

When the Turks saved the Greek Cypriots

Selective Memories of 300 years under Ottoman Rule

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The political question of Cyprus is nearly as inflamed as the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots¹ have their separate versions of the island's history, and their narratives are often totally contradictory. But when it comes down to basics, there are sometimes not such great differences between the two versions, it is rather a question of how the history is presented.

The question is also who has won the propaganda war. That is definitely not the Turks or the Turkish Cypriots. Over the centuries, Greeks, Greek Cypriots and pro-Hellenic historians and authors have been in the majority and have also had an important impact on the forming of opinions in Europe. And in recent times, after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, we have often seen an amateurish, clumsy, arrogant and perplexed attitude from the varying governments in Ankara, frequently amounting almost to naivety.

The history of Turkish oppression and atrocities in Cyprus is well known, due to the prevailing pro-Greek attitudes. Many of these accounts are true, but there is another side of the coin, which to a great extent has been suppressed in both Greek and other European historical literature. My intention is not to defend the Turks, but to try to balance the picture. For some people, the title of my presentation might be provocative. But I can very well support it, based on varying sources. Actually I will

¹ I am fully aware that there were no conceptions of 'Greek Cypriots' or 'Turkish Cypriots' during the Ottoman rule in Cyprus. The population was traditionally described as 'Christian' or 'Muslims'. However, I have, in this paper chosen to use 'Greek Cypriots' and 'Turkish Cypriots' because those are the terms used today.

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suggest that Cyprus might have been a Catholic island, like Malta today, had the Turkish invasion not occurred in 1570.

The Turks are coming

Let us go back to the early summer of the dramatic year of 1570. The Venetians had occupied Cyprus since 1489 and continued the Latinisation of the island, begun by Richard the Lionheart², the Templar Knights and later the Frankish kingdom of the Lusignans. The Greek Orthodox Church, which obtained its religious independence from the mother church in Constantinople as early as 488, was in ruins. There was no archbishop, and the four remaining bishops had since Frankish time been confined to the island's rural areas. Many Orthodox churches and monasteries, along with their estates, had been confiscated. Some of the churches, first of all in the towns, were converted to Latin houses of God. In the villages the priests were living in utmost poverty. So what happened when the Turks first captured the capital Nicosia in 1570 and the coastal fortress town of Famagusta the following year?³

It was the Venetians who were the enemies of the Turks, not the local Greek Cypriot population. Therefore it was the Latin church that now suffered, and not the Greek Orthodox. From being the Christian underdog in Cyprus, the Orthodox Church gradually achieved a power and wealth it still possesses today. While Latin churches were abolished and Latin priests expelled, the Orthodox archbishop was restored to all the rights he had been deprived of by the Franks and the Venetians. The orthodox bishops returned to the towns and villages they had previously been forced to leave by the Frankish kings. The church regained some of its properties and was able to buy back others, including monasteries. The clergy was also allowed to collect taxes. As I shall explain later, this became very important for the church. And even more important was the power of the archbishop. As the first Orthodox archbishop of Cyprus since the fall of Byzantium he was allowed nearly imperial privileges; to hold a sceptre, wear the purple, and sign his name in red ink.⁴ He was an ethnarch, both a political and religious leader of the Greek Cypriots, with a power base that later enabled the late Archbishop Makarios to become president and natural leader of his people in the 1960s. Let us hear what Barbara Lyssarides, the wife of the former Greek Cypriot socialist leader Vassos Lyssarides, writes:

² Conquered Cyprus in 1191.

³ It would have been more proper to use the term 'Ottoman', but since most of the sources refer to 'Turks', I will mainly do the same.

⁴ Rebecca Bryant, *Imagining the Modern, The Cultures of Nationalism in Cyprus* (London: I.B Tauris, 2004), p. 79.

