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Pontic Greeks and the Greek Genocide

GPN Original

Editors Introduction: I have just returned from an inspiring conference in Athens, "Three Genocides - One Strategy" which focused on the interlocking genocides of the Armenian, Assyrians and Greeks by the Ottoman Turks. See in this issue a news release summarizing the conference in HGR Information Resources, World Genocide Bulletin Board. My paper at the conference was on the psychology of denial of other victims alongside one's own people - and referred to the subject of the above three victim peoples, as well as to denials of other victims alongside the Jews in the Holocaust. Actually, it turns out that there were still additional victims of the Ottoman Turks, such as approximately 300,000 Yezedis -- about whom GPN will also be presenting more information in a future issue. And, as we shall read in the intriguing article by Nikolaos Hlamides, it turns out that there are strains within the Greek community and among genocide scholars as well, to recognize the genocide of Pontic Greeks but not of other Greeks. In the following article the author argues factually and eloquently for recognition of all Greek victims. (The author himself has conveyed to us that he is personally a Pontic Greek). This paper was not presented at the Athens conference.

In the early twentieth century Greek and other minority communities across the Ottoman Empire were targeted in a campaign of physical extermination. In recent years some descendants of these communities have adopted an exclusive and segregated narrative of this genocide. In particular, a hierarchy of victims has been constructed by relaying an account of the historical events addressing solely the fate of one community and wholly ignoring the persecutory history of their co-victims. Here the case of the Pontic Greek community is discussed. This paper has two goals. The first is to explain the illegitimacy of this approach and the second is to communicate how such myopia, apart from conflicting with the historical record, can considerably undermine the case for genocide history altogether.

In March of this year the Swedish Parliament passed a motion affirming the genocide perpetrated against certain minority groups in the late Ottoman Empire; in particular, "the killing of Armenians, Assyrians/Syriacs/Chaldeans and Pontic Greeks" is now recognised as an act of genocide. While many hailed the motion's passing a great victory, to those more familiar with the historical record it came as a surprise that this outwardly inclusive motion excluded all Ottoman Greeks bar the Greeks of the Pontus region.¹

The vast majority of Pontic Greeks appreciate the genocidal experience of other Ottoman Greeks but many still prefer to consider the fate of their own people separately. Over the years I have

encountered several arguments explaining why a distinction should be made between the experiences of Pontic Greeks and the other Greeks of the Empire during the Genocide.²

The arguments which seem most common are:

1. The Pontic Greeks have a unique history, culture, way of life and dialect, which distinguishes them from other Ottoman Greek communities;
2. Many Pontic Greeks, unlike Greeks elsewhere in the Empire, raised arms against their persecutors and, as such, the history of persecution in the region is deserving of special consideration;
3. Unlike Pontus, western Asia Minor was a zone of war where Greek and Turkish military forces were engaged in warfare. Atrocities committed in the context of the Greco-Turkish war cannot be considered as part of the genocide;
4. For two decades the Pontic Greek Diaspora has worked relentlessly to achieve recognition of the genocide and, as such, it is not an unnatural expectation for Pontic Greeks to approach the issue exclusively.

A response to the aforementioned will be offered but first let it be stated that the author fully acknowledges that Pontic Greeks did experience genocide and in everything that follows he in no way seeks to undermine the factuality and severity of the persecutory campaign in the Pontus region.

1. This uniqueness claim is somewhat simplistic because it overlooks the very rich cultural diversity of the region's Greek communities. The Centre for Asia Minor Studies in Athens has identified as many as 1,500 distinct Greek Orthodox settlements in the Pontus region, each with their own unique culture, traditions, and way of life.³ The claim of a unique Pontian dialect also deserves some clarification. The truth is that there is no single Pontic Greek dialect—we should speak of dialects, plural. The work of Richard M. Dawkins highlights the very many differences between the very many dialects, not only in Pontus but across Asia Minor.⁴ Pronunciation differed from place to place while some words were peculiar to one locality and completely unknown elsewhere. Of course, regardless of the influence of local phraseology and pronunciation, the community language of the Pontic Greeks was Greek.⁵ And although the physical isolation of Pontus from Greece resulted in the development of a character in the region that was distinct from mainland Greece, the Greek communities in Pontus shared a common identity in terms of ethnicity and religion with Greek communities elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, Greeks in Pontus did not identify themselves differently from Greeks elsewhere in the Empire; referring to themselves not as Pontians but as *Ἕλληνες* (Greeks) or *Ρωμιοί* (Romioi), stemming from their view of being descendants of the Eastern Roman Empire. Like Greeks across Asia Minor, they considered their ancestors to be ancient Greeks who had colonised the shores of Asia Minor many centuries earlier. Neither did the Ottoman Turks differentiate between the various Greek communities, who were all considered as members of the Ottoman Rum Millet.
2. The premise of this claim is simply false. While it is true that there were several pockets of armed resistance in the Pontus region in response to the genocide, it is untrue to claim that communities subject to massacres and deportations elsewhere did not offer any resistance. Although there are many instances to choose from, one counterexample suffices: Greek resistance in the area of Nicomedia/Izmit, several hundred kilometres from Pontus.⁶ This

