

# SNAPSHOTS FROM A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY: 1912-18 IN THE WRITINGS OF OTTOMAN-BORN GREEKS

*The events of the turbulent years of 1912-18 surface in the novels and memoirs of several Greeks born as Ottoman subjects. All writers quoted in this article were later forced to emigrate, and all eventually ended up in Greece. Their works have become classics in contemporary Greek literature. Describing the reign of Abdülhamid II as the community's golden years, these writers chronicle a gradual descent into chaos and violence following the Balkan Wars. In what has become a topos in Greek literature and oral history, these writers attribute the deterioration of their fortunes not primarily to the Turkish side, but to German propaganda during the Great War.*

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**T**he novels and fictional memoirs of Ottoman-born Greeks provide vivid glimpses of daily life in the years between 1912 and 1918, while they also delineate the community's concerns and aspirations. All books quoted in this article are either memoirs, fictional autobiographies, chronicles of the writers' families, or novels echoing personal experiences of the period. Those tumultuous years were an interlude between the prosperous tranquility of the Hamidian era and the Disaster and Exodus of 1922-24. They are often mentioned as "leap years" – leap standing for unlucky in Greek popular culture. The term, alongside others such as, "the years of wrath" and "the beginning of the end", are often used in Greek oral history. The title *Like Birds Gone Wild* of Maria Iordanidou's third fictional memoir leaves little doubt as to what her people felt they had become.<sup>1</sup> Overall, a nation is depicted moving from a state of lethargic bliss to one of agony, death, and destruction.

Developments in 1912-18 deeply affected the lives of the writers, initiating a chain of events which eventually forced them to abandon their homeland forever. Even so, references to specific events predating the First World War are less frequent and somewhat more vague than one would expect. It has been very eloquently and famously stated that "Nostalgia is memory with the pain removed."<sup>2</sup> The depiction of the pre-1914 Ottoman World in Greek literature very much conforms to this adage. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, a distance of several decades separates the events described and the time of writing; the writer would normally retain a blurred memory of events. Moreover, nostalgia for the lost homeland relegates many bad memories preceding the Exodus to the background; memories of the "golden years" and longing for the "lost homeland" dominate. Adaptation to life in Greece was a very traumatic process and a huge disappointment for most Ottoman Greeks who migrated there. This, more than anything, encouraged and fed the trend of nostalgia for life in a homeland now lost.

Almost all of the famous writers had left-of-center sympathies. Their writing reflects their political ideas while also aiming to be didactic: Many books targeted primarily teenagers and most have become an inseparable part of the Greek school curriculum. All writers repeatedly allude to the "national feelings" of their community and its hopes for "liberation". Yet, they also rush to blame "the Great Powers" and their imperialist machinations for the misfortunes both of their community and of the Turks. These writings have, as observed by Joëlle Dallègre, helped form a collective historical memory, especially since several became long-sellers and were

1 Maria Iordanidou, *Like Birds Gone Wild* (Athens: Hestia, 1978).

2 Herb Caen, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 April 1975.

even adapted into movies and television.<sup>3</sup> Their attempt at historical analysis has become a *topos* in 20th century Greek literature.

The writers quoted below come from diverse social backgrounds and homelands. Their personal circumstances and experiences of the turbulent 1912-18 interlude are also very different. Notably, inhabitants of the capital Istanbul and of Izmir did not witness the worst of the period's upheaval first-hand. The cataclysmic violence reached them in the form of worrying reports and frightening rumors, or *via* encounters with destitute refugees and their stories. Despite the writers' differing circumstances, all texts exhibit very similar imagery, viewpoints, and evaluations. Taken together, they paint a consistent image of attitude and communal experience.

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### *The Blissful Lethargy of the Hamidian Years*

All writers juxtapose the “lost paradise of the pre-1914 Ottoman world”<sup>4</sup> with the chaos that began in 1914. To what may come as a surprise, given the horrible turn of events for Armenians under Abdülhamid II and his paranoid censorship, his reign is unanimously recognized as “the golden years” for Ottoman Greeks. The community had received a huge boost with the *Tanzimat* reforms, but it was under this sultan that it reached the peak of its confidence, affluence, and intellectual achievement. Literary works portray an atmosphere of calmness and languor; an old order of things that was unaltered for centuries and hence, created an illusion of safety.