The archbishop of Cyprus was so powerful by the end of the 18th century that both Greeks and Turks here regarded him as the real governor of the Ottoman-held island rather than the appointed *muhasıl*⁵, some historians claim.⁶

Venetian Hardship

For the common Cypriot, the Frankish and Venetian rule, with a European-style feudalism, was generally full of hardships. Even if some of the serfs were able to buy their freedom, the taxes and the obligations to the rulers were harsh. The traveller Martin von Baumgarten, who visited Cyprus in the sixteenth century wrote:

All the inhabitants of Cyprus are slaves to the Venetians, being obliged to pay to the state a third of all their income, whether the product of their ground or corn, wine, oil or of their cattle, or any other thing. Besides every one of them is bound to work for the State two days of the week wherever they shall please to appoint him; and if any shall fail, by reason of some other business of their own, or for indisposition of body, then they are made to pay a fine for as many days as they are absent from their work. And what is more, there is yearly some tax or other imposed on them, with which the poor common people are so flayed and pillaged, that they hardly have wherewithal to keep soul and body together.⁷

Under the Venetians a master could sell a serf whenever he pleased, and the local population was treated as the personal property of their masters. When the Turks came, serfdom was abolished. The former serfs were given freedom and were allowed to own property and transfer ownership to others by way of inheritance, gifts or sale.

What was the Greek Cypriot attitude to the Turkish invasion? The sources are naturally contradictory, but there are certain indications. In the village of Lefkara the local population was punished for not having resisted the Muslim invasion forces in 1570.⁸ In general there were few Greek Cypriots who fought for the Venetian cause,

⁵ A *muhasıl* was a commissioner, the representative in Cyprus of the Grand Vizier or the Sublime Porte.

⁶ Barbara Cornwall Lyssarides, *My old Acquaintance, Yesterday In Cyprus* (Nicosia: Kailas Printers & Lithographers LTD, 1999), p. 175.

⁷ Claude D. Cobham, *Excerpta Cypria* (1908), p. 55, quoted in Katia Hadjidemetriou, *A History of Cyprus* (Nicosia: Hermes Media Press Ltd, 2002), p. 251.

⁸ Ahmet C. Gazioğlu, *The Turks in Cyprus, A Province of the Ottoman Empire (1571-1878)* (London: Rustem & Brother, 1990), p. 32.

except in the two large towns of Nicosia and Famagusta. There are also reports of Greek Cypriots who travelled to the Ottoman capital Istanbul to ask for Turkish help against the Venetians before 1570. In 1569 a delegation of Cypriot serfs petitioned the Grand Vizir Mehmet Sokolli for Turkey to occupy Cyprus.⁹

‘The Turkish Yoke’

In Greek-Cypriot history the period under Turkish rule from 1571 to 1878 is presented as ‘The three hundred dark years’. The people suffered daily under ‘the Turkish yoke’. Head words are the forced migration of settlers from Anatolia in today’s Turkey, forced Turkification, the extreme burden of taxation, atrocities against Greek Cypriots and the Orthodox Church, misrule by brutal, incompetent and corrupt Turkish leaders and massacres and mass flights from the island.

The Turkish rule in Cyprus was of course not based on liberal, democratic or humanistic principles as we know them today. Regimes were oppressive and brutal, whether they were Ottoman, European or Asian. There is no doubt about Turkish abuses in Cyprus, but one might ask how the situation was experienced and felt by the people at that time. When it comes to the present anti-Turkish attitude among Greek Cypriots, it is relevant to ask the following question: how much of this attitude is caused by general conceptions and misconceptions, nationalistic folklore or/and selective memory? Notwithstanding, there is no doubt that the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 revived the negative attitude towards the former Ottoman masters of the island.

Some 35,000 Turkish soldiers have occupied the northern part of Cyprus since 1974. After 1571 the sultan in Istanbul kept around 4,000 soldiers in Cyprus, often badly armed. The figure seems to be more or less constant during the Turkish rule. In the 1820s the force was reinforced because of the Greek revolution, but it is interesting to note that the total number was reduced to 840 in the years 1841-1842.¹⁰

The Settlers from Anatolia

One of the most controversial aspects of Greek Cypriot history concerns the settlers who came from Anatolia to Cyprus in the years after 1571. Together with Christian converts and the descendants of Turkish soldiers and officers, they constitute today most of the Turkish Cypriot population of the divided island. Because of expulsions of Catholics, war, misrule, natural disasters and diseases, there was a lot of empty

⁹ Hadjidemetriou, pp. 257 ff.

¹⁰ Gazioğlu, p. 261.

land for agriculture in Cyprus after the Turkish occupation. By a decree in 1572 the Governor encouraged the people who had fled the island to return, with the promise that all their rights would be given back to them. Very few seem to have taken the opportunity, but there are some reports, among them an account of 35 Christian families who came back from exile in Venice to Cyprus, reportedly provided with all the facilities they required.¹¹ What would have happened if more people had returned, is difficult to say, but the fact is that an 'exile proclamation' was issued on 19th August 1572. One in ten households in four different Turkish provinces in Anatolia were to be transferred to Cyprus to resettle there, voluntarily or by force. The ones who registered but did not leave were to be hanged, something that shows that this policy was not to be lenient. But one important question is whether this was a planned deliberate step to Turkify and Islamise Cyprus, as many Greek Cypriots claim.

According to estimates, 8,000 families from mainland Turkey were resettled in Cyprus by the end of the sixteenth century. Dr. Recep Dündar at İnönü University in Ankara has made an interesting study of who the settlers were. By checking the lists of settlers, he has found out that there were Christian families among them, mostly Greeks, living in Anatolia. Dündar has not found any indication whether the exiles were Muslims or non-Muslims.¹² But the majority living in these areas were Turks, and the majority who arrived in Cyprus were naturally Turks, too. One may speak of a Turkification, but not necessarily a quite deliberate one. As in other parts of the Ottoman empire, the Turkish rulers were mainly interested not in converting the Christian population, but in securing the tax incomes. One can therefore not talk about an Islamisation.

Burden of Taxation

As in other provinces of the Ottoman Empire, the millet system was established after 1571, with internal self-rule for the different religious communities. The *rayahs*, as the Christians were called, had to pay special taxes for exemption of military service and to practise their own religion. Imperial decrees from the sultan in Istanbul stated that the taxes should be lower than under the Venetians. The tithe was to be between one fifth and one eighth. In practice it seemed more often to be one fifth than one eighth. And even if serfdom was abolished, some feudal practices from the previous era were retained and applied during Turkish rule. In many parts of the island the peasants were obliged to work on state properties one day a week, but it does not seem to have been

¹¹ *Great Ottoman-Turkish Civilisation*, Volum I (Ankara: Yeni Türkiye), p. 261.

¹² *Op.cit*, pp. 259-274.

a regular practice. There were different taxes, many of them heavy. Even if the order from the sultan in Istanbul was to keep the taxes lower than under the Venetians, there was a lot of over-taxation, based on greed, corruption and tax systems like tax-farming, where a person could buy the rights to collect taxes in a certain area. The Greek Cypriots seem to be mostly correct when focusing on the burden of taxes during the Ottoman rule, but that was not special to Cyprus. There, as in other regions of the world, the oppressed people had a lot of clever and sophisticated ways of evading or reducing taxes, for instance by concealing the real number of animals owned.

Beyond doubt, the peasants were oppressed, but who were the oppressors? The Turks of course, but the Greek-Cypriot historian Katia Hadjidemetriou emphasises that the poor villagers also suffered oppression at the hands of rich Greek landowners. They managed to evade the payment of taxes so that they might be paid by the poor instead.¹³ And even more important was the role the Church played in collecting taxes. That right was given to the Orthodox Church after 1571 and extended in 1660. As both parties benefited from the tax incomes, it is also natural that the Turkish leaders and the Orthodox Church often had a close cooperation and a common interest in defending their rights. Here is what the Englishman John Macdonald Kinnair, a captain in the East India Company, wrote after his stay in Cyprus in 1814:

[T]he Greek peasantry, who are the only industrious class, have been so much oppressed by Turks, monks and bishops, that they are now reduced to the extremity of indigence...¹⁴

There is no doubt that the Church used some of its income to benefit the Greek-Cypriot people, but it is also a fact that the same Church gathered an abundance of wealth, which even today makes the Greek Cypriot clergy a very influential player in Greek-Cypriot society and politics. One will find little criticism of the Orthodox taxation measures among Greek Cypriots, even if it also meant hardship for the population. In the Greek-Cypriot mind, it is thanks to the Church that they survived as a people and were able to keep their Greekness. This attitude is of course very understandable. But it is also a fact that the Greek Cypriots owe the Turks a great deal because of the power the sultan and the Porte in Istanbul gave the Orthodox Church.

¹³ Hadjidemetriou, p. 322.

¹⁴ Paul W. Wallace and Andreas G. Orphanides (eds.), *Sources for the History of Cyprus, Volume V, English Texts: Frankish and Turkish Periods* (Altamont New York: Greece and Cyprus Research Center, 1998), p. 148.