puts the claim to rest but, for a moment, let us assume the premise were true. The act of genocide is not a variable dependent on armed resistance but on target group, which in the case of the Greek Genocide was the entire Ottoman Greek population. If the historiography of the Jewish Holocaust focused solely on the resistance in the ghettos or the Armenian Genocide on, say, the resistance at Van then those two genocides would be grossly misrepresented. In any case, because the Ottoman Greeks were an unarmed civilian minority population scattered across the entirety of the Ottoman Empire, in the overwhelming number of cases—including those in Pontus—Greek communities were in no position to offer any organised armed resistance whatsoever.

3. In the case of the Greco-Turkish War, sporadic atrocities committed by one military force engaged in warfare against another military force in a zone of war, cannot be considered as a chapter in the history of the Greek Genocide. Indeed, the Greek Genocide is unconnected to any form of war activity. After all, the Greek Genocide saw the physical destruction of unarmed civilian populations, consisting of men, women and children, at times of peace and outside zones of war.

Between May 1919 and September 1922, Greece maintained a military presence in certain areas of western Anatolia. It is important to remember that their presence was partly determined by the treatment of Greeks in the five years prior to the Allied-mandate over Smyrna: “With a view to avoiding disorders and massacres of Christians in Smyrna and its environs, the occupation of the town and forts by Allied Forces has been decided upon by President [Wilson], Prime Minister [Lloyd George] and M. Clemenceau,” disclosed the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs a few days prior to the arrival of Hellenic troops in Smyrna.⁷ So ignoring this region altogether erases a five year history (1914-1919) of systematic deportations and massacres against hundreds of Greek communities at a time of no foreign military presence. Similarly, it overlooks the period following the evacuation of Greek and other Allied military forces from Asia Minor which was succeeded by the Smyrna Holocaust and the final phase in the destruction and eradication of Ottoman Christian communities.

More concerning is that this argument seems to reflect a misguided belief that the only communities targeted were those in Pontus and the Smyrna district of western Anatolia and that the choice is simply between including Smyrna or not. What is left unexplained is why the many hundreds of thousands of Ottoman Greeks who lived along Turkey’s complete coastline, those who lived in remote villages in the interior, those who lived on the islands as well as the vast numbers who inhabited Thrace have also been excluded? These communities were no less a victim than the Greeks of Pontus and the Greeks of Smyrna.

One historian explained in an interview that the reason he excludes the persecution of other Ottoman Greeks from the genocide equation is because “there is an alibi for their slaughter and in the Pontus region there is no alibi.”⁸

In fact, things are not so simple for Pontus, which experienced a Russian military occupation, a British military presence, a Hellenic naval bombardment and a sporadic armed resistance movement, as already noted, among other things. It simply remains to point out that it is the duty of historians to be exact, truthful and dispassionate.⁹

To manipulate the historical record in order to further one position over another, regardless of one's motivations, constitutes an act of serious professional misconduct.

4. Genocide recognition should not be viewed as a title bestowed on those who make the most noise. Recognition must serve to affirm history in a way which accurately reflects the historical record and should in no way be susceptible to individual demands. The historical record—including documentation from international archives; newspaper reports; survivor and eyewitness testimonies—affirms that Greek communities across the entire span of the Ottoman Empire were targeted in the Genocide. Unfortunately, to date, most Genocide resolutions have been the product of intense lobbying on the part of Pontic Greek organisations and, as such, seem to be focused on the “Pontian Genocide” and the fate of Pontic Greeks alone. But a quick review of resolutions does reveal some positives to draw on. For instance, a resolution passed in Ohio in May 2005 speaks of a “tragic genocide of the Greeks of Pontus and Asia Minor”.¹⁰ And last year the Parliament of South Australia passed a motion which, although focused on the Pontic Greeks, did hint at the genocidal experiences of other Greeks in Asia Minor.¹¹ These attempts at inclusiveness are a step in the right direction but, without meaning to be cynical, there are still two remarks that need to be made: First, Pontus is part of Asia Minor and so expressions such as “Pontus and Asia Minor”, while not logically incorrect, are no less redundant and misleading than one saying “I’ll be spending the weekend in Bavaria followed by a week in Germany”. Second, Ottoman Greek communities throughout the length and breadth of the country were targeted in the Genocide and simply referring to this region as Asia Minor is inadequate. Asia Minor is an historical term which denotes the Anatolian plateau but excludes the whole of Thrace including European Constantinople, the islands as well as land east of the Euphrates.

