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THE RIOTS IN TURKEY, IN SEPTEMBER 1955:
A BRITISH DOCUMENT

The importance of the riots in Istanbul and Izmir on September 6, 1955, does not need extensive analysis: Although other Christians suffered as well, the riots were clearly directed against and gave a fatal blow to the Greek community in Turkey, a community covered by the Treaty of Lausanne, of 1923. According to this Treaty, a Christian minority and the Oecumenical Patriarchate were left in Turkey and a Muslim minority was left in Greek Western Thrace. The well-being of the two minorities had always been a crucial factor, facilitating the good relations between the two countries and contributing to the stability in the region. Since the Greek community in Istanbul formed the overwhelmingly greatest part of the Christian minority, the September events severed the prospects of stability as well: The riots affected the course of the Cyprus dispute, of the Greco-Turkish relations and of the Balkan Alliance between Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia. They also caused great strain to the NATO structure in the region and the USA tried to mediate, asking for restraint from both sides. However, by delivering identical messages to Athens and Ankara, i.e. treating the victim in the same way as the culprit, Washington caused the first strong expressions of anti-american feelings in Greece. On the other hand, the Greek government reacted strongly, but with restraint to this Turkish provocation: Athens asked for satisfaction for the burning down of the Greek Consulate in Izmir and for compensation for the victims. Greece, also, refused to take part to NATO exercises. Yet, there were no actions of revenge in Greece and the USA, later that month, praised the "exemplary calmness" shown by Athens¹.

1. See, among others, Averoff-Tossizza Evangelos, *Istoria Khamenon Efkerion-Kypriako, 1950-1963* (History of Lost Opportunities-The Cyprus Question, 1950-1963), Hestia, Athens, 1982, pp. 77-82. Alexandrakis Menelaos, Theodoropoulos Vyron, Lagakos Ephstathios, *To Kypriako, 1950-1974, Mia Endoskopisi* (The Cyprus Question, 1950-1974, An Introspection), Elliniki Evroekdotiki, Athens, 1987, p. 100. Vlachos Anghelos, *Deka Khronia Kypriakou* (Ten Years of the Cyprus Question), Hestia, Athens, 1980, pp. 120-121. Couloumbis Theodore A., *Greek Political Reactions to American and NATO Influences*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1966, pp. 95-97. Mikhelopoulos Dimitris,

It is today known that the Turkish government had organised the whole thing, although they did not want the riots to take such proportions. Turkey, evidently, wanted to strengthen her case in the Tripartite Conference on Cyprus, held in London in these days. Ankara, understandably, tried to belie such grave accusations. Yet, after the coup of 1960, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister of 1955, Adnan Menderes and Fatin Zorlu, were convicted to imprisonment, on charges that they had organised those events. (They were executed on other charges). Thus, many informations were revealed about the affair: for example, that Zorlu, from London, (he was in charge of the Turkish Delegation to the Cyprus Conference) asked for a large demonstration to be organised in order to strengthen his stand in the Conference².

The document (FO 371/117711/50) which follows, therefore, does not reveal many details as yet unknown. Nor is it totally accurate since it was written only a few days after the event. For example, the author seems not to know Zorlu's request mentioned above. He was also reluctant to consider the Salonika incident as part of the plot, although, later, it was proved that it was. The document, however, is a notably detailed account of what happened through British eyes, as well as an important evidence, from the British side, to prove the governmental connection in the riots.

The report (sent to the Foreign Secretary, Harold Macmillan), was signed by Michael Stewart, the British Chargé d'Affaires in Turkey. The events took place at a time when the Ambassador, Sir James Bowker, was at London,

Ellada ke Tourkia, 1950-1959, I khameni Proseghisi (Greece and Turkey 1950-1959, The Lost Rapprochement), Roes, Athens, 1988, pp. 77-92. Linardatos Spyros, *Apo ton Emphylio tin Hounta, Tomos B', 1952-1955, I Trietia tou Synaghermou* (From the Civil War to the Junta, Volume B', 1952-1955, The Three Years of the Rally), Papazisi, Athens, 1978, pp. 328-343. Sarris Neoklis, *I Alli Plevra - Diplomatiki Khronographia tou Diamelismou tis Kyprou me Vasi Tourkikes Pighes* (The Other Side-Diplomatic Chronicle of the Dismemberment of Cyprus, based on Turkish Sources), volume B', Book A' (1955-1963), Grammi, Athens 1982, pp. 97-273. See also *Eleftherotypia*, 9 Jan. 1986, pp. 18-19, in which part of some of the PRO documents (including parts of the one presented here) are published. Foreign Office (F.O.) to Athens 10 Sept. 1955, PRO PREM-11/834.

