those relations, one asserting the existence of a genocide of the Armenians, the other asserting a war of mutual destruction between Armenians and Muslims. This study takes the former view. Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller draw extensively on interviews with Armenians who lived at the time and include an analysis of the psychological factors found in the interviews.

The authors understand some of the methodological difficulties in their study. The primary question is the reliability of evidence taken sixty or seventy years after the fact from witnesses who "were, on average, eleven or twelve years old in 1915" (p. 31). The Millers take such criticism in stride, declaring that the obvious emotional commitment of the survivors indicates that their stories have been believed firmly all their lives. This is undoubtedly correct, but it begs the real question of whether or not what they believed is wholly true. Recent studies of children's testimony in child-abuse cases in America bring up disturbing questions of the reliability of children's testimony. Nevertheless, despite possible embellishments, it is obvious that these children suffered horrors.

The methodological problem that the authors do not consider is the inherently biased nature of such interviews. Children may remember evils done to their families, but they are unlikely to remember evils done by their families. Indeed, it is unlikely that they would have even been told. Can one imagine a report of someone who was eleven years old in 1915 in which the survivor states, "My father went out and killed a number of the enemy and their families, then the enemy came and killed him and my mother"? Of course not. What a child of 1915 would remember was the sadness and terror in his or her own life. This would be true whether the interviewee was Armenian, Turkish, Kurdish, or from any other people who have suffered. In fact, comparable interviews of Muslim survivors of the war with the Armenians, some made in 1915-16, some made in the 1980s, tell of Armenians killing Turks and Kurds, not of Turks and Kurds killing Armenians.

The inherent difficulty in interviews such as these is that they only tell one side of a complicated story. Armenian suffering is described in detail. Turkish and Kurdish suffering goes unmentioned. Interviews of Armenian survivors, as well as of Turkish and Kurdish survivors, should have a place in the writing of the history of Anatolia during World War I. Their proper place should be as part of an even-handed history of events. The authors do not write such a history. Only one scholarly book that disagrees with their conclusions is included in their bibliography, and its conclusions on the events of World War I are

not referred to. One other such article is cited in the notes. The history in the book comes exclusively from sources that agree with the authors' preconceptions. This is carried to an absurd extent: the sections on the religious communities (*millets*), sultan Abdülhamid II, the Ottoman economy, the Ottoman portion of World War I, and so on, draw on none of the standard histories. Not a single book in Turkish, nor even a book written by a Turk, is included in the bibliography. None of the books that present an alternate view of the history of Armenian-Turkish relations have been consulted.

This is a book that harkens back to the "national histories" of a past age, histories in which nothing is entertained that might contend with the national vision. Opposing views are avoided. Today it is considered a better practice for historians to at least refer readers to books and articles with alternative views. That is one of the practices that separates history from propaganda.

JUSTIN MCCARTHY
University of Louisville

ALEXIS ALEXANDRIS. *The Greek Minority of Istanbul and Greek-Turkish Relations 1918-1974*. (Bibliotheca Asiae Minoris Historica, number 1.) 2d ed. Athens: Centre for Asia Minor Studies. 1992. Pp. 380.

In the aftermath of the Greek-Turkish conflict a compulsory exchange of populations led to the elimination of the age-old Greek communities in Anatolia. By the Treaty of Lausanne, however, the Greek Orthodox established in Istanbul were allowed to remain and were accorded rights as a non-Muslim minority. They were to maintain numerical proportionality with a Muslim-Turkish minority in Greece residing in western Thrace.

During the interwar era the Greek Orthodox minority of Istanbul numbered more than 100,000 people. In the *Economist Atlas of the New Europe* (1992), however, the country profiles note that Greece has minorities but for Turkey there is no mention of the presence of such groups. Alexis Alexandris's account documents and explains how this situation has come to be.

As the title of the book makes clear, this is not so much a study of the inner dynamics of an ethnic group, but of the politics—national and international—surrounding, relating to, and influencing the existence of a national community. Although the book is noted as a second edition, it actually is a reprint with typographical errors corrected.

The account of the Greek minority in Istanbul focuses on two interrelated worlds: the ecumenical patriarchy and the Greek Orthodox community. It is largely institutional history, with chapters on the patriarchy and its relations with the Turkish government alternating with others on the status and condition of the Greek community.