Incidentally, it might be added that recognition by third parties would be far less necessary if it were not for brazen denial by Turkish officialdom. On the other hand, the goals of the Diaspora should not be focused on securing recognition and recognition alone. Efforts might be better spent contributing to our collective understanding of the period through research and serious scholarship. Recognition could then adopt the far more fitting role of being predicated on a vast and established body of scholarly literature.

So why shouldn't scholars and other interested parties focus on one region in particular? In the historiography of the Armenian Genocide, for instance, scholars have contributed papers which focus on the Genocide against the Armenians in a particular district, so why can't others do the same for the Greek Genocide?¹²

Regional case studies are incredibly important contributions to our collective understanding of the genocide and we should not discourage such works. On the other hand, I am not convinced that a regional case study isolated to “Pontus” is at all viable. Pontus is a historical word for an ancient region whose boundaries have fluctuated considerably over the ages and defining Pontus or the homeland of Pontic Greeks in the early 20th century is problematic if one needs to be precise. More crucially, the issue here is not one of regional case studies but pertains to defining genocidal campaigns in their own right and, as such, the argument pivots on whether or not this accurately reflects the historical record. The so-called “Pontian Genocide” thesis fails to incorporate the broader history and the magnitude of the campaign against the Ottoman Greek population as a whole. It is a thesis which has sought to define a unique genocide in that region without even passing reference to the existence of other Ottoman Greeks, let alone their

shared fate. To this end, I hope readers will agree that there is a world of difference between that term and, say, the expression “Pontus: a regional case study of the Greek Genocide”.

To those who still disagree, I should like to make one final point: failing to incorporate the broader history can even threaten individual Pontic Greek interests. Consider for a moment the following characteristics peculiar to the Pontus region: (1) The noted resistance movement; (2) The Russian occupation between 1916 and 1918; (3) The British military presence; (4) The Hellenic naval bombardment of Black Sea ports; (5) The territorial claims made to the Pontus region and the attempts to establish a Pontic state. Revisionists, who seek to discredit the factuality of the genocide, have seized on all these circumstances unique to the region to discredit the history of persecutions in Pontus. For example, publications such as *The Pontus Issue and the Policy of Greece* published by the Atatürk Research Center and the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ memorandum *Setting the Record Straight on Pontus Propaganda against Turkey* have exploited—I hasten to add, quite effectively—these very circumstances.¹³

Without taking into account the fate of Greeks elsewhere in the Empire, it becomes almost impossible to effectively lay down the arguments for genocide but as soon as one is prepared to broaden the context of the genocide campaign, the denialist thesis immediately disintegrates. To give but one example, being able to point to the deportation of Greek men, women and children from, say, Konya in central Turkey completely undermines revisionist narratives which suggest that deportations were conducted on the grounds of military necessity. In light of the above, attempts to define a detached and localised genocide in the Pontus region are morally and historically untenable and all parties should be encouraged to attach precedence, first and foremost, to the historical record.¹

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¹ Ironically, while the motion itself failed to mention other Ottoman Greeks, in the supporting material the sole piece of documentation sourced from Swedish archives and pertaining to Greeks was in fact a reference to the deportation of Greeks in western parts of the Empire and not to Pontus. I do not mean to suggest there was a deliberate attempt on the part of the drafters to exclude other Ottoman Greeks whilst presenting documentation pertaining to those other communities in support of the Pontic Greek thesis, even if this seems an immediate conclusion to draw.

