

The Ashes of Smyrna—A Book Review

by [Peter Dreyer](#) (March 2025)



The Battle of Lepanto, 7 October 1571 (Peter Brunniche, 1762)

Poor Turks, poor Greeks, poor world! –Halide Edip Adıvar (1884–1964), feminist, novelist, Kemalist member of the Turkish Grand National Assembly

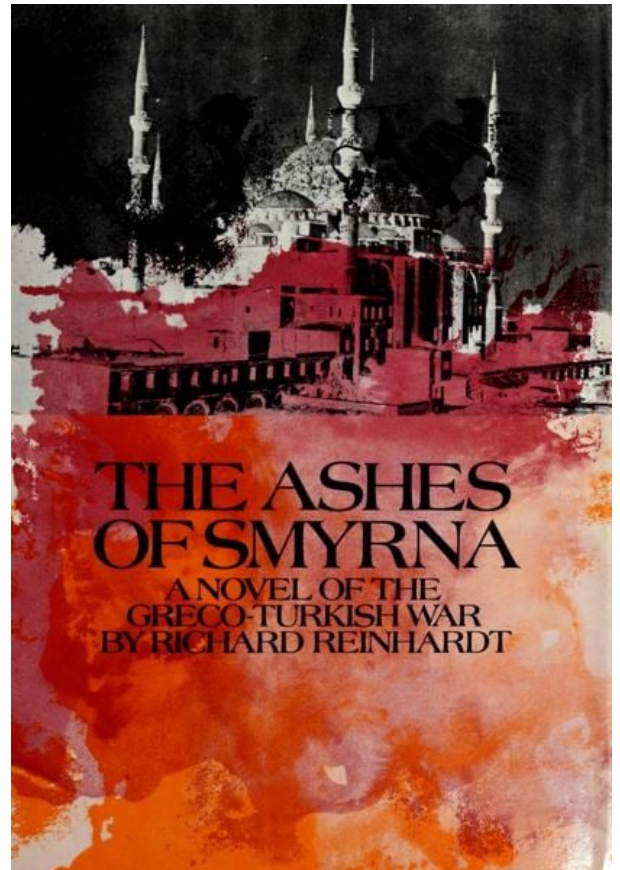
Richard Reinhardt's novel *The Ashes of Smyrna*, published in 1971 by Harper & Row, paradoxically made little impact when it came out. It was just too damned good!

The comparison that leaps to mind is with Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, published in 1957, at the height of the Cold War, which won a Nobel Prize in 1957, infuriating the USSR, to

the delight of *bien pensant* America and the West in general.

The world was ready for *Doctor Zhivago*. In Nikita Khrushchev's famous "Secret Speech" in 1956 (leaked by the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad), Stalin's monstrous crimes had been exposed for all to see.

The world was not ready, however, for Reinhardt's *Ashes of Smyrna*, set during the Asia-Minor Catastrophe of 1919–1922. At least a million people died, whole populations were forced from their ancestral homes, ethnic cleansing on a monumental scale.



Who knew!

As Terentianus Maurus wrote two thousand years ago: "Books have their fate, depending on the capacity of the reader."[\[1\]](#)

World War I had brought about the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, a German ally, which proportionately lost more of its troops' than any of the other belligerents, mostly in enormous battles fought in the Caucasus against the armies of Tsar Nicholas.

Ottoman Turkey had been defeated in the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913. With the Sultan reduced to a sock puppet, a trio of so-called "Young Turks"—fanatical nationalists and haters of

Armenians, in particular—ruled in Istanbul.

Greek society was split down the middle between royalists and republican anti-monarchists, led by the redoubtable Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos.

King Constantine, the Kaiser's brother-in-law, who as a young man had served in the German Imperial Guard, had kept Greece neutral in the Great War, but he was forced to abdicate after the Anglo-French Entente threatened to bombard Athens.

Greece then entered the war on the side of the Entente, Britain's Prime Minister David Lloyd-George having promised Venizelos support for the so-called "Great Idea"[\[2\]](#) that had Greeks had entertained ever since obtaining independence—the creation of a greater Greek state, including southern Aegean coast of Turkey, where many Greeks lived, ruled by the Ottomans since the fifteenth century.