An introductory chapter surveys the Greeks and their institutions in the Ottoman capital from the late nineteenth century to the beginning of World War I. The story then picks up with the defeat of the empire and the rise of the Turkish nationalist movement. The negotiations at Lausanne pertaining to the establishment of the Greek minority in Istanbul and the issues dealing with minorities in the treaty are discussed. The chapters that follow cover the vicissitudes of the Greek minority in Istanbul decade by decade.

The thread that runs through the work is the dynamics of a triangular, interactive relationship involving the Greek minority, the Turkish state, and the Greek government. The fate of the Greeks and the ecumenical patriarchate became tied to the state of relations between Turkey and Greece in the context of significant international developments such as the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War.

Not unexpectedly, Alexandris finds that the fortunes of the Greek minority improved or fell in barometric synchronization with the fluctuations in Greek-Turkish relations. The author explains clearly the new development in power relationships from the days of the Ottoman empire to the successor Turkish national state. During the nineteenth century, the great powers of Europe were able to intervene on behalf of a nationality in the shrinking Ottoman domains. The Turkish nationalists, with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk leading the way, were determined not to allow such outside intervention to occur. As much as Greece might try to see that the rights of the Greek minority were upheld, its ability to influence the Turkish government was limited.

Over the half century that essentially saw a progressive deterioration in the numerical and material condition of the Greek minority in Turkey, two factors played a role in ameliorating the situation, at least for a while. One was personal. Charismatic national leaders such as Eleftherios Venizelos and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk brought about a rapprochement between the two states in the early 1930s. The second, impersonal factor was the division of the world into ideological and military power blocs. Cold War necessities also brought the two neighboring states together briefly in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Yet there was a constant in the up-and-down course of Greek-Turkish relations. Turkey's political leaders were determined to break with elements of the past and create a new society on the basis of two seemingly progressive policies: secularism and national integration. For people like the Greeks who had survived through ethnic distinctiveness based on faith and communal organization, there was little room for secure accommodation. Their future in the Turkish national state promised little choice: either assimilation or the gradual elimination of ethnic diversity.

Alexandris provides a balanced and well-documented account of an important aspect of the often

difficult relationship between two nations that are joined by geography and history.

GERASIMOS AUGUSTINOS
University of South Carolina

DAVID M. CROWE. *The Baltic States and the Great Powers: Foreign Relations, 1938–1940*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview. 1993. Pp. xv, 264. \$55.00.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 23, 1939, was officially a non-aggression pact, but it secretly divided up Eastern Europe between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Because of the controversies that have surrounded this treaty, it has engendered an enormous literature. Or perhaps one should speak of at least three literatures: the background and nature of the pact itself, the disputes among historians about the nature and the very existence of its secret addenda, and its role in the last years of the Soviet Union when it even found a place on the agenda of the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies in 1989. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought no end to these discussions; there will be more to come.

David M. Crowe's study of the role of the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia in the politics of Eastern Europe can serve as something of a summa of the Western literature on the background and nature of the pact. The documentation is impressive: footnotes constitute almost 25 percent of the volume; the bibliography covers thirteen pages. Crowe has used published diplomatic documents as well as records in the British Foreign Office and in the U.S. National Archives. Those making further efforts to consider this aspect of the pact's history would be well advised to begin with this work.

The book's particular strong point is its comprehensive survey of the problems with which diplomats and politicians had to deal in the last years before World War II. Crowe considers topics often ignored by others who deal with this period, such as the repatriation of Germans from the Baltic republics in 1939 and 1940 and the tension between Lithuania and Poland over the Lithuanians' acceptance of the city of Vilnius (Wilno) from the hands of the Soviet government.

The picture that emerges from these pages is of the two large neighbors, the Soviet Union and Germany, closing pincers on the small Baltic republics. The availability of German documents allows Crowe to make clear the cynicism involved in protesting the rights of German minorities in the Baltic and challenging statements by Baltic leaders that might somehow question the Germans' motives. The absence of Soviet archival sources makes the Soviet leaders appear somewhat more speculative and problematic, although hardly less cynical.

But here some questions arise. The book might better have its title reversed—The Great Powers and the Baltic States—because the Baltic republics appear