

Turkey celebrates its violent past

By Nikos Akritas

Empire is a dirty word – except in Turkey. If the naïve of the West think pride in conquest, killing, enslavement and the reduction of people to inferior status is a thing of the past, abhorred by wealthy countries, they are sadly, and dangerously, mistaken. On May 29th Turkey celebrated the 571st anniