

Smyrna 1922: A complex legacy

A hundred years ago today, Turkish forces entered the city of Smyrna (now Izmir), bringing an end to the 1919-22 Greco-Turkish War. Michael Cottakis reflects on the legacy of the events of September 1922 for Turkey, Greece, and the wider world.

On 9 September 1922, Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk) rode down Frank Street in the European quarter of Smyrna astride a white warhorse. The colour of his mount signified victory over Greek armies in Asia Minor following years of bloody war. It also denoted purity, cleanliness, a blank slate. For with his grand arrival, five hundred years of history were changed. The last hurrah of empires and cities gave way to the monochrome world of the nation state. The world events that followed are well-known, though connections with this date are rarely made. It is one hundred years today since Ottoman Smyrna became Turkish Izmir.

For Turks, today is a celebration. The proud Turkish nation, risen from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, is now a regional power and dynamic bridge between east and west. A prosperous oasis in a challenging Middle East, 'Turkey', as a project, has been something of a success. For Greeks, the date is tinged with infamy, and a dose of nostalgia. The destruction of multicultural Smyrna, in which Greeks formed the largest single group, is still regarded as the '*Catastrofi*' (catastrophe). Its aftermath brought much pain and upheaval – a reality-check for a small country with imperial pretensions in an age of dying empires.

Between September 1922 and November 1924, some 1.5 million Ottoman Greeks – many speaking only a smattering of their 'mother' tongue – were forcibly deported from their homes in Asia Minor to an unfamiliar and inhospitable Greek state. In the other direction went 600,000 Greek Muslims, settling a land of which they knew little. The process, legitimised ex-post by the Treaty of Lausanne, forms the demographic bedrock of modern Turkey and Greece. Others will comment on their content and sequence. But what should posterity make of these events?

Population exchange

The 'population exchange' as it is now known is typically heralded as having put paid to centuries of conflict, laying the ground for stable nation states. The influx of educated Greeks from prosperous Asia Minor gave the Greek economy, moribund after a decade of war, a new lease of life. Construction boomed, as cities raced to accommodate the deportees.

Many subsequent cultural styles derive their dynamism from the newcomers. A fine example is the 'rebétiko' musical tradition, immortalised in the clanging rhythms of Manolis Chiotis on his bouzouki, and the strains of Mikis Theodorakis – of Zorba fame. Politics, too, matured. Since 1922, Greek governments have shed their penchant for daring foreign adventures, setting their country on sounder footing. Greece has suffered further degradations since, though less are of its own making.

For Turkey, shedding its non-Muslim population – a fifth of all inhabitants in 1921 – meant removing tantalising bait for irredentists, one likely to have plagued the country indefinitely. The Kemalist logic of a unitary national economy and society could not triumph in the presence of prominent resisters. Thankfully, many Muslim arrivals in Turkey were muscular supporters of the new regime.

Having witnessed the Ottoman caliphate recede, leaving them stranded in slippery Balkan obscurity, they embraced the Turkish nation state and helped secure its western future. Greeks and Turks, enemies for centuries, saw their relations improve. While new disagreements surfaced, never again would they go to war. To cap off this historical turnaround, Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos nominated none other than Atatürk – architect of the population exchange – for the 1928 Nobel Peace Prize.

But the wider legacy of 1922 involves a more sombre reading. Its events asserted a new modernism; one distorting those miracles of industrial engineering which had produced the many social improvements in the previous century. Such devices had been deployed to tame and civilise the natural world – to alter it, in ways, for the benefit of humankind.

By 1922, following the ravages of nationalism and war, its logic had turned to whole populations: peoples, nations too, could be engineered. In this synthesis, tradition and heritage were viewed with suspicion. The past could be cast asunder, lest it hold the advancing nation back. Asia Minor, home to Christians for centuries, could be 'cleansed' – the international community watching banally on. Dynamic communities of European Muslims could be regenerated as Turks; no matter their remonstrations.

National purity

The trends epitomised by 1922 and its aftermath gave succour to the dictum that the nation can succeed only if pure. And with the instrument of 'population exchange', it offered a template for others to follow. All states that emerged from WWI with significant minorities – Germany, Poland, Romania, Hungary, and the Soviet Union – would pursue in subsequent decades, and with varying degrees of success, that chalice of national demographic purity.

Forced population transfers in the years following Lausanne are grimly numerous. It is estimated that between 1922 and 1952, over 30 million people formed part of forced movements – the impact of such uprooting on lives and livelihoods are unimaginable to us. The cost in terms of human life is debated, though scholars have suggested some 8 million perished.

It should not be underestimated what impression these events had on the imagination of the nascent fascist movements. The Greco-Turkish War and Treaty of Lausanne were followed feverishly by the right-wing press of Europe. Nationalist leaders looked to Atatürk as their prototype. For Hitler, he was particularly intoxicating.

The Treaty of Sèvres (1919) had foreseen an ethnically mixed arrangement. Yet Atatürk used the cover of war to redefine the ethnic composition of Asia Minor through forced marches, deportations, and massacres. By the time the international system could arbitrate, the ethnic cleansing of the region – however unpalatable – had become a 'fait accompli'. This logic of firebrand revisionism on questions of national demography held an especial attraction for the Führer and Nazi strategists.

A complex legacy

The logics of the early 1920s have applications in contemporary politics, too. Vladimir Putin's War in Ukraine carries the hubris of the Megali Idea. Here too, the dream of rebuilding a lost empire, of uniting ethnic Russians under a single state, is paramount. Meanwhile, his tactics recall Lausanne. We hear of forced marches of women and children to Russia and the resettling of ethnic Russians in conquered Ukrainian territories. Ukrainian civilians are dying in alarming numbers, the evidence of genocide mounting. Clearly for Putin, ethnic purity serves a political purpose. It is a familiar playbook.

It cannot, of course, be claimed that Atatürk and the European fascists, old or new, are equivalent. The success of Turkey, compared with other states in the region is testament to the far-sightedness and effective management of its early leadership. For all its flaws, contemporary Turkey is richer, freer, more tolerant, and more open than its eastern neighbours. The visage of Atatürk peers down paternalistically from every public building, in every square, and at every sports venue in the land. For his offspring, today's Turks, he is a symbol of inspiration and acclaim.

In twenty-first century Izmir, a city changed as much in physical form as in demography, Atatürk remains a hero. His grand arrival in the city in 1922 will be re-enacted today, as it is each year, with customary gusto. But in celebrating a more harmonious century of relations between Turkey and Greece, let us also remember the darker international resonances of Smyrna 1922 and its aftermath, such that we might place these events in a sounder historical context.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: ["The Turkish Army's entry into Izmir"](#) (Public Domain)