Maria Iordanidou was born in the Istanbul district of Tarlabaşı in 1897; she studied in the American College of Üsküdar and later became a communist activist in Alexandria and Athens. Published in 1962, *Loxandra*, her fictional biography of her namesake maternal grandmother has had more than 60 reprints and more than half a million copies sold, making it one of the most celebrated works of contemporary Greek literature.<sup>5</sup> In *Loxandra*, Iordanidou portrays Greek life before 1908:

3 Joëlle Dallègre, “Grecs et Turcs d’après la prose Grecque” [Turks and Greeks in Greek Literature] in Semih Vaner (ed), *Le Différend Greco-Turc* [Greek-Turkish Dispute] (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1988), p. 227.

4 Dallègre (1988), p. 231.

5 Maria Iordanidou, *Loxandra* (Athens: Hestia, 1962).

“At that good old age, everybody minded one’s own household and comfort, and believed that the world would continue as it was (...) and that Greeks would always be part of Istanbul’s cityscape”.<sup>6</sup> “[Greeks] served no military service, because Turks were afraid to hand them arms. (...) So long as they did not interfere in state matters (...) and knew how to bribe, they had their way.”<sup>7</sup>

The characters in *Loxandra* live on the margins of the historical dramas, which they accept with passivity as inevitable and acknowledge they have no influence on.

Who even realized that a revolution broke out in Crete and that the bankrupt Ottoman Empire barely managed to quell it? When Sultan Aziz was murdered, Loxandra learnt this by chance. (...) People did not bother with politics at the time, because the Sultans could anyhow do as they pleased. And the Greeks (...) were able to use their abilities to live and prosper...<sup>8</sup>

Historical events of the Hamidian era sometimes surface to mar this image of bliss. *Loxandra* contains a very powerful description of the Armenian massacre in the very streets of the capital in 1895, which the writer’s family witnessed first-hand.

Sultan Hamid roused the riffraff, brought over Kurds with cleavers and organized a massacre of Armenians in the very streets of Constantinople (...) A clerk from Theodoros’ office came to bring them food and check if they were alright. There was a massacre of Armenians, he said, but the Turks did not attack any Greek, unless one hid an Armenian at home. And Theodoros begs them, for the grace of God, not to let anyone know they are sheltering [one]. The dogs licked the blood off the streets and life resumed, as if nothing had happened.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Young Turks and the “Great Persecution”***

Ottoman Greeks, like all Ottoman minorities, initially greeted the 1908 *coup* by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and its promises of equality and constitutional government, with enthusiasm. They organized huge demonstrations, supporting the new Ottoman constitution. However, the CUP’s nationalism would soon turn against the interests of non-Muslim citizens and its actions would lead to serious concerns. The first sore issue was the drafting of non-Muslims, which although

6 Iordanidou (1962), p. 179.

7 Iordanidou (1962), p. 80.

8 Iordanidou (1962), p. 79.

9 Iordanidou (1962), p. 145.

recognized as part and parcel of the *Tanzimat* reforms, had remained inactive. A new conscription law that passed in 1909 rendered military service mandatory for all male subjects between the ages of 20 and 45. The awkward position of conscripted Greeks called to fight against Greece hit home in the 1912-13 Balkan Wars, leading to many defections.

Aydın-born Dido Sotiriou chronicles the descent from peace into chaos and mutual hatred in her books *Ματωμένα Χώματα* (Bloodied Earth),<sup>10</sup> translated as *Farewell to Anatolia* in English, and *Οι Νεκροί Περιμένουν* (The Dead Are Waiting). *Farewell to Anatolia* is set in the Greek village of Kirrintzes (modern Şirince near Ephesus). Its first part, titled “Peaceful Life”, describes a civilized, polite coexistence with the Turks of the nearby villages and the seasonal workers who come to the village for work.<sup>11</sup> Turks are portrayed as innocent, respectful, superstitious, and very religious people, who will visit Greek doctors for serious health matters and are incapable at commerce.<sup>12</sup>

“*Apportion of blame to third parties has become a topos in Greek literature, which –just like its Turkish counterpart– is obsessed with an often stale and unoriginal ‘anti-imperialist’ rhetoric.*”

The phenomenon of defection is traced to the First Balkan War: “In the War of ’12 my two elder brothers, Panagos and Michalis, were drafted in the Turkish army. Michalis managed to defect and fight for the Greek side. ‘It is a holy deed he did’ my father said. The priests, the teachers, the elders spoke of it as an example to follow.”<sup>13</sup>

Greek-Turkish relations become further polarized following the Balkan Wars. Greeks remaining under Ottoman rule now firmly believed and wished that their homelands too would eventually join Greece. Anatolian Turks, on the other hand, panicked as thousands of exiled Balkan Muslims flooded Asia Minor. Sotiriou notes that “Age-old desires of salvation awoke in the souls of the *reyâ*. But so did the Young Turk movement fire up. As they had been shouting for Crete, they were now shouting for Macedonia...” She describes how “*Efes*,<sup>14</sup> dervishes, notables, and the *muhacir*”<sup>15</sup>

