

THE GREEK-ORTHODOX MINORITY IN TURKEY: A BRIEF HISTORY

Before World War I there were almost 2.5 million Greeks living in Turkey, the largest ethnic group after the Turks themselves. Countless Greek communities with roots in the East Roman or Byzantine Empire played a major role in the cultural life, economic development, and modernization of their native land. Within a decade, as a result of genocidal acts, territorial adjustments and a massive population exchange between Greece and Turkey, the number of Greeks in Turkey had been reduced to about 135,000. Defined by their Greek Orthodox faith, and known in Turkish as *Rum*, from the Greek word *Romaios*, or Roman, most lived within the boundaries of the city of Constantinople (Istanbul). The vast majority of the Greeks of Istanbul, who numbered about 125,000, were Turkish citizens, while about one fifth held Greek citizenship. At the outset, as was intended, the Greek minority in Turkey was numerically equivalent to the Muslim minority which remained in north-eastern Greece. Furthermore, the human rights of both groups were guaranteed by the Treaty of Lausanne, signed by Greece and Turkey in 1923. Since then, unlike the Muslim minority in Greece, the Greek minority in Turkey has shrunk dramatically, to the point that it now faces the threat of extinction. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, based in Istanbul for almost two millennia, is headed by His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew I, the spiritual leader of tens of millions of Orthodox Christians around the world. Although there are still more than sixty Greek-Orthodox parishes in Istanbul, the numerical collapse of the community means that most of its churches and schools stand empty. The latest and most favourable estimates suggest that the Greek-Orthodox minority in Istanbul now numbers less than two thousand individuals and most of them aged above 60.

WHY HAS THE GREEK-ORTHODOX MINORITY IN TURKEY ALMOST DISAPPEARED?

Since the 1920s, successive Turkish governments have conducted a continuous policy of ethnic cleansing directed against their native Greek communities, centred on the continuous erosion of their minority rights which were clearly defined in the Treaty of Lausanne. The only legal entities within the minority recognised by the Turkish government are the elected boards which manage community institutions such as schools, churches, cemeteries, and hospitals. From the 1920s onwards the responsibilities of these boards have been subject to extremely restrictive regulations which have made it almost impossible for them to function. In addition, during the 1940s the Turkish government enacted two harsh measures which had an extremely negative effect on the Greek-Orthodox minority of Istanbul. The first was the forced mobilization of men aged 18-45, which resulted in their deportation to labour camps in eastern Turkey. The second was the so-called Wealth Tax, which led to the financial ruin and destitution of many members of the Greek minority. Then, on the night of 6-7 September 1955 the Greek minority of Istanbul was targeted in a massive pogrom planned and orchestrated by the Turkish state which was proven unequivocally in the years followed. In addition to murders, physical violence and widespread intimidation, the community's churches, cemeteries, homes, schools, and commercial establishments were vandalized, looted and in some cases totally destroyed. As a

result of these events, thousands of Greeks left Turkey. In 1964, using the ongoing Cyprus issue as a pretext, and in accordance with long-standing secret directives, the Turkish government expelled thousands of Greek citizens from Turkey, even though their residence in the country was guaranteed by the Treaty of Lausanne. Most belonged to families which had lived in Turkey for generations, and many were closely related to Greeks of Turkish nationality. Finally, in 1972, government legislation resulted in the compulsory shutting down of Theological School of Halki (Heybeliada), the only functioning Greek Orthodox seminary in Turkey. This meant that the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople was no longer able to educate members of the minority to serve the church. These successive violations of the human and minority rights of the Greek community of Turkey in its native land have resulted in a continuous flow of forced emigration to Greece and other countries in Europe, the USA, Canada, South Africa and Australia. As a result, 98% of the Greek minority of Turkey now lives abroad as an expatriate community.

THE ECUMENICAL FEDERATION OF CONSTANTINOPOLITANS AND ITS EFFORTS TO SUPPORT THE GREEK -ORTHODOX MINORITY

The Treaty of Lausanne obliges the Republic of Turkey to respect the legal status and rights of the Greek-Orthodox community of Istanbul and yet the evidence reveals a systematic policy of ethnic cleansing seemingly aimed at its eventual disappearance. That this policy continues unabated was shown only a few months ago, when the Turkish government announced its plans for the long-delayed elections for the managing boards of the Greek minority's numerous community institutions. The proposed election process has been denounced as extremely obstructive and contrary to the terms of the Treaty of Lausanne and to the constitution of the Turkish Republic itself. There is no doubt that its provisions will inflict further harm on the minority, and it is essential that it is radically revised as soon as possible, taking into account the wishes of the minority and its representatives abroad. For this to happen it is necessary for the Turkish government to recognize the legal representatives of the expatriate community of Greeks from Istanbul. The Ecumenical Federation of Constantinopolitans (EFC) was established in Greece in 2007. It is the only global organisation representing thousands of members of the expatriate Greek minority of Istanbul. Its aim is to find a remedy to the many critical issues facing the community in Turkey and abroad. In 2010 the EFC attempted to open lines of communication with the government of the Republic of Turkey by submitting several proposals concerning the status of the Greek minority. In 2014 the EFC applied to the Turkish government requesting that it is recognized as the legal representative of the expatriate community of Greeks from Istanbul, in order to support the minority's rights as effectively as possible. Despite numerous follow-ups, no response has been forthcoming. The EFC's support of the Greek-Orthodox minority in Turkey is ongoing and its success hinges on the systematic repatriation of younger members of the community. By returning to Istanbul, they will be able to support their compatriots and lay the foundations for new generations of the Greek-Orthodox minority to live safely, securely, and peacefully in their native land, making use of the many schools, churches, and other community institutions inherited from their predecessors.