2. Weiker Walter F., *The Turkish Revolution 1960-61, Aspects of Military Politics*, Washington D.C., The Brookings Institution, 1963, pp. 33-35. Alexandris Alexis, *The Greek Minority of Istanbul and Greek-Turkish relations, 1918-1974*, Center for Asia Minor Studies, Athens, 1983, pp. 256-266. Also, Alexandris Alexis, "To Istoriko Plesio ton Ellinotourkikon Scheseon" (The Historical Framework of the Greco-Turkish relations), in Alexandris Alexis, Veremis Thanos, Kazakos Panos, Coufoudakis Vangelis, Rozakis Christos, Tsitsopoulos Giorgos, *I Ellinotourkikes Scheseis, 1923-1987* (The Greek Turkish Relations, 1923-1987), Gnosi, Athens, 1988, pp. 31-172.

attending the Cyprus Conference. Thus, Stewart was the British diplomat of the highest rank, present in Turkey on September 6. It must also be stressed that, on the day in question, Stewart was in Istanbul and, consequently, that he had the opportunity to take a close look at the events.

As for the reference to talks between Turkish statesmen and the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, R. A. Butler, which appears in the document, it may be useful to note that Butler went to Turkey, in mid-September, for the meeting of the International Monetary Fund.

Finally, one has to take note of the reference of Turkish officials, as well as the Press, in late August, to "informations" that the Greek Cypriots were planning a massacre of the Turkish Cypriots. The Governor of Cyprus, Sir Robert Armitage, had insisted that the Cyprus intelligence had no such information³. Even after September 6, Turkey appeared provocative: On September 12, the Secretary-General of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, Nuri Birgi, repeated to the British such Turkish "fears" about the safety of the Turkish Cypriots. He even expressed the view that Armitage was not "so competent in protecting people", a rather surprising thing to say at that specific time. Notably, in the next years, Turkey did not hesitate to refer to the dangers the Greeks in that country faced, because of the insistence of Athens to pursue the case of the Greek Cypriots⁴.

Scholar of the Greek State Scholarships Foundation

3. Stewart (Istanbul) to FO, 25 Aug. 1955, PRO FO 371/117651/860 Stewart to Macmillan, 25 Aug. 1955, FO 371/117652/877 Record of a meeting, Macmillan-Zorlu, 27 Aug. 1955, FO 371/117652/894. Armitage to Colonial Office, 25 Aug. 1955, FO 371/117650/850.

4. FO minute (Ward), 13 Sep. 1955 FO 371/117656/996, FO to Ankara 20 June 1956, FO 371/123899/1242.

A P P E N D I X

The Right Honble.
Harold Macmillan, M.P., etc., etc.,
Foreign Office,
S.W.I.

SECRET
No. 193
(1491/81/55)

British Embassy Residence,
Istanbul.
22nd September, 1955.

Sir,

In my unnumbered telegram of the 6th of September I reported that serious anti-Greek rioting had broken out in Istanbul that evening. I now have the honour to submit an account of the disturbances as they appear at a distance of some days. The immediate cause seems to have been a report received three or four hours earlier and published by two Istanbul papers in special evening editions that Atatürk's birthplace and the Turkish Consulate in Salonika had been attacked and blown up by Greek demonstrators. There is, however, good reason to believe that demonstrations on a very much smaller scale had been planned earlier to coincide more or less with the end of the London Conference on Cyprus. I will revert to this point later.

2. The bomb outrage on Salonika appears to have done little damage but the Turks in Istanbul and Izmir had already been worked into a state of considerable excitement by uncompromising public statements on Cyprus made by the Turkish Foreign Minister during the London Conference and weeks of anti-Greek writing in the press, and the Salonika incident provided them with the convenient opportunity to display in a peculiarly brutal and useless way their hatred of the Greeks.

3. This Embassy's first intimation of the rioting was the sound of breaking glass and shouting at about 8 o'clock at an open-air

night club immediately below the Embassy garden wall which faces the Golden Horn. It appears, however, that the demonstrations began about 6 o'clock in Taksim Square, where a large crowd, excited by the news of the outrage in Salonika, were harangued by Hikmet Bil, the present President of the "Cyprus is Turkish" Association. The Police are reported to have tried to arrest Bil, who defied them with the support of the crowd, whereupon they made no further attempt to intervene. The speeches finished, the main part of the crowd started moving down Istiklal Caddesi the main street in Pera, while others went off in the direction of Ayazpaşa and along the main boulevard towards Şişli. The attacks on shops, the destruction of goods and property and to a much more limited extent the looting, then began. This was done with a method and determination which would have done credit to any thorough-going barbarian. Groups of young men armed with clubs and crowbars and under the Turkish flag—most groups had their own standard bearer—smashed the plate-glass or where necessary battered through steel shutters and systematically ransacked the shops, threw the contents into the street and trod it underfoot or otherwise destroyed it. Both from my own observations, I went out for an hour about 8 o'clock and again towards midnight, and from what I have heard from others, neither the Police nor the garrison troops who were out in some force by 8.30, made any real attempt to restrain the rioters. Indeed the Police in the Pera district, with the exception of four mounted officers who rode aimlessly up and down the main street, armed with hunting whips, which they were careful not to use, seemed to have generally disappeared from the scene by 9 o'clock. The Italian Ambassador, however, tells me that the Police were in evidence in some parts and effective in preventing damage to Italian property.

4. The troops, who were kept in side streets or paraded up and down the main street in trucks to the accompaniment of the applause of those who could take time off from the more engrossing occupation of pillage, were useless. Neither they nor the tanks, which appeared towards ten o'clock made any effort to intervene, nor did their presence have the slightest restraining effect on the rioters. By midnight there were probably no more than a dozen or twenty shops in the whole length of the Istiklal Caddesi left intact and the street itself was carpeted with broken glass, sodden bales of cloth

and wreckage of household goods and merchandise.

5. I have not had any eyewitness account of what took place in other parts of the city, but from the wreckage on the 7th of September in the Beyazit area, the business centre of old Istanbul, it is clear that many minority shops were broken up. The Greek residential area of Kurtulus in new Istanbul was badly damaged. There was also great damage done in the Greek village of Samatya towards Florya, and in other Greek centres and in the islands of the Sea of Marmara, and generally wherever there were Greek or foreign communities.

6. The Embassy Residence and the Consulate General were in the centre of the rioting in Pera, and when it became clear that neither the Police nor the troops were willing or able to control the crowds—the solitary policeman who normally controls traffic outside our gates had disappeared some time earlier—I telephoned the Governor of Istanbul to protest against the lack of adequate protection for British lives and property and to ask for it to be provided without delay. The Governor was profuse in his assurances but in fact no sort of guard was put on the Embassy until five hours later.

7. I have in my telegram No. 180 already given you a preliminary summary of the damage to British persons and property, and, in accordance with your instructions, a Note was presented to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs last week setting out the damage so far as we know it at present, reserving the right to claim compensation and asking for police protection for British lives and property in the future. Other foreign missions have done the same for their nationals and the Italian Ambassador told me on the 20th of September that he had suggested to the Foreign Minister that the Turkish Government might make a payment in advance of formal claims to meet some of the most immediate needs of foreign nationals. I had already seen Count Pietromarchi on the 8th of September to suggest that in his capacity as Dean of the Diplomatic Corps he might make some representations to the Turkish authorities about their failure to provide adequate protection for foreign property and persons, but His Excellency was not inclined to move at that time. Since then I gather that other diplomatic representatives have been urging the same course. In this connection I have noted your Legal Adviser's opinion that the right to protest and

to claim compensation can only be based on it being shown that the Turkish authorities failed to exercise due diligence. I do not, of course, know how an argument on this point would go in a Court of Law, and the Turkish Prime Minister in his speech in the National Assembly of the 12th of September was at some pains to defend the Istanbul Police. Nevertheless apart from the evidence of eyewitnesses, the Prime Minister has admitted foreknowledge of demonstrations, the Minister of the Interior, who was in Istanbul during the rioting, has resigned and the Chief of Police, the Director of Security, and three senior Generals in the Istanbul District Command have been dismissed. It strikes me therefore that the Turkish Government might have some difficulty in maintaining that the authorities had been as active in dealing with this incident as they should have been.