10 Dido Sotiriou, *Bloodied Earth* (Athens: Kedros, 1962).

11 Sotiriou (1962), pp. 24-7.

12 Sotiriou (1962), pp. 30-2 and pp. 48-53.

13 Sotiriou (1962), p. 66.

14 Brigands in rural Anatolia.

15 Muslim immigrants.

“The end of the Great War created unprecedented hope and optimism for the Greek community, which had feared downright extinction and experienced deportations during this war.”

chased out of Greece joined forces to flare up fanaticism among the naïve common folk. (...) Murders of Christians started here and there.”<sup>16</sup> Sotiriou did not personally witness the violence –she lived out the Great War in Aydın and Izmir– but is paraphrasing here the testimonies of its survivors.

Before even the outbreak of the Great War, thousands of Greek men from Thrace and Western Anatolia were drafted to special “Labor Battalions” (*Amele Taburu* in Turkish). They were marched to the interior of Anatolia to be employed in the construction of roads, bridges, railways, and other works of infrastructure. The phrase *Amele Taburu* became synonymous with the death of young men from exhaustion and ill-treatment. Parallel to the conscription, a campaign of violence was aimed at “cleansing” the areas of Thrace and the Aegean littoral of their Greek populations. Entire communities were threatened and forced to flee, others were sent on death marches to the interior, and others were massacred on the spot – the most infamous case being that of Phocaea (Foça) in June 1914. About 200,000 Greeks abandoned their settlements and fled to the Aegean islands on the opposite side.<sup>17</sup> The campaign became known as “The Great Persecution”.

Despite acknowledging the rising nationalist fever on both sides, in *Farewell Anatolia*, Sotiriou famously points the finger at those she considers the orchestrators of the violence. The son of a rich Smyrna merchant returning from Beirut produces a pamphlet reading: “If we Turks are hungry and suffering, the reason is the infidels who hold our riches and our trade in their hands. (...) Boycott their products. Stop all dealings with them.” The merchant’s son stresses that the pamphlet was distributed by the *Deutsche Palestinien Bank* all over the Middle East.”<sup>18</sup>

Laying the ultimate blame on German machinations is an easy solution, which enables the quasi-absolution of both Greeks and Turks for the decisions and actions that led to the carnage between them. However, apportion of blame to third parties has become a *topos* in Greek literature, which –just like its Turkish counterpart– is obsessed with an often stale and unoriginal “anti-imperialist” rhetoric.

<sup>16</sup> Sotiriou (1962).

<sup>17</sup> Erich-Jan Zürcher, *Greek and Turkish refugees and deportees 1912-1924* (Leiden: Leiden University, 2003), <http://www.transanatolie.com/english/turkey/turks/ottomans/ejz18.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Sotiriou (1962), pp. 66-7.

*The Great War: the “Labor Battalions” and the Teaching of Turkish*

Constantinopolitan Greeks may have been spared the “Great Persecution”, but the eruption of the “Great War” in 1914 would influence their lives in a number of ways. The immediate and most serious one was the drafting of all Greek men of military age (many ended up not in the Labor Battalions but in regular units). Draft evasion became a widespread practice in the capital. Iordanidou mentions in *Loxandra* that her aunt “was struggling to help her two sons escape to either Russia or Greece, because the Turks have gone wild. They have summoned all Christians for conscription.”<sup>19</sup> In the opening lines of her third fictional memoir, *Σαν τα τρελλά πουλιά* (Like Birds Gone Wild), we find her cousins safe and sound in Johannesburg.

The second part of *Farewell Anatolia* bears the terrifying title *Amele Taburu*. Sotiriou describes the panic which descends on the village as the crier calls out the drafting order. “The coffee houses were packed at night (...) The Turkish government drafted the Christians, but did not trust them and gave them neither guns nor uniforms; it designed Labour Battalions for them to serve in, but they’d be better called Death Battalions.”<sup>20</sup> Again, the observation that “the Turk has changed” and the issue of who awoke such instincts in him is raised. “The *Amele Taburu* are the work of the Devil. In the war of ’12 we did not have such outrages” the village priest observes.<sup>21</sup> Another villager comments:

“I only know one thing. It is the German who turned the Turk so cunning.”  
(...) The German was the mind and the Turk the hand. (...) Much before the declaration of war, German specialists had flooded the country for field study. (...) Greeks and Armenians constituted a major hurdle to German interests and should be removed at all costs.<sup>22</sup>

