

**The Displacement,  
Extinction and Genocide  
of the Pontic Greeks 1916–1923**

Edited by  
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# Editorial

The articles in this volume stem from a conference held at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The conference was organized by the Institute for Diaspora Research and Genocide Studies in cooperation with the Southeast Europe Society of the Humboldt University of Berlin, the Center for Mediterranean Studies of the Ruhr University Bochum and the *Καλώς ήρθατε στην Ιστοσελίδα της Ομοσπονδίας Συλλόγων Ελλήνων Ποντίων στην Ευρώπη (ΟΣΕΠΕ)* (Union of the Associations of Greeks from Pontos in Europe (OSEPE)). It was made possible by a generous grant from the Association of the Societies of Greeks from Pontos in Europe and the Charitable Foundation *Ivan Savvidis*.

Within the framework of this conference, an intensive interdisciplinary discussion took place on the topic of the Displacement, Extinction and Genocide of the Pontic Greeks between 1916–1923, which is still barely represented in research in the Federal Republic of Germany, on the motives and intentions of the perpetrators, the ideological framing and contexts of this policy of social engineering, the strategies and structures of the implementation processes as well as on questions of (international) legal implications or aspects of the (de)thematization of memory culture.

However, the present volume is not simply an expanded transcription of the reflections made at the time. Rather, the volume attempts to address a number of deficits and problems which, as became clear in the course of the conference discussions, repeatedly emerge in the discourses on the expulsion and extermination of the Greeks of the Pontus: The lack of integration into the contexts of the transformation of the Ottoman Empire into a Turkish nation state and the associated ideological, but also knowledge and order-historical framings; the contextualization of this event within the framework of the so-called Greek-Turkish war and thus its explanation within the framework of a conflict between two nation states; the lack of reflection; the lack of detailed and local studies that could trace the expulsion and extermination practices on the ground and thus, on the one hand, make clear continuities with the extermination policies towards Armenians and Arameans, but on the other hand also highlight the specifics of the violent measures against the Greeks of the Pontus.

The expulsion and extermination of the Greeks of Pontos in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey represents the final phase of a policy of violent social engineering that began in 1914 under the Young Turk regime with the violence against the Greeks of Western Anatolia and reached its first climax with the genocide of the Armenians in 1915/16, which

also included the Aramean Christians. This ideologically framed policy of violent social engineering aimed to transform the Ottoman multi-ethnic state into a Turkish nation state with a homogeneously »Turkish« population.

The contributions in this volume take this statement into account by examining the persecution, deportation and extermination of the Greeks of Pontos itself, but also by placing it in the wider context of the politics of the Ottoman Empire and the history of the Republic of Turkey.

A number of *major* terms seem to lend themselves to such a classification and, above all, two perspectives: One perspective is determined by discussions about the »dynamics of violence« of regions, e.g. by the talk about »spaces of violence«<sup>1</sup> and »bloodlands«<sup>2</sup>, or also by the frequently used term »escalation«, which, when it comes to explaining political violence, has a surprisingly self-explanatory function. These current discussions also offer a certain convenience. For they make it possible to speak of war, civil war and genocide without naming the perpetrators and victims.

The second perspective that comes to mind when attempting to classify the Ottoman Empire can be illustrated with a quote from an article by Erik-Jan Zürcher from 2003:<sup>3</sup> Zürcher explained that the final phase of the Ottoman Empire was characterized by »a tremendous uprooting of a whole range of ethnic and religious communities«.<sup>4</sup> The Greeks were initially treated very differently to the Armenian and Syrian Christians. It was only when the Ottomans, already »traumatized by the loss of the European provinces«,<sup>5</sup> were faced with the loss of areas of Asia Minor that it became clear that the different religious communities could no longer coexist. According to Zürcher, it was in this context that the decision was made to exchange the minority populations between Turkey and Greece.

The image created by Zürcher here is used again and again – in this or a similar form – in the historiography of the violence of the late Ottoman period to this day. Thus, the persecution and murder of the Greeks is separated from the persecution of the Armenians and Syrian Christians; in addition, the persecution of the Greeks is concentrated under

the term »population exchange«, without the individual regions and the specific policies in each region being considered separately.

