

Study Guide for “Smyrna, September 1922 – The American Mission to Rescue Victims of the 20th Century’s First Genocide”

By Lou Ureneck



An American sailor draws near the crowd of refugees on the Quay at Smyrna. The fire drove hundreds of thousands of people to harbor front, where they waited for rescue.

SUMMARY:

Hundreds of thousands of refugees were rescued by an American minister and U.S. Navy officer following the burning of the city of Smyrna, Turkey, by the Turkish nationalist army in September 1922. Smyrna had been one of the richest and most cosmopolitan cities of the Near East and was home to a majority population of Greek and Armenian Christians.

IMPORTANCE:

The arson and massacre at Smyrna formed the final violent episode of the 20th Century's first genocide. Between 1912 and 1922, two successive Turkish governments killed three million Armenian, Greek and Assyrian people in Turkey. The people were killed through executions by gun and sword or by long marches over mountains and desert, leading to death by starvation, disease and exhaustion. The mass killings set a pattern of genocides that would follow later in the 20th Century including the Jewish Holocaust.



A refugee woman and child stand with a group of others rescued from the city after it was occupied and burned by the Turkish nationalist army.

WHAT IS GENOCIDE?

Genocide is an attempt to eliminate an entire group of people. The group can be defined by race, culture, religion, ethnicity or language. The word "genocide" was

coined by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish legal scholar. Lemkin said that genocide was

“... a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be the disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups.”

Examples of genocides in history include the Jewish Holocaust (1941-45), the Cambodian Genocide (1975-1979), the Bosnian Genocide (1992-1995), the Rwandan Genocide (1994) and West Punjab Genocide (1946-47). The Armenian Genocide (1915-1916) was part of a broader religious cleansing in the Ottoman Empire that killed Greeks and Assyrians as well as Armenians and culminated at Smyrna.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

Christians had long been second-class subjects in the Ottoman Empire (Turkey). As the Empire declined in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, its Christian subjects became scapegoats for the Empire's troubles, and campaigns of expulsion and killing were begun. Turkey aligned itself with Germany and other Central Powers at the start of World War I, and during the war the killing of its Christian subjects intensified. About 1.5 million Armenians were killed in 1915-16. American missionaries in the country witnessed the long death marches, and the killings were widely reported in the West.

After the defeat of the Central Powers, the victors gathered at Paris for peace talks and the drafting of treaties to settle new borders, reparations and other issues. The big four nations at the peace talks were the United States, Great Britain, France and Italy. A dispute broke out among the victors, and Italy unilaterally sought western Turkey as its rightful spoils of war. The United States and Britain objected and invited the nation of Greece, also an ally in the war, to forestall an Italian invasion of Turkey by occupying the city of Smyrna in May 1919. At the time, a civil war had broken out inside Turkey between the government and a new party of Turkish nationalists opposed to the peace terms

that were being dictated by the Allies. After Greece occupied Smyrna, a war broke out between Greece and the Turkish nationalist army. It lasted for three years. In August 1922, the Turkish nationalist army prevailed under the leadership of Mustapha Kemal, later called Ataturk. The Turkish army entered Smyrna and burned the city and massacred thousands of its residents.



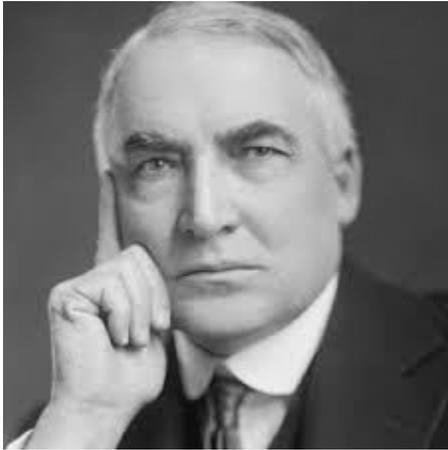
Refugees fleeing the brutality of the Turkish army crowd on to a barge in the harbor at Smyrna. After the fire, the city was bereft of food, and water was scarce.

MAIN CHARACTERS IN THE STORY:

Asa K. Jennings, a Methodist minister from upstate New York and an employee of the Young Men's Christian Association. Disabled by tuberculosis early in life, Jennings nonetheless arranged for the evacuation of Smyrna's Christian population in a bold and unusual diplomatic maneuver.

Halsey Powell, a U.S. naval officer from Kentucky who assisted Jennings in the evacuation. Powell was a WWI hero before arriving at Smyrna.

Mustapha Kemal, leader of the Turkish nationalist army and the father of modern Turkey.



President Harding

Warren G. Harding, president of the United States and an opponent of American involvement in Turkey to rescue Christian refugees.

George Horton, the American consul-general at Smyrna and an advocate of American intervention to save Smyrna and its Christian population.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Why did the United States refuse to intervene on behalf of Christian refugees at Smyrna?

What part did oil and other commercial interests play in the U.S. decision not to intervene in the crisis?

What seemed to be the factors that contributed to the characters of Asa Jennings and Halsey Powell that led them to arrange an evacuation despite the position of the American government?

Why was the American organization Near East Relief so important during this period?

Henry Morgenthau was the U.S. ambassador to Turkey before America entered the war against Turkey's ally, Germany. Morgenthau reported the genocide that was occurring in Turkey to his superiors in Washington. Why did the U.S. government fail to act on his reports? Was the U.S. correct in not declaring war on Turkey when it declared war on Germany?

What was the social and political context in Turkey that led to the genocide?

In what ways was the genocide in Turkey a portent of genocides that would follow in the 20th Century?

ADDITIONAL READING:

Websites:

"The Genocide of Ottoman Greeks, 1914-1923"

<http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/center-study-genocide-conflict-resolution-and-human-rights/genocide-ottoman-greeks-1914-1923>

"Coming to Terms: The Legacy of the Armenian Genocide"

<http://www.armeniangenocidemuseum.org>

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Horton, George. *The Blight of Asia*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1926; repr. London: Sterndale Classics and Taderon Press, 2003.

Hovannisian, Richard G. "Denial of the Armenian Genocide in Comparison with Holocaust Denial" in *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide*. Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.) Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999

Lord Kinross, *Ataturk: A Biography of Mustafa Kemal, Father of Turkey*, New York: William Morrow & Company, 1965

Morgenthau, Henry, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday 1918.

Power, Samantha . *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

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