Draft evasion was as desperate as it was widespread. “Those who came from the *Amele Taburu* –deserters or on the leave– narrated such unbelievable horrors that soon villages and towns were flooded with deserters and draft evaders. (...) They made hideouts under the ground, in wells, in sewers, and between the roof and the ceiling. They called those *tavan taburu* (ceiling battalions). They remained in hiding for years.”<sup>23</sup>

19 Iordanidou (1962), p. 247.

20 Sotiriou (1962), pp. 81-3.

21 Sotiriou (1962), pp. 84.

22 Sotiriou (1962), pp. 87.

23 Sotiriou (1962), pp. 91.

The *tavan taburu* was a common practice in Istanbul's Greek quarters. But Constantinopolitan writers speak of different hardships. One of the first was the requisition of the best Greek schools, such as the Zographeion and the Zappeion; classes were now held in private homes – where students were also boarded. Georgios Theotokas, who was born and raised in Pera, a district of Istanbul, writes in *Leonis*, his fictional autobiography first published in 1940:

They had also taken possession of the best schools and turned them into hospitals and sanitarium for the army. (...) The Zographeion was taken over by the Germans. (...) Leonis (...) could see from the windows the school's court, where students used to play, the classrooms which had become dormitories and the Germans going out and about in pyjamas and with shaven heads. (...) They also had a big frame of their Emperor, in one of the classes, with his helmet and all his insignia and his famous moustache, sharp as a bayonet and turned upwards. From time to time they were in great spirits and started pillow-fights and laughed. Grandma would then say, "Those poor kids. Who knows what has become of their mothers."<sup>24</sup>

Greek actress Eleni Halkoussi, born in Makri-Köy (modern Bakırköy) and a boarder at Zappeion, describes in her memoir *Πόλη, Αγάπη Μου* (Istanbul, My Love),<sup>25</sup> the Turkish delegation's arrival to requisition the Zappeion in order to use it as a military hospital: "The schoolmistress is trying to communicate with its members in German and French, unable to speak a word of Turkish."<sup>26</sup>

Ignorance of Turkish was very common among Istanbul and Izmir Greeks. But the CUP government was set to change that. The introduction of mandatory Turkish classes in all minority schools during the Great War was seen as a necessary step towards "strengthening" the "Ottoman" identity of the non-Muslim pupils.

To our other adventures was added the teaching of Turkish – for the first time ever in Zappeion's history! As unbelievable as it sounds, it had not been taught in Istanbul's Greek schools, at least not in girls' schools. (...) It was written from right to left, in the Arabic script. (...) We somehow felt vindicated when Mustafa Kemal's new Turkey replaced the Latin script for those ideograms they were teaching us, and of which we had only learnt the first letter, Eliph, a perpendicular line...<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Georgios Theotokas, *Leonis* (Athens: Hestia, 2004), p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Eleni Halkoussi, *Istanbul My Love* (Athens: Kedros, 1980).

<sup>26</sup> Halkoussi (1980), pp. 69-70.

<sup>27</sup> Halkoussi (1980), pp. 73-5.



The teaching of Turkish was not always well received. Since language and its teaching at school has traditionally been seen by Greeks as the cornerstone of their collective identity, the introduction of Turkish teaching was seen by many as a step towards a much undesired assimilation. There were squabbles between teachers and students, as some of the latter flatly refused to learn the new language. In *Leonis*, Theotokas writes:

*“Adaptation to life in Greece was a very traumatic process and a huge disappointment for most Ottoman Greeks who migrated there.”*

Menos had thrown himself into politics. He did not cease to create trouble ever since the war started and Turkish classes became obligatory. Mr Nikolettopoulos, the Turkish language teacher, would call him to the blackboard. Menos would come forward, dressed in a black uniform, fat, uncombed, dirtied with chalk, and stare at the teacher as if dumb. Mr Nikolettopoulos would dictate, Menos would not make a move. Mr Nikolettopoulos would then ask: “Menelae,<sup>28</sup> why don’t you know your lesson?” And Menos would standardly retort: “My father told me not to learn Turkish.” Then Mr Nikolettopoulos would rise from his desk, give him a good slap and say: If the government closes our school down, will your father open it for us?<sup>29</sup>

As the war progressed, the capital’s inhabitants were faced with food shortages, inflation, disease, and other hardships. However, there was a conscious effort to preserve as many elements of normal life as possible. Theotokas describes:

Bread was now a black, muddy thing, which tasted like earth baked with straw. Indeed, all food had a strange taste, was hard to swallow, sugar and lemons had already become luxury items. There was also much talk on the epidemics, especially the typhus which wiped out the army, while there were also outbreaks of cholera. The movie theatres, nevertheless, continued to function and incessantly showed armies, cannons, automobiles, all dipped in endless mud, and later some very serious Swedish movies, filled with love, crimes and other adventures taking place in beautiful cities up north.<sup>30</sup>

28 “Menos” is the diminutive of the Greek name Menelaos; the teacher uses the formal, full name.