There is no doubt that it is about a policy that has to be traced at least since 1908. But above all, the historiography that is enforced focuses on the Young Turks' policy of violence as the cause of the war. It always appears as a reaction. Above all, it is never recognized as »politics«. In fact, however, the social and political processes that characterized the end of the Ottoman Empire were not just dynamics that were influenced by the course of the war. Other perspectives, which can certainly be developed on the basis of concepts such as »Homogenization« and »Turkification«, must be held up against the usual explanatory patterns. However, the political and social transformation processes that began in the early 1830s – and by no means came to an end with the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 – are central.

The genocide of the Pontic Greeks is thus closely integrated into the wider context of the policies of the Ottoman Empire during the transition to the Republic of Turkey. This event, which has rarely been the subject of intensive research and has received little public attention in Germany, not only took place during the transition from the Ottoman multi-ethnic state to the Turkish nation state, but also marked this transition significantly.

The contributions in this volume follow these observations from an interdisciplinary perspective:

**Medardus Brehl** and **Mihran Dabag** focus in on the framing of the politics of violence in the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic in terms of the history of knowledge and order. Drawing on Eric Voegelin's concept of »Knowledge of Order« (*Ordnungswissen*), they reconstruct the discourses of Ottoman intellectuals on identity and national politics, in which an irresolvable conflict between an Islamic-based knowledge of order and a Western-national knowledge of order emerged. This fundamental conflict concerns the understanding of the sources of sovereign domination, the understanding of community, and it concerns the differentiating lines of membership and non-belonging. The solution to this conflict was ultimately sought by force: in the annihilation of the non-integrable »other«.

**Thea Halo**, critically acclaimed author of *Not Even My Name*, outlines a variety of pogroms against different groups of the Christian Ottoman population that ultimately led to the genocide. Halo describes Young Turk policies and measures that targeted Christian groups in the Balkans to (Pontic) Greeks in Thrace and Anatolia. She draws a timeline from the first Balkan pogroms of 1910, that eventually led to the Balkan Wars 1912–13, to the genocide of Pontic and other Anatolian Greeks of Asia Minor 1913–23. The author also explains, how the Young Turkish government, and later Mustafa Kemal's as well, tried to »Turkify« the state and purge culture and even language of foreign influences.

- 1 Baberowski, Jörg: Räume der Rewalt, Frankfurt/Main 2015.
- 2 Snyder, Timothy: Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin, London 2010.
- 3 Zürcher, Jan-Erik: Greek and Turkish refugees and deportees 1912–1924, in: Turkology Update Leiden Project Working Papers Archive 2003 (<https://www.transanatolie.com/english/turkey/turks/ottomans/ejz18.pdf>; last visited: 22.10.2024).
- 4 Ibid, p. 1.
- 5 Ibid.

**Antonis Klapsis** explains the genesis of the Megali Idea that shaped Greece's foreign politics towards the Ottoman Empire for decades in the 19th and early 20th century. In a quest to unite the newly formed Kingdom of Greece with the Greeks of the Balkans, the Near East and the islands from Corfu in the Northwest to Cyprus in the Southeast in a single Greek state, the Pontus Greeks were originally not included. Klapsis argues that the Pontus region was often used as a pawn in broader geopolitical negotiations between the Great Powers and the Greek state and that maintaining the balance of regional powers and preserving the status quo was deemed more important than Pontus' independence and, ultimately, led to the deportation and death of the region's population.

**Theodosios Kyriakidis** minutely describes the measures taken against the Christian Orthodox population of Pontos and argues, that the deportations were a mechanism to achieve a genocide. He specifically does not focus on the acts committed by the Kemalist nationalists, but instead on the original policies enacted by the Young Turks, which ultimately had the same goal: The extermination of the Pontos Greeks. Kyriakidis supports his claims with a plethora of primary sources and scholarly analysis and finds that the extermination of the Pontos Greeks were not a series of spontaneous acts but part of a predetermined plan of massacres and deportations in conditions that large parts of the affected could not possibly survive.

