

**Ismini Lamb & Christopher Lamb, *The General American: George Horton's Odyssey and His True Account of the Smyrna Catastrophe*, Gorgias Press, 2022, Piscataway, NJ, USA**

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***Book Review***

This is the first, long overdue, official biography of the US Consul General, George Horton who served his country in Greece and Turkey during the tumultuous period of the 1890s-1922. The authors have brought to life many unknown aspects of the life of this diplomat who served his country with honor and distinction. It is an important book based on many largely unknown sources whose content is being made available to the public for the first time.

The book contains a Prologue (pp1-16.) which relates a masterful and very moving overview of Horton's life and importance, an Epigraph and 13 chapters in addition to a selected bibliography.

This large and richly produced book begins with an Epigraph (n.p) which encourages readers to view the British Pathe news agency's short film of the Smyrna fire of 1922 along with other videos on Smyrna on Youtube. Such videos capture life and events as they actually happened. The book also contains 78 illustrations made up of photos which also includes a photo of George Horton and two maps showing the Greek presence in Asia Minor. Some of the photos provide a visual of how Smyrna looked like before and after the 1922 fire and the maps help the reader to locate towns and cities mentioned in the narrative. Similarly, a list of important individuals of the time assist the reader to understand Horton's involvement and interaction with these individuals for instance with Eleftherios Venizelos, Admiral Mark L. Bristol and US Ambassador Henry Morgenthau.

In their Preface the authors describe the difficulties they experienced in bringing this book into fruition and the reasons why it was important to tell Horton's story. They state:

“In sum, we believe Horton's life experience reveals a great deal, and not just about Horton, but about Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. Among other things, readers will discover how World War I really ended in Europe, and how it never really ended in Turkey despite the armistice. Beyond these and other revelations, Horton's story should give readers a new or renewed appreciation for why nations, like people, cannot avoid moral choices. The issues he contended with a century ago are still readily apparent

in our own recent headlines. People and nations still have to decide whether to accept the role of the good Samaritan or avert their eyes, leaving a mass of victims to horrible fates. Now you know how the book came to be, and why we believe it is important. Horton liked to say, “the truth will out,” and that nicely encapsulates our own modest hopes for this biography. It is out of our hands now. Readers will ultimately determine whether the book is considered a success or not.” (p.Xviii)

Although the authors make clear that during their nine years of research they collected and analyzed enough material to write a full biography of Horton’s life, the focus of this book concerns the latter part of his diplomatic career. The book’s thirteen chapters provide a detailed and well documented narrative of the major events unfolding before and after World War I during Horton’s time serving as US Consul-General in Salonika and Smyrna. There are quotations from his diary, letters sent to family members, correspondence with Ambassador Morgenthau and Admiral Bristol and his dispatches forwarded to the Secretary of State in Washington DC in the book. He was a witness to the persecutions of Christians in the Smyrna region between 1914-17 and did everything in his power to protect them from the Ottoman authorities. Horton’s close relationship with the Governor of Smyrna, Rahmi Bey was crucial in protecting the Christians and foreign communities from Turkish reprisals during the years 1915-17. Rahmi had no faith in a German victory and “cordially detested the Germans, whose officers were often overbearing and rude to him.” He often ignored orders sent to him from Constantinople (p.70).

In their excellent overview, the author’s note that Horton described the Greek High Commissioner in Smyrna, Sterghiadis as someone who did not like socializing like Rahmi. When Sterghiadis issued an order, “he expected it to be obeyed.” (p. 148) Many Greek Smyrniotes hated Sterghiadis for his stance of displaying a favorable treatment of the Turks. Sterghiadis once interrupted a Church service conducted by Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Smyrna because he considered the Metropolitan’s sermon too patriotic. Despite this however, Horton “developed a close working relationship with Sterghiadis just as he had done with Rahmi. He believed it was in America’s interest to encourage Sterghiadis to be as liberal, humane, and just, in his administration as possible.” (pp.149-150)

Morgenthau and Bristol were important figures as the senior US diplomats in Constantinople when Horton was Consul General in Smyrna. The authors provide the reader with a good understanding of the context that Horton had to deal with. For example, Morgenthau sought to have Horton transferred but the latter fired back that he worked well with Rahmi Bey. Horton stated that Rahmi had given an assurance that no harm would to Americans during World War I and so it was important for him to remain in place. Morgenthau was concerned that since Horton was married to a Greek woman that this might be inconvenient if war broke out between Greece and Turkey. Over time however, the authors illustrate that Morgenthau came to the same view as Horton regarding Turkey’s treatment of its minorities.

Though a detailed analysis of the sources, the authors also demonstrate that Bristol tried to sideline Horton and to ensure that he never returned to Smyrna. Later, Horton wanted the truth to be known that the Turks caused the Smyrna fire and even suggested at one point that the US represent Greek interests in Smyrna. Bristol would have none of this. With Horton out of the way, Bristol appointed Barnes as Consul in Smyrna who reported that the Greeks and Armenians

were responsible for the Smyrna fire. Bristol was pro-Turkish doing everything to exonerate the Turks from lighting the fire and any responsibility for the massacres of Christians.

Using evidence from the archives and official documents, the authors also show that Horton was deeply offended by Bristol's proposals which prevented the US from providing any official aid to the Greek refugees. Bristol wanted the Greek government and the allies to be responsible for the care of the refugees. Horton also wrote to the State Department outlining the events and causes that led to the Asia Minor debacle. Earlier Bristol tried to damage Horton's career that the latter had broken down and had to be evacuated in September 1922 accusations which the authors prove had no basis in fact. In 1924, Bristol requested a copy of Hepburn's report from the state department files so he could comment on it. He added his own comments regarding Horton's performance as a consular official that he was "impartial", "remarkably well-informed", and called him "plain fair-square."