8. I now return to the events of the night of the 6th of September. It is clear, though it is naturally difficult to lay one's hand on conclusive evidence, that the rioting was organised well in advance. Indeed the Government have admitted as much. It broke out simultaneously all over Istanbul on the Asiatic and European side, and as far out as Therapia on the Bosphorus and the Marmara Islands. It is also fairly clear that there was some degree of Government connivance. The new Hilton Hotel, for instance, was heavily guarded by cavalry and police well before the demonstrations degenerated into rioting, and the Greek Consulate General and the Patriarchate were given effective military protection at an early stage. Hikmet Bill, the President of the "Cyprus is Turkish Association" though now under arrest, spent an hour with the Prime Minister on the evening of the 5th of September, and I am reliably informed that the Government were aware of and had agreed to an anti-Greek demonstration to be organised under the auspices of the Association. This was to be limited to street demonstrations and the breaking of a few windows. The day planned for these events was to be the 9th of September, the anniversary of the final defeat of the Greeks in Izmir but the bomb outrage in Salonika seemed to afford a more suitable occasion. There is other evidence of the Government's foreknowledge which I will not detail here. I rather doubt whether, as Greek sources have suggested, the Salonika bomb incident was part of the plot.

9. The answer to the question of why, even with the Minister

of the Interior present in Istanbul, the Turkish authorities allowed the city to be pillaged and burnt for five hours, is probably that everything depends on Monsieur Menderes in this country. The Prime Minister, or, if not the Prime Minister himself, responsible people very close to him had agreed to a demonstration. The fact that the demonstration had turned to rioting with great risk to life and property was not sufficient reason for taking action until the Prime Minister could be consulted, and the Prime Minister was on the train to Ankara and temporarily *incommunicado*. He was finally reached at Sapanca about 10 o'clock at night and, with the President of the Republic, returned to Istanbul immediately in a police car. At Pendik, a suburb about 20 miles outside the city, the seriousness of the situation was brought home to them when their car was stopped by a crowd shouting "Evela mal, sopra can" ("first property, then life"). The Prime Minister reached Istanbul about half past eleven and on his orders, endorsed by President Bayar, the Army Command who had refused to act in answer to the appeals of the Governor, without written authority, started to move troops in force into the city about midnight, too late to prevent the damage and too late to have stopped the rioters, many of whom, their job done, were by then roaming aimlessly round the city ready to go home or to sleep where they were. Martial Law was imposed shortly after midnight, lifted for a few hours the following morning, and then re-imposed until the National Assembly could meet to decide its duration. Martial Law under Article 86 of the Constitution consists of the suspension or temporary restriction of the inviolability of the person, the home, the freedom of the press, correspondence, association and incorporation.

10. The first acts of the Government on the 7th of September were to recall the National Assembly for the 12th of September and subsequently to announce the re-imposition of Martial Law, a curfew from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. (later reduced from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. and now from midnight to 4 a.m.), and to promise full compensation for the victims. All unofficial telegraphic correspondence abroad was prohibited for some days. A large number of arrests, the present figures vary between three and four thousand, were also made. President Bayar, accompanied by the Prime Minister and the Governor of the city, who seems to have come fairly well out of the whole business, toured the city in the morning and made suitable

and no doubt perfectly sincere speeches of regret and condemnation. By the afternoon gangs of workmen were clearing up the wreckage and in two or three days, except for the ubiquity of troops, gaping windows and broken shop fronts and a shortage of certain foodstuffs, Istanbul was getting itself back into some sort of shape to receive the Delegates for the International Bank and Monetary Fund Conference. There must, however, have been a good many Turks in those days, including the Prime Minister, who wished the Conference and the Delegates the other side of the Atlantic.

11. Simultaneously with these happenings in Istanbul serious rioting was taking place in Izmir and demonstrations which, but for the effective action of the Governor, might have degenerated into rioting in Ankara. The pattern of events in Izmir was much the same as in Istanbul though the riots were on a smaller scale and more obviously limited to anti-Greek attacks. First, demonstrations and then synchronised rioting throughout the city. The Greek Consulate, the Greek pavillion at the Izmir Fair, the principal Greek Church and a number of Greek business and private houses were attacked, burnt or broken up. The security forces were largely inactive or ineffective, though troops prevented the complete destruction of the British Information Office, which was nevertheless damaged by the mob seeking the flat of a Greek doctor on the floor above. The mob also tried to reach the Greeks reported aboard the British ships, the m.v. "Brescia" and the s.s. "Livorno", but failed and did only minor damage. The police did not interfere but eventually troops intervened. One of the most serious incidents in its political implications was the attack on the residences of six Greek Officers attached to the NATO Headquarters, during which a Colonel and his wife were cut and bruised. The Greek Consul-General, his family and staff were unmolested. Her Majesty's Consular Representatives in Trabzon and Iskenderun report that all was quiet in those two cities.

