

BOOK REVIEW

Kostas Faltaits, *The Genocide of the Greeks in Turkey: Survivor Testimonies From the Nicomedia (Izmit) Massacres of 1920-1921*. Translated and edited by Ellene S. Phufas-Jousma and Aris Tsilfidis, with Prologue by Tessa Hofmann (River Vale, NJ: Cosmos Publishing, an Imprint of Attica Editions Inc., 2016), 156 pp.

Reviewed by Michael Kalafatas

The Czech-French writer Milan Kundera observed, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." So, score the publication in English of a volume written almost a century ago in Greek—and translated at the time only into French—a victory for remembering a genocide.

Kostas Faltaits's *The Genocide of the Greeks in Turkey: Survivor Testimonies from the Nicomedia (Izmit) Massacres of 1920-1921* is a book load of fresh witness testimonies recorded by an ace journalist of his time, Konstantinos (Kostas) Faltaits. An admired correspondent for the Athens newspaper *Embros*, Faltaits arrived on horseback in the Nicomedia (today Izmit) region of Turkey, southeast of Constantinople in March 1921. He remained for eight months. In that time, he meticulously recorded direct testimonies from survivors of eight Greek settlements ravaged in 1920-1921 by Kemalists, whose clear aim was the destruction of the Greek Christian communities. The genocidal methods employed were identical to those used in the Armenian genocide of 1915. Indeed, the book also includes recollections of the Armenian Apostolic Bishop of Nicomedia on the deportations of the Armenians during the First World War. Of eighty thousand Armenians in the region only ten thousand survived. Faltaits sent his reports, installment by installment, to *Embros*, which instantly published them. They must have seemed dispatches from Hell. As I read the variegated and ghastly genocidal methods used, the haunting music and lyrics of Leonard Cohen's "Who by Fire" ran through my mind, including "Who shall I say is calling?"¹

A helpful Editors' Note by Ellene S. Phufas-Jousma and Aris Tsilfidis contrasts the genocide of the Armenians, annihilated in a comparatively short period of time (1915)

with the Greek Genocide in the former Ottoman Empire that spanned nine years (1914-1923). At the beginning of World War I, some 2.5 million Greeks lived in the Ottoman Empire; by 1923 an estimated 1.3 million were able to flee, mostly to Greece, “thus bringing the death toll to roughly 1.2 million.”² The genocidal tools included “forced relocations with no food or shelter (death marches), wholesale massacres, conscription of men into labor battalions (concentration camps), forced conversion to Islam, rape, pillaging, the confiscation of wealth and property, and the burning of their religious institutions (often while they were bolted within the churches).”³

This book offers the reading public and researchers of genocide information previously unavailable in English. This new English edition includes a discerning, highly informative Prologue by Dr. Tessa Hofmann, a scholar and member of the Eastern Europe Institute of the Free University of Berlin. Hofmann has published or edited ten books and lectured widely on Armenian history, culture, and specifically on the Armenian genocide. She is also a well-known human rights activist and defender of minority rights.

Hofmann’s Prologue sets the stage for the reader: “The crime scene is the scenic peninsula and its hinterland situated at the Marmara Sea between the towns of Yalova and Gemlik, south of Istanbul. On the eastern shore of a large lake is the city once known in Europe as ... Nicaea . . . where during the years 325 and 787 two Christian Ecumenical Councils took place.”⁴ Across the arc of time through linguistic assimilation many of the Greeks had become Turkophone but it was a long settled Greek Christian community.

This collection of witness testimonies underscores the power of a single accomplished journalist to preserve cultural memory. A lone journalist, Kostas Faltaits, gathered up testimonies of evil of the first order— what Hofmann calls “a modus operandi that led to the destruction of Christian or Greek settlements” These included armament of the Turkish population; racketeering – promises of protection in exchange for money, valuables, or goods, with such promises regularly broken; gender separation, a feature of modern genocide; plunder and arson; massacres; extraordinary cruelty that “far exceeded any tactical necessity.” Persecuted by Kemalist irregulars, Hofmann reports, these refugee communities secured their survival by suffocating or poisoning with opium their own infants. She writes, “The narratives about child killing— usually by the mother or at any rate by women—belong to the most heartrending episodes in the survivor accounts.”⁵ The witness reports of Kostas Faltaits relate to the final phase of the greater Greek genocide, which Hofmann characterizes as “a cumulative state crime.”