Another strength in this book are references to Horton's intervention on behalf of the Armenians, Greeks, Jews, and Muslims which are contrary to views of his critics accusing him of a pro-Greek bias. Horton told Rahmi Bey that he would be "eternally damned" if he persisted in the deportation of Armenians of Smyrna. Europe would learn about this outrage which would harm Rahmi's reputation as governor. As the dean of the diplomatic corps in Smyrna, Horton was a respected figure in the foreign communities and the consuls of the Central Powers. In 1914, Horton reported to Constantinople and Washington of massacres, boycotts, and anti-Greek propaganda by the Turks against the Greek population of western Asia Minor. American residents along with Horton requested that American warships be sent to protect American interests in Smyrna and also offer some protection to the Smyrniot Greeks.

Rahmi tried to get the Smyrniot Jews to renounce their European citizenship and gave them a short time to adopt Ottoman citizenship or face deportation. Jewish community leaders kept Horton apprised of developments within their community. Horton "saw Rahmi 'at least eight times' protesting his treatment of Jewish community leaders." Additionally, Horton called upon Morgenthau to raise this issue with the Turkish government in Constantinople.

Horton also intervened on behalf of Muslims who were wronged under the Greek administration in Smyrna. In fact, the authors provide documentation to show that he was "plain fair-square" that his "office was daily a refuge for Mohammedan delegations" who were assured that the American consulate was the only place where they could get real help." The Greek government thought he was pro-Turk.

I am honored that the authors cited my work on the Japanese ship, *Tokei Maru* which saved Greek and Armenian refugees from the clutches of the Kemalists by taking them to Piraeus. In fact, their discussion of the fire and its aftermath is both comprehensive and balanced. Any future scholar who writes on the entire subject of the Asia Minor catastrophe, the Christian genocide, and American involvement must take this important and fundamental study into account.

There are some aspects however, which would have made the book an even greater contribution to the scholarship on this period. The authors state they used materials from the George Horton papers held at the Booth Family Center for Special Collections in Lauinger Library, at Georgetown University. A major gap in this book is the inadequate citation of the Horton papers in the endnote sections of the book. There are also instances where more attention to footnote

documentation would have helped document their arguments. The examples are too numerous to cite here but a few examples will suffice for illustration purposes. In Chapter 3 footnote 65 the authors mention German sources without naming them to back up their claim. Listing German sources here could have been helpful to the reader who might be interested in checking them out for themselves. In Chapter 4 footnote numbers 64, 70, 85-87 cite correspondence written by Horton to the Secretary of State in Washington without any reference to index and document numbers and the same is repeated in Chapter 9 footnote numbers 4, 61, 71 and 73. Additionally, the authors failed to provide a complete container list of the George Horton papers in their primary source section. This would allow the interested reader like myself to conduct my own research on this important American diplomat and know exactly which materials the authors used.<sup>1</sup>

It appears that the authors anticipated that this gap might be mentioned and write that the recording system of the State Department files “are meaningless to average readers unfamiliar with the Department of State’s complex coding system. We chose to provide more practical information in our notes, including the identity of the originator, recipient, date of the document, and a subject line when one was provided.” (p.423) Without providing a reel or microfiche and document number, however, this method makes it difficult to trace the original document in the National Archives. This omission is a limitation that makes this otherwise exemplary book less useful than it could have been. I would have liked to have seen Dr. Constantine G. Hatzidimitriou’s detailed studies<sup>2</sup> which contain previously unpublished state department documents and anticipated and fully agreed with their findings utilized a lot more in their narrative. It would have also been useful to cite official Turkish documents to highlight what the Turks actually thought of Horton. Nevertheless, despite these limitations the authors have amply succeeded in providing us with an outstanding contribution to the scholarship on Horton and the period they cover.

In conclusion, this biography has filled a gap in our knowledge about an important American diplomat who served his country with honor and distinction for nearly thirty years in Greece and Turkey. He lived through the topsy-turvy years of war, massacres, deportations, and finally the expulsion of the Greeks from Asia Minor in September 1922. Horton was well respected by the foreign communities and diplomatic corps in Smyrna, even though his overall relations with Morgenthau and Bristol were not always the best. Though married to a Greek woman, his interventions on behalf of Armenians, Greeks, Jews, and Turks show that he cannot be considered partisan in any way. In the last analysis, the voluminous documentation that this book provides has definitively demonstrated that Horton was impeccably honest, unbiased, and a diplomat whose humanity and professionalism represented the highest values of the United States during tumultuous times.

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<sup>1</sup> For the interested reader who wishes to refer to the actual contents of the George Horton papers, please refer to the following URL [https://findingaids.library.georgetown.edu/repositories/15/resources/9999/collection\\_organization#tree::archival\\_object\\_1165588](https://findingaids.library.georgetown.edu/repositories/15/resources/9999/collection_organization#tree::archival_object_1165588) (accessed on April 12, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> American Accounts Documenting the Destruction of Smyrna by the Kemalist Forces: September 1922 (Aristide Caratzas Publisher, New York: 2005; and “The Destruction of Smyrna in 1922: American Sources and Turkish Responsibility” in *The Asia Minor Catastrophe and the Ottoman Greek Genocide* edited by George N. Shirinian, (The Asia Minor and Pontos Research Center, Inc.: Bloomingdale, Illinois: 2012) pp. 155-227.