The Power of the Archbishop

The archbishop was not only the political and religious leader of the Greek-Cypriot community, he had also a lot of power in relation to the Turkish governor. He had the right to make complaints to the rulers in Istanbul, and it is established that the archbishop or his envoys travelled to Constantinople many times and presented complaints from the *rayahs* to the Grand Vizier, effectively the Ottoman Prime Minister. Sometimes their missions succeeded, sometimes not. With the declining power of the Ottoman Empire, the archbishop's position in Cyprus increased. The British historian Sir Harry Luke has the following conclusion:

By an astonishing reversal of fortune the Archbishop of Cyprus, whose office had been created by the Turks after lying dormant for three hundred years, secured in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the supreme power and authority over the island and at one period wielded influence greater than that of the Turkish Pasha himself.¹⁵

There were Turkish abuses against the Orthodox clergy, but in general there was cooperation between the two axes of power. The relationship was, however, seriously harmed by the Greek revolution, starting in Greece in 1821. Some envoys of the Greek nationalist movement, *Philike Hetaireia*, came to Cyprus and tried to convince the Cypriot leaders to rise against their Turkish masters. The archbishop himself became a member of *Philike Hetaireia*. Some Greek Cypriots travelled to Greece to fight against the Turkish enemy. Others collected money in Cyprus to finance the war on the Greek mainland. There were plans and talk about uprisings, and when the Turkish authorities in Cyprus discovered leaflets proclaiming revolution, they reacted. At first the sultan in Istanbul refused to allow any executions, and demanded instead disarmament of the Greek Cypriot population. But the Governor of Cyprus, Küçük Mehmet, at last secured the sultan's permission to execute 486 Cypriots. Among the ones that were executed on the dramatic day of 9th July 1821 were the archbishop, three bishops, several other clergymen and some laymen. More executions followed. Some Cypriots escaped death by fleeing abroad. These executions of course had (and still have) a serious impact on the Greek-Cypriot people who understandably consider the victims as martyrs. But as Greek-Cypriot historians also admit, the Cypriot leaders knew very well that an uprising in Cyprus would have no other consequence than slaughter.¹⁶

¹⁵ Sir Harry Luke, *Cyprus under the Turks 1571-1878* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1969), p. 17.

¹⁶ Hadjidemetriou, p. 299.

How lasting was the Turkish revenge after 1821, and was the Orthodox Church crushed once and for all? Definitely not. Four thousand Ottoman soldiers, mostly Arabs and Albanians, were sent from Syria to Cyprus as reinforcements to restore order. They behaved very badly and plundered and pillaged Orthodox churches and monasteries. As a consequence the sultan issued a firman, a decree, by which much of the confiscated gold and silver plate of the monasteries and churches was not sold, but returned to Joachim, the new archbishop.¹⁷

During the Ottoman reform period, the *Tanzimat* in the late 1830s, the power of the Orthodox Church was restored and even strengthened. Also the common Greek Cypriots benefited from these reforms. It is, however, interesting to observe that such reform periods were often opposed by the local Turkish rulers, the Greek upper class and even the Church, who saw their interests threatened by political and economical changes.

Enosist Aspirations

Three Cypriot uprisings occurred at the beginning of the 1830s, motivated by maladministration and unjust taxes. Two of them, however, also had enosist aspirations, with the aim of uniting Cyprus with Greece.¹⁸ This time the pro-Greek upheavals were not supported by the Orthodox Church. Despite the pro-Greek sentiments of the Greek-Cypriot population, students were allowed to leave Cyprus for studies in Greece, first and foremost in Athens. There they came under the influence of Greek nationalists, and brought aspirations for freedom with them when they came back to Cyprus. The Turkish rulers for one reason or another allowed this to go on. Even more surprising is the fact that in 1846 Greece was allowed to open a Greek consulate in Larnaca to protect the Greek citizens in Cyprus. Some of these Greeks were actually Greek Cypriots who had obtained Greek citizenship after fighting in Greece against the Turks during the Greek war of independence.

The Turks did not care about the *rayahs*' education in Cyprus. When schools were established in the second part of the eighteenth century, this was mainly the responsibility of the Orthodox Church, including financially. Schools and teachers' salaries were financed by taxes imposed by the Church. The curriculum was based on Orthodoxy, Greek language and history. Especially after the Greek revolution, the schools promoted nationalism, more or less without Turkish interference. The Greek-Cypriot pupils did not learn Turkish, neither did the great majority of the Greek

¹⁷ Gazioğlu, p. 278.

