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# **Book Review: *The Greek Genocide in American Naval War Diaries: Naval Commanders Report and Protest Death Marches and Massacres in Turkey's Pontus Region, 1921–1922***

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*The Greek Genocide in American Naval War Diaries: Naval Commanders Report and Protest Death Marches and Massacres in Turkey's Pontus Region, 1921–1922*

Robert Shenk and Sam Koktzoglou, editors  
New Orleans, University of New Orleans Press, 2020  
404 Pages; Price: \$24.95 Paperback

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Coming on the heels of the more well-known Armenian Genocide, the ethnic cleansing of Ottoman Greeks in the Pontus region of Asia Minor in 1921 and 1922 has received comparatively less attention. Editors Robert Shenk and Sam Koktzoglou look to open the documentary record of this chapter in the larger story of ethnic violence of the early twentieth century. Shenk—who previously published a history of the U.S. Navy in the Black Sea in the aftermath of World War I—and Koktzoglou—a descendent of Pontic Greeks—tell this story from the perspective of U.S. Naval officers stationed along the Black Sea coast of Turkey.<sup>1</sup> An important question that weaves its way through accounts of naval officers reporting on the forced labor, death marches, and massacres of ethnic Greeks at the hands of Turkish nationalists, is what is the duty or ability of the United States military to intervene in such human rights violations.

At the heart of this book are diary entries kept by U.S. Navy officers, the bulk of which cover events in the city of Samsun from May to November 1921. The editors omitted information deemed “irrelevant” to the violence committed against ethnic Greeks—subjects pertaining to naval affairs and commercial interests, as well as relief efforts—in favor of any “reference to every Turkish or Greek military-related event of any size...[and] all references to either Greek or Turkish offenses or atrocities.”<sup>2</sup> The editors’ goals in presenting these sources are to provide “for the first time a unique window from an impartial source on events in Samsun and the Pontus region in general.”<sup>3</sup>

Before presenting relevant diary entries Shenk and Koktzoglou take readers through an extensive introduction detailing the historical context. As the editors explain, the Greek genocide sprang directly from the Greco-Turkish War. In the aftermath of World War I, Greece, with the support of the Allies, had territorial ambitions as the Ottoman Empire disintegrated. Hellenic forces invaded western Anatolia. Concurrently Turkish nationalists occupied the Pontus region before ramping up the persecution of Ottoman Greeks who called the area home. Some Turkish leaders justified the persecution as a response to the perceived threat posed by the invading Greeks who might have found support among their coethnics. As Shenk and Koktzoglou state, “By the late summer of 1921, numerous killings, some massacres, the burning of innumerable Greek villages, and many forced deportations into the interior, which soon became death marches, had become commonplace throughout Pontus.” They continue, “the suffering affected the Ottoman Greek minority even more profoundly than it did the ethnic Armenians who had been most severely ravaged before.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Shenk, *America's Black Sea Fleet: The U.S. Navy Amidst War and Revolution, 1919–1923* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Shenk and Sam Koktzoglou, eds., *The Greek Genocide in American Naval War Diaries: Naval Commanders Report and Protest Death Marches and Massacres in Turkey's Pontus Region, 1921–1922* (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2020), 62.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

U.S. Naval officers served as witnesses to this series of events. Having never declared war on the Ottoman Empire, the United States was left on the outside looking in as the Allies—Britain, France, and Italy—made policy decisions that affected the region, including initially supporting the Greek invasion. The reason why American warships were in the region in the first place was to transport and protect investigators, relief workers, and missionaries responding to postwar crises and reports of atrocities, like those against the Armenians. Relief work in the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea was a new mission for a navy that only recently joined the ranks of the great powers. The introduction does well in explaining these naval operations.

The extensive introduction will serve the needs of multiple audiences. Historians of and those interested in the U.S. Navy will find the editors' discussion of the region's history, its geopolitics, Turkish nationalism, and a blow-by-blow account of the Turkish atrocities against the Greeks a necessary prerequisite to making sense of the naval records reproduced in the volume. Conversely, those interested in other perspective on the Greek genocide and the region's history in the aftermath of World War I will benefit from the editor's discussion of the navy's organization and operations. Researchers in these areas—genocide studies, the eastern Mediterranean, and American naval history—will no doubt benefit from this well-edited collection of heretofore underutilized sources.

As the atrocities unfolded, the question of what did, or even what could, these naval officers do came to the fore. The editors conclude with qualified approval of the limited actions taken by Admiral Mark Bristol, the naval commander in charge in Constantinople. Bristol's authority was not limited to naval affairs. As the most senior American representative in the region, Bristol carried on the tradition of naval officers operating in diplomatic and consular capacities in places where the American state had little presence. Concern for American business interests in the Pontus region may have slowed Bristol's response to the atrocities. As the editors observe, the admiral "became increasingly more sympathetic to the Turks than to Turkey's various Christian people despite the terrible suffering of the latter groups...under the Nationalists."<sup>5</sup> Were it not for an officer under Bristol's command, the admiral may have done nothing to oppose the treatment of the Pontic Greeks.

The editors recognize that plenty of officers mirrored Admiral Bristol's pro-Turkish bias. After all, these officers would have risked their careers by opposing Bristol's policies. One commander did just that. Commander Arthur LeRoy Bristol (no relation to the admiral) pressed for the navy to take action to mitigate the violence. Writing to his superior in Constantinople, Commander Bristol informed his superior of a new round of forced deportations of more than ten thousand Pontic Greeks from Samsun. Bristol urged the admiral to consider the consequences: "If this goes through it will at later date...be classed with the Armenian affair, and we will occupy in the public mind very much the position of the Germans. Time will impute to us not only doing little to prevent it but actually the attitude of complacent if not concurrence. There is a feeling among all (Turks included) that...strong action by America can stop it."<sup>6</sup> In the estimation of the editors, this missive finally motivated the previously reluctant Admiral Bristol to formally protest Turkish treatment of the Greeks. Shenk and Koktzoglou conclude that this protest and the continued presences of American warships in the region saved the lives of thousands of Ottoman Greeks. Action, limited as it was, came after months of persecution and only because of the exhorting of subordinate officers.

This volume constitutes a case study of what individuals in institutions like the U.S. Navy can do in the face of atrocities like those in Anatolia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lessons learned are not limited to this single example. Admiral James Stavridis considers the larger implications in the book's foreword.<sup>7</sup> Stavridis, a retired naval officer and former supreme commander of NATO, observes that "Naval servicemembers at all levels might profitably study the extraordinary circumstances that these officers faced, as well as their varied responses to the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>7</sup> Stavridis has elsewhere written about the Navy and geopolitics, offering policy recommendations and his perspective as a sailors, see James Stavridis, *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World's Oceans* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017).

narrow options open to them.”<sup>8</sup> Amidst the constraints of institutions and protocols Stavridis recognizes that “the larger responsibility of an officer both to his fellow human beings and to his country, *whatever* the effect upon his own career,” should factor in when considering “the hard choices we face going forward in this turbulent twenty-first century.”<sup>9</sup> For policymakers, service members, and researchers alike, this collection is a valuable resource.

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<sup>8</sup> Shenk and Koktzoglou, *The Greek Genocide*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.