12. The Government's explanation for these happenings was given by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister at the extraordinary session of the National Assembly on the 12th of September. A full summary of this was sent in my telegram No. 652 from Ankara. Briefly the demonstrations, of which the Government had foreknowledge, were the spontaneous expression of national feeling inflamed by the report of the intended massacre of Tur-

kish Cypriots on the 28th of August (for the spreading of which incidentally the Turkish Government was solely responsible), and concern for their Cypriot brothers. The police and armed forces were understandably affected by the same "psychosis" which accounted for their hesitation and relative ineffectiveness. But beyond the natural and to some extent legitimate activities of students and the like, there were dark forces, Red agents and ill-disposed individuals, who had momentarily succeeded in capitalising the feelings of the country and had brought disgrace and material disaster.

13. To blame the rioting on Red agents seems too easy and not very convincing when we have been told by the Turkish Government for years past that such few Communists as there might be in Turkey were incapable of effective action. It is only fair to add here that this was also the Embassy's independent view. Even the Turkish security authorities say that only sixty or seventy out of the total number of arrests are Communists. But if it was not the Communists, who was it? It is reasonable to argue, as do some Turks, that part of the damage was done either by the poor in violent protest against the exorbitant cost of living, or by straightforward hooligans such as exist in every town. But these people, even if they added to the destruction, could not have organised it. The most obvious alternative to the Communists is the "Cyprus is Turkish Association". This Association may have been responsible for much of the planning, for the systematic identification of Greek property, the organization of taxis for the demonstrators, the despatch of roving bands to the outlying Greek colonies and the transport to Istanbul of gangs from the provinces. It may also have been responsible for the instructions which must have been given to spare life, since only isolated cases of injury to persons have been reported. I do not, however, believe that the Association can be held responsible for the wave of methodical destruction which followed the early demonstrations, nor for the wholesale ransacking and burnins of Greek churches and schools, the widespread desecration of the Şişli cemetery, nor the attacks on the property of minorities other than Greek.

14. Another possibility is the local organization of the Democrat Party itself. There is fairly reliable evidence that local Democrat Party representatives were amongst the leaders of the rioting in various parts of Istanbul, notably in the Marmara Islands, and

it has been argued that only the Democrat Party had the political organization in the country capable of demonstrations on the scale that occurred. This is true, but I myself do not believe that the Party, as distinct from individual members, can be held to be consciously responsible for more than the opening stages. If this is so, we are still left with the question of who was. I do not know that we shall ever get an answer since whatever the conclusion of the official enquiry, the full report will probably never be published. But on the whole I am inclined to think that the work of destruction was led and carried out by extreme nationalists, to whom groups of trouble-makers, hooligans and anyone with a grudge against authority or riches attached themselves.

15. It is clear from the manner in which Monsieur Menderes spoke to the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the latter called on him on the 16th of September that the Turkish Government are most seriously concerned and fearful of further developments of the same kind. They have put Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir under Martial Law for six months and intend to subject workers and students' associations to severe investigation and repression. In addition to the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of State particularly responsible for students' and refugees' affairs has resigned; a number of other Ministers have been moved to less immediately responsible appointments and the purge of the Security Services continues. Coming on top of the economic crisis and the absolute refusal at present of the United States Government to consider further financial aid to Turkey for any other than strictly military purposes, the position of the Government, and Monsieur Menderes personally, is far weaker than it has been since the Democrat Party first took office in 1950.

16. The International consequences of the riots are probably equally serious to Turkey. Turco-Greek relations are very seriously damaged. A telegram from the United Kingdom Delegation at New York suggests that the Turks are not going to find much sympathy at the United Nations if Cyprus has to be debated, and Her Majesty's Ambassador at Belgrade has reported that the Yugoslavs are highly critical. These reactions, as Sir Pierson Dixon has remarked, are not altogether fair since up to a fortnight ago it was the Greeks who were almost wholly responsible for the trouble. The memories of the Armenian atrocities, however, and similar episodes in Turkish

history die hard, and, while the Istanbul and Izmir riots may have been mild compared to what we read of in North Africa or what is liable to happen at almost any time in the Middle East, I have met very few foreigners, resident or visitors, of whom there were hundreds in Istanbul during the last ten days, who do not regard the riots as disgraceful and as irrefutable evidence that Turkey has many, many years to go before she can fairly claim to stand as an equal with the West.

17. I am sending copies of this despatch to Her Majesty's Ambassadors at Athens, Belgrade and Washington, to the Governor of Cyprus and to the Head of the British Middle East Office.

I have the honour to be,
With the highest respect,
Sir,
Your most obedient Servant,
(sgd.) MICHAEL STEWART