29 Theotokas (2004), p. 34.

30 Theotokas (2004), p. 51.

*Leonis* also contains the only description in Greek literature of an Allied bombardment of the Ottoman capital:

It was the beginning of summer. Crowds were strolling in the alleys of the Municipal Garden of Taksim<sup>31</sup> and the tables were almost full. (...) The orchestra (...) was playing polkas and easy waltzes. (...) A good eye could discern, high above, a few tiny points approaching. (...) The black spots descended rapidly towards the opposite side of the Bosphorus, where the Haydarpasa station was situated, and must have dropped something there because explosions were heard. Meanwhile, the machine gun pounded incessantly. German planes took off and a big air battle began, between Europe and Asia. (...) In seconds, the Municipal Garden was emptied. Everyone, stepping on one another, fled inside the café, overturning tables and chairs... (...) Waiters dropped their trays. (...) The empty garden was astir; you could see overturned tables, broken chairs, glass shattered on the ground, countless hats. And this calamity of the inanimate world, under the bright summer sun, was even more impressive in the soundtrack of the battle's incessant rattles.<sup>32</sup>

### *The Armistice and the Futile Hopes*

Hostilities between the Ottoman Empire and the Allies were ended with the Armistice of Moudros, signed on the Greek island of Lemnos on 30 October 1918. The armistice sealed the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. As per its terms, the Ottoman army was demobilized and the Empire's ports, railways and overall infrastructure opened up for use by the Allies. Greeks everywhere greeted the signing of the Armistice with jubilation. Within an hour of news spreading in the capital that the war was over, Theotokas describes the joy in the streets:<sup>33</sup>

The Grande Rue de Péra,<sup>34</sup> from one end to the other, was packed with flags – English, French, Italian, but mostly Greek. Windows and balconies were full of people. The street resembled a demonstration, and public transport had stopped. People were pushing one another and everybody was being dragged along, they did not know what they were doing, they all laughed and talked together. They had all become brothers and seemed a bit crazy. (...) Someone grabbed Leonis and kissed him. It was Menos, the fat child with his political ideas. “Everybody kisses everybody today. Christ has risen!”<sup>35</sup>

31 The Taksim Municipal Garden was a vast garden whose entrance was on the site of today's Taksim Square and which descended the slopes towards the Bosphorus.

32 Theotokas (2004), pp. 52-5.

33 Theotokas (2004), pp. 71-2.

34 Today's pedestrianized Istiklal Caddesi.

35 “Christ has risen!” is the traditional form of Easter well-wishing in the Orthodox Church. It is sometimes used in Greek figuratively in situations deemed akin to “national redemption”.

The end of the Great War created unprecedented hope and optimism for the Greek community, which had feared downright extinction and experienced deportations during this war. The propagation of the U.S. President Woodrow Wilson’s famous “14 points” in 1918, and particularly the idea of self-determination of nations propelled this enthusiasm:

The war had now finished, and there was to be no other war, everybody knew this was the last one. (...) All of the world’s major issues had somewhat been sorted. (...) A new era was beginning full of freedom and prosperity. (...) There was only one little effort that the Greek state had to carry out, a last push to sort out certain pending issues in Asia Minor. Then no other trouble would cast a shade on the joyful existence of Ulysses’ children...<sup>36</sup>

It was not meant to be. Disaster was actually in store for the Greeks who remained in the territories of the vanquished Ottoman Empire. All of the above writers took the road of exile. Halkoussi was in a school tour of Europe when the Greek front in Asia Minor collapsed in 1922. Banned from returning to the Ottoman realm, she remained in Europe for a while and then settled in Athens. Theotokas left with his family for Athens shortly after the Disaster – as the defeat of the Greek army in Asia Minor and the ensuing Exodus is known. Sotiriou and her family arrived in Athens destitute. Iordanidou left for Alexandria before moving to Athens shortly before World War II. Greek existence in Asia Minor and the “golden years” before 1912 would henceforth be confined to memory and nostalgia.

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<sup>36</sup> Theotokas (2004), pp. 75-6.