¹⁸ Stavros Panteli, *The Making of Modern Cyprus. From obscurity to statehood* (Nicosia: Interworld Publications, 1990), pp. 58f.

Cypriot population. It was more common that Turks and Turkish Cypriots learned Greek, and that brings me to another interesting observation. In how many parts of the world did the occupier learn the occupied subjects' language and not vice versa?

Reading Greek-Cypriot history is a constant procession of drought, crop failures, earthquakes, flooding, locust ravages, plagues and fevers. There are few disagreements between Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot historians concerning these terrible occurrences, but one can sometimes get the impression that even acts of God are the fault of the Turks in the Greek-Cypriot mind. Population decline was often due to plagues and migration. Migration was sometimes a result of Turkish misrule, at other times a consequence of crop failure due to natural causes. Greek-Cypriot history can tell us that Greek Cypriots often moved to Syria to escape the Turkish yoke in Cyprus. But how can that be possible, when the Turks also ruled Syria for most of this period? It seems to me that one has to look into a lot of different causes for migration and population decline, and to balance the picture.

Cooperation between the Ethnic Groups

Both Turkish-Cypriot and Greek-Cypriot historians emphasise that the two population groups cooperated during long periods of Ottoman rule. There was no direct affection between them, but they often lived in the same villages, and they were often interacting in daily life. There were few mixed marriages, but the reason was probably more a question of religion than ethnicity. Often the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots cooperated in uprisings against the rulers, sometimes these uprisings were a protest against tax burdens imposed both by the Turkish rulers and the Orthodox clergy. The Greek revolution spread some fear among the Turkish Cypriots, but it was not until the 1950s, under British rule, that the ethnic groups started to drift totally apart.

Cyprus was of course no heaven on earth, neither for the Greek Cypriots nor for the Turkish Cypriots. Daily life was often hard, but foreign travellers were often surprised by some positive elements. One factor often mentioned is the absence of criminality. The English vice-consul wrote in 1862 that 'Brigandage, burglaries and assassinations are so rare as to be almost unknown in Cyprus.'¹⁹ His assertion is also confirmed by many other sources. There is no doubt that the Cypriots have been oppressed during their history, but it might perhaps be more relevant and fruitful to speak about 800 years of darkness, from 1191 to 1960, when Cyprus obtained independence from Great Britain. It was actually the British occupation that led

¹⁹ Hadjedemitriou, p. 329.

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to the most serious and bloody rebellion, orchestrated by the militant organisation EOKA B in the 1950s. As an indication of the 800 years of darkness I shall quote from the writings of the hermit St Neophytos in the district of Paphos in the first years of the thirteenth century, during the Frankish period:

Strange things and unheard of have befallen this land, and such that all its rich men have forgotten their wealth, their fine dwellings, families, servants, slaves, their many flocks, herds, swine, cattle of all kinds, grainbearing fields, fertile vineyards and variegated gardens, and with great care and secrecy have sailed away to foreign lands, and to the queen of cities. And those who could not fly – who is fit to set forth the tragedy of their sufferings?²⁰

Conclusion

As we have seen the Turks restored the Orthodox Church with its extensive power. But what would have happened if the Turks had not conquered Cyprus in 1571? As always with counterfactual questions, it is difficult to give a clear and certain answer, but it is doubtful if the Orthodox Church would have survived, at least economically. On the local level it might have, in a way, kept its position, but without any income, except from local support. Another question is how long the Latin rulers would have allowed the Orthodox Church to exist at all, due to the bad relations between the two Christian churches. The Venetians would definitely have tried to wipe out Hellenism from Cyprus, had they kept their power. The Orthodox Church and Hellenism was the glue that kept the Greek-Cypriot people together during hundreds of years of occupation. They could have survived until the Greek revolution of 1821 and thereafter been 'liberated' by their Greek brethren. But that is just a mere supposition.

Let me finish my essay with a quotation from the book *British Cyprus* written by the British author and traveller to the island in 1878, William Hepworth Dixon. He characterised the relationship between the Turkish Governor Bessim Pasha and the Orthodox Archbishop Sophronios II in the following way: 'Bessim held the whip, but Geronymo (Sophronios) showed him where to strike.'²¹

²⁰ Claude Cobham, *Excerpta Cypria*, pp. 10-11, quoted in Katia Hadjidemetriou, *A History of Cyprus* (Nicosia: Hermes Media Press Ltd., 2002), p. 173.

²¹ Gazioğlu, p. 254.

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