**Vasileios Th. Meichanetsidis** dedicates his contribution to the question of ›intent‹ within the context of the Genocide of the Ottoman Greeks, as intent is one of the key components of the crime of genocide. He argues that the Genocide of the Greeks and Armenians was the result of a pre-existing program aiming at the annihilation of the ›Christian element‹ in toto (Greeks, Armenians, Assyrians/Arameans) in the Ottoman Empire, and a premediated decision made at some point before the Balkan Wars or World War I. Meichanetsidis explains that there can be many ›models‹ of genocide and supports his position with arguments of various scholars of genocide and a detailed account of the means by which the Ottoman Greek genocide was committed.

**Tessa Hofmann** sheds light on a series of massacres that are generally rarely talked about. Using extensive examples from primary sources, she describes these events that took place in the Bithynia region and more specifically, in Yalova and Nicomedia. Hofmann illustrates the brutal treatment of the Greek Orthodox population living in these lands and underlines her findings with contemporary oral history reports. She also explains how the Kemalist nationalists profited from the relative ›lawlessness‹ of the region, as the Entente and Hellenic army failed to adequately protect the local Christian population.

**Nikos Sigalas'** chapter deals with the violence inflicted on the Orthodox Christians of the sub-province of Canik during WWI. In his study,

he relentlessly traces the structures of the politics of violence, examines the motives and the scope of action of the local actors as well as their relationship to the central government. Last but not least, Sigalas uses this in-depth study of a local case to outline analogies and differences between the expulsion and extermination of the Pontic Greeks and the annihilation of Armenians of the Ottoman Empire.

**Zeynep Türkyilmaz** describes the fate of the *Istavri* community, a so-called Crypto-Christian group in the Pontus region, that wanted to convert from Islam to (Orthodox) Christianity. This will to conversion was met with violence from the Turkish side and their conversion has been reduced to ignorance, opportunistic betrayal, or nationalist re-unification in the existing literature. Türkyilmaz argues that Crypto-Christians had agency and were indeed aware of their position in the broader national and imperial projects of the time. Furthermore, according to the author, they interpreted Great Power rivalries and imperial modernity projects as an opportunity to re-negotiate their socio-political status and identity concerns.

**Robert Shenk**, who unfortunately passed away in 2021, presents a study of US-American naval diaries, that were written aboard ships that navigated around the Pontus coast during the Pontic Genocide. This unique perspective on the atrocities committed against the Pontic Greeks, was documented by naval officers, who, despite not being ›students of history or diplomatic experts‹, were deeply moved and disturbed by the events they witnessed. Although the American forces were ordered to remain neutral in the Turkish-Greek conflict in Asia Minor, some captains even took it upon themselves to protest these events or tried to have their superiors intervene. Shenk's findings add valuable perspectives to the corpus of foreign sources of the Pontic Genocide.

**Monika Albrecht** offers a thorough overview of the German memory culture and (memory) politics regarding the displacement and extinction of the Ottoman Greeks. She analyzes media coverage around the centenary commemoration of the Armenian Genocide in Germany, noting the ambiguities of the inclusion in the commemorative acts and speeches in regard to other Christian ethnic groups like the Assyrians, Aramaeans or Pontic Greeks that were affected by the Young Turkish politics of ›Turkification‹. Albrecht also takes a look at different literary or filmic representations (and non-representations) of this topic, highlighting several examples from the last 20 years, making a case for the importance of the depiction of the ›staging‹ of history.

**Miltiadis Sarigiannidis** delivers a very in-depth look at the history of the legal term and concept of ›genocide‹, before offering a perspective on how it was applied to the atrocities committed against the Christians of the Pontic Region. He highlights the special stipulations that the crime of genocide entails and how it can be applied even retrospectively.

Sarigiannidis argues that even though the perpetrators of the actual crimes are long dead, state responsibility for the committed genocidal atrocities and collective symbolic reparations remain as the *ultimum remedium* for the intra-generational trauma of the targeted communities. Therefore, such non-criminal legal proceedings are long overdue.

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We would like to thank the authors most sincerely for taking on the intensive work for this volume.

The Editors

Bochum, October 2024