² For more information on the 1980s genesis of the “Pontic Greek Genocide” thesis, please see the website: <http://www.pontiangenocide.com> (Accessed 1 June 2010) or consult Michel Bruneau (ed.), *Η Διασπορά του Ποντιακού Ελληνισμού [The Diaspora of Pontian Hellenism]*, (Thessaloniki: Irodotos, 2000), pp. 40, 47-49 for a terser description of how it developed. Also of relevance is the article “Η Ομάδα Χαλαμπίδη-Φωτιάδη και το ποντιακό κίνημα [The Charalambidis-Fotiadis Team and the Pontian Movement]” by historian Βλάσης Αγτζίδης [Vlasis Agtzidis] in March 2006. For our purposes, it shall simply be said that the movement originated in Greece, initiated by a politician of Pontic Greek ancestry in coordination with the Pontic Greek community and had almost no academic dimension whatsoever.

³ Κέντρο Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών [Centre for Asia Minor Studies], *Ο τελευταίος Ελληνισμός της Μικράς Ασίας [The Last Greeks of Asia Minor]* (Athens: Centre for Asia Minor Studies, 1974), pp. 277-278. The number of Greek settlements identified was 1,454 and of these 795 had been studied by the Centre. See also p. 17 of Alexis Alexandris & Paschalis Kitromilides, “Ethnic Survival, Nationalism and Forced Migration: The

¹ For further reading, consult Αριστέιδης Τσιλφίδης [Aristidis Tsilfidis], “Άλλη μια χρονιά πέρασε... [Yet another year...]” in: *Ελληνική Γνώμη [Greek Opinion]* (May 2009, p. 12); or Σάββας Καλεντερίδης [Savvas Kalenteridis], “Μια γενοκτονία, πολλές στρατηγικές! [One genocide, many strategies!]” in: *Ποντιακή Γνώμη [Pontian Opinion]* (Year 1, Issue 7, September 2009, p. 1).

Historical Demography of the Greek Community of Asia Minor at the close of the Ottoman era” in: *Δελτίο Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών* [*Bulletin of the Centre for Asia Minor Studies*] (Volume 5, 1984-85, pp. 9-44).

⁴ See, for e.g. R. M. Dawkins, “Modern Greek in Asia Minor” in: *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* (Volume 30, 1910, pp. 109-132, 267-291).

⁵ As a side note, most schools in Pontus encouraged adherence to the Greek language in its canonical form. At perhaps the most renowned teaching institution of the region, the Frontistirion Trapezuntas, students were even forbidden from speaking in the Pontic dialects altogether. See Αντώνης Παυλίδης [Antonis Pavlides], *Το Φροντιστήριο Τραπεζούντας (1900-1914) και η ιδεολογική κυριαρχία των Ελλήνων στον Πόντο* [*The Frontistirio Trapezountas (1910-1914) and the ideological hegemony of the Greeks of Pontus*] (Athens: Committee for Pontian Studies, 2004).

⁶ Ioannis K. Hassiotis, “The Armenian Genocide and the Greeks: Response and Records (1915-1923)” in: *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992, pp. 129-151), p. 141.

⁷ Nikolaos Hlamides, “The Smyrna Holocaust: The Final Phase of the Greek Genocide” in: *The Genocide against the Ottoman Greeks: Studies on Mass Violence and Its Aftermath* [Forthcoming] (New Rochelle, New York & Athens: Caratzas/Melissa Publishing House, 2010).

⁸ Sourced from a transcript of a joint interview conducted with Neoklis Sarri, Kostas Fotiadis, Michalis Charalambidis in May 1999.

⁹ I am inspired by this passage from *The Ingenious Gentleman: Don Quixote de la Mancha*: “(...) for it should be the duty of historians to be exact, truthful, and dispassionate, and neither interest nor fear nor rancor nor affection should swerve them from the path of truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, and the future's counselor.” I thank A.D. Krikorian and E.L. Taylor for bringing this passage to my attention.

¹⁰ A “Resolution of Recognition” by the City of Cleveland, Ohio, 11 May 2005.

¹¹ See the motion “Genocide of the Armenians, Pontian Greeks, Syrian Orthodox, Assyrian Orthodox and other Christian Minorities” in Hansard of the Parliament of South Australia, 30 April 2009.

¹² See, for e.g., Vahakn N. Dadrian, “The Agency of “Triggering Mechanisms” as a Factor in the Organization of the Genocide Against the Armenians of Kayseri District” in: *Genocide Studies and Prevention* (Volume 1, Number 2, September 2006, pp. 107-126).

¹³ Berna Türkdoğan (ed.), *The Pontus Issue and the Policy of Greece* (Ankara: Atatürk Research Center, 2000); “Setting The Record Straight On Pontus Propaganda Against Turkey”, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/setting-the-record-straight-on-pontus-propaganda-against-turkey.en.mfa> (Accessed: 1 June 2010)