These events happened in the confines of a failing state. After the Ottoman capitulation on October 30, 1918, the country was formally under the military control of the Entente states. Russia, France, and Great Britain had already announced that after the war, as Hofmann reports, “they would hold the members of the Ottoman government

responsible for their ‘crimes against humanity and civilization’.”⁶ But once it became clear that the Allies intended the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire, any hope of Turkish compliance faded, especially given “open antagonism between the Sultan’s government of Constantinople and the rebellious nationalist government at Ankara under ... Mustafa Kemal.”⁷

Faltaits’s written reports of survivor testimonies of the Izmit massacres, taken so proximate to when these events occurred, are of extraordinary value. Every genocide has its deniers. One recalls Supreme Allied Commander Dwight David Eisenhower’s deeply wise decision in the final days of the World War II in Europe to personally visit the Nazi death camps. Here is Eisenhower’s reasoning as it appears in his book, *Crusade in Europe*:

I felt it my duty to be in a position from then on to testify at first hand about these things in case there ever grew up at home the belief or assumption that ‘the stories of Nazi brutality were just propaganda.’ . . . I not only did so but . . . that evening I sent communications to both Washington and London, urging the two governments to send instantly to Germany a random group of newspaper editors and representative groups from the national legislatures. I felt that the evidence should be immediately placed before the American and British publics in a fashion that would leave no room for cynical doubt.⁸

An interesting side bar story associated with the publication of Faltaits’s book in English is how an important book fell into near oblivion for almost a century. The book was first published in Greek in 1921 under the title of *These Are Turks—Narratives of the Massacres in Nicomedia*, and then rushed into French translation. The translation was done by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs so the book could be used by the Greek government at European summits where decisions were being made about the future of the affected people and the nations at war. But why a *French translation*? At that time French was the *lingua franca* of diplomats. But English soon pushed aside French as diplomatic lingua franca and became the prime language of international discourse. Faltaits’s book became lost to a worldwide audience—giving wholly new meaning to the phrase “lost in translation.” With this brand-new English translation, the book now becomes widely accessible and even strengthened for contemporary audiences with its insightful Editors’ Note and Hofmann Prologue. When the book was first published and swiftly translated into French, there was a clamor in Greece for translation into many languages. But that never happened. Why one of the many Greek governments since 1921

did not arrange for an English translation, given the perennial preoccupation of Greek governments with Turkey, remains puzzling. Above all, this new publication in English stands as a small but important victory for those who study genocides in the sad and ever-present need to understand and try to prevent them. Faltaits's witness reports of the Nicomedia (Izmit) massacres will now hold up much longer against what Lincoln called "the silent artillery of time."

As Hofmann observes, it is a tribute to the editorial integrity of Faltaits "that he did not exclude those self-exposing moments in the survivors' accounts that exemplify revenge-taking by survivors."⁹ Retributive atrocities can occur in genocide, as she reports, and did in the Izmit massacres as in an example cited of "destitute and traumatized civilians" committing an atrocity attack upon a captured prisoner. "Can one expect mercy from mothers who had suffocated their infants in order to survive?" Hofmann asks. But she goes on to say, "Understanding in the given context is not to be confused with an apology, but it could result in the acknowledgement of limited criminal responsibility and in mitigation."¹⁰ In recent times genocide scholars have acknowledged that a victimized population need not prove itself utterly defenseless to successfully file claims of genocide. Armed self-defense or resistance of victimized groups is increasingly seen by such scholars as a human right, Hofmann reports.

In his time Kostas Faltaits was "*l'homme engage*"—the man engaged. He was born in 1891 in Smyrni (Izmir today) and died in 1944 on the island of Skyros where he was raised. A small biography in the book reports that the "hardships and deprivations caused by the German/Italian occupation during WWII took a heavy toll on his health, finally leading to his death on October 23, 1944." Sadly, he died in penury. Much of Kostas Faltaits's work was preserved by his devoted son, Manos Faltaits, who established a museum on Skyros to acquaint people with his father's work as a renowned journalist, writer, and novelist.

The Editors' Note begins with an epigraph from Elie Wiesel: "For the dead and the living, we must bear witness."¹¹ With the publication of this book in English, Kostas Faltaits, a lone journalist on horseback, lives again in his finest role: as witness for the prosecution

¹ (A sample eyewitness account can be found online at www.izmitmassacres.com.)

² Kostas Faltaits, *The Genocide of the Greeks in Turkey: Survivor Testimonies from the Nicomedia (Izmit) Massacres of 1920-1921*. (River Vale, NJ: Cosmos Publishing, an Imprint of Attica Editions Inc., 2016), p. 11.

³Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p. 16.

⁵ Ibid, p. 21.

⁶ Ibid, p. 22.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, p. 409.

⁹ Ibid, p. 26.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The Editors' Note also includes a dedication of the book to the memory of the victims of the massacres and to Manos Faltaits who passed away as the English edition approached publication.

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