Central to that coast was the ancient city of Smyrna, with a Greek population then twice that of Athens, a merchant emporium so rich and comfortable that the pet name for it of its British Levantine residents, who had lived there for generations, was, quite simply, "Paradise."

After World War I the Ottoman Empire was dismantled by the victors. Allied troops occupied Istanbul. The British took Iraq and Palestine as "zones of interest." The French took Syria and Lebanon. The Italians, the Dodecanese. In 1919, escorted by British warships, a Greek army landed at Smyrna.

A shot was fired by someone and the Evzones responded uncontrollably, shooting, breaking into buildings, looting, and assaulting Turks. As many as 500 unarmed Turks may have been killed.

The newly arrived governor of Smyrna appointed by Venizelos, Aristeidis Stergiadis, acted swiftly to defuse the situation by imposing impartial justice and punishing all those involved

in the bloodbath. A court-martial swiftly sentenced Greeks guilty of murder to death. They were taken out and shot publicly.

The Greek troops presently advanced into the interior:

“What a surprise, to be devouring Anatolia as calmly as a snake digests a frog!”

At Ankara, chosen as his new capital, Mustapha Kemal, the commander who had beaten back the invading British and Anzacs at Gallipoli in 1915—later to be known to the world as Atatürk, “father of the Turks” —was, however, putting his ducks in a row.

Instead of restricting themselves to the littoral awarded to Greece as a protectorate by the Treaty of Sèvres between the Entente Powers and the Ottoman government, the Greek High Command hubristically plunged their army into the vast semi-desert of eastern Anatolia, biting off more than they could chew. There the Kemalists met them, defeated them, and turned them back in a retreat that quickly became a rout.

Reinhardt’s novel brilliantly traces this complicated history in the interlocking lives of two sets of characters, the family of Christos Trigonis, a wealthy Greek raisin shipper, and two Turkish brothers, Kenan, a fanatical Kemalist *mutilé de guerre*, and Abdullah, a radical modernizer influenced by the speeches of the Comintern’s Grigory Zinoviev at the Bolshevik Congress of the People of the East held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 1920.

Abdullah is in love with Eleni Trigonis...

In 1912, William Childs, a British Secret Service agent, traveled through Turkey. “You can have no idea of racial hatred,” he reported back to Whitehall, “until you have seen it in this land.”[\[3\]](#)

The retreating Greek army scorched the earth behind it, burning some 300 towns and villages and dynamiting railroad stations and other infrastructure.

In Salihli in 1968, I met a man named Atilla who was reading a French novel. Why, I asked him, were there no old buildings there?

“The Greeks,” he said. “They burned everything.”

The eventual price of that senseless conflagration would be the ashes of Smyrna.

Novelists worth their salt must needs also be poets, and Reinhardt surely meets that test:

“The fires were dying. Darkness swallowed the hill, and the long yellow nightstick of the patrol boat stroked the shore; but Kenan raved on.”

“Kenan came into Smyrna with the Pasha and his staff ... Mustapha Kemal slept in a red-brick house that had been used the year before as a headquarters for King Constantine. Somebody spread a Greek flag like a doormat on the threshold; but the Pasha folded it up and handed it to his orderly.”

After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkan Wars ten years earlier by the combined forces of Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece, some 600,000 Muslims had fled the empire's former European provinces, creating a vast humiliated, impoverished refugee population in Anatolia. Inevitably, they hated Greeks, representatives of those who had displaced them. And the tens of thousands of bashi-bazouk irregulars who formed part of, or followed on the heels of, Mustapha Kemal's army, many of whom must sprung from this refugee population, now took terrible vengeance on Greek Smyrna.

“Nobody knew exactly how or where the first spark had fallen ... Sailors on shore patrol saw looters splashing pails of coal

oil to spread the flames. Bloated corpses floated in the harbor... ”

There seems no doubt that fires were set deliberately and by uniformed troops.

Mustapha Kemal might perhaps have stopped the burning, looting, and killing, but he didn't. Perhaps after all it was even beyond his power and he couldn't.

He, too, for that matter, had lost his family home. His own birthplace, Salonica, was now Greek Thessalonikē. He supported his penniless mother and sister in lodgings in Istanbul. Faced with horrifying atrocities being committed under his command, he was oddly passive—almost, it seems, paralyzed. What was he thinking?

An alcoholic, battle-hardened soldier, he may simply have drowned out what was happening with raki.[\[4\]](#)

When Kemal's disciplined cavalry rode in, they had called out to the watching Smyrniots, “Don't be afraid!” In retrospect, this seems a cruel irony. But they probably had been ordered to say this and meant it.

Then everything got out of hand in the worst imaginable way.

In the end, only the Turkish and Jewish sections of Smyrna survived the conflagration. Innumerable Greeks and Armenians were marched into the arid interior. Few of them would ever return.

In 1923, by agreement between the two governments, least 1.6 million Greek Orthodox Christians and some 400,000 thousand Muslims were denaturalized *de jure* and expelled from their respective countries, where their ancestors had lived from time immemorial. A census in 1928 showed that 20 percent of Greece's population were refugees.

On November 15, 1922, in an Athens suburb, Prime Minister

Dimitrios Gounaris, General Georgios Hatzianestis, commander of the Greek army in Anatolia, and four government ministers were executed by firing squad, condemned to death by court martial.[\[5\]](#)

“Six men paid for the Disaster with their blood,” I. M. Panayotopoulos writes. “Six men for so many thousands dead ... and for the unbearable deprivations to be suffered in the future.”[\[6\]](#)

Atatürk abolished both the Islamic caliphate and the sultanate. The sultan himself was evacuated to Malta on HMS *Malaga*. He settled in San Remo and never saw Turkey again, the last of a dynasty that had ruled there for 469 years.

In 1968, at the front desk of a cheap hotel in Izmir, Smyrna’s Turkish name, I had difficulty communicating—the clerk understood neither English nor French. Finally, I asked if he spoke Greek. “Μάλιστα,” he said. Sure!

There are clearly still Greeks in Smyrna—but they have become Turks.

Crossing from Lesbos on a fishing boat a few weeks earlier, we encountered a Turkish caique, which came alongside. The crew tossed over a few mackerel as a gift, and one of the Turks shouted to me: “Tell the Greeks we don’t like them!”

Richard Reinhardt turns 98 this month. It’s long past time some canny publisher reprinted his exemplary novel, which has so much to teach us!

N.B. It is impossible to give any but the most cursory and inadequate account here of the complex background to Richard Reinhardt’s novel *The Ashes of Smyrna*. I have myself relied on Giles Milton’s very readable account in his book *Paradise Lost: Smyrna 1922* (New York: Basic Books, 2008) for information, which I recommend to anyone interested in this history. Milton’s account of it “has been praised for its

balanced approach to history and has been published in both Turkish and Greek,” Wikipedia notes. What a terrible story it is!

[1] *Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli*. Terentianus Maurus, *De litteris, De syllabis, De Metris*, verse 1286.

[2] https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Megali_Idea.

[3] Giles Milton, *Paradise Lost: Smyrna 1922* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 33.

[4] Made from twice-distilled grape pomace, flavored with aniseed, rakı is Türkiye’s national drink. Atatürk died of cirrhosis in 1938, when he was 57.

[5] See https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trial_of_the_Six.

[6] Panayotopoulos, *Astrofengia: I istoria mias Efivias* [Moonlight: The Story of My Adolescence] (1945; 2nd ed., rev., Athens, 1971), 162.

[Table of Contents](#)

Peter Richard Dreyer is a South African American writer. He is the author of *A Beast in View* (London: André Deutsch), *The Future of Treason* (New York: Ballantine), *A Gardener Touched with Genius: The Life of Luther Burbank* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan; rev. ed., Berkeley: University of California Press; new, expanded ed., Santa Rosa, CA: Luther Burbank Home & Gardens), *Martyrs and Fanatics: South Africa and Human Destiny* (New York: Simon & Schuster; London: Secker & Warburg), and most recently the novel *Isacq* (Charlottesville, VA: Hardware River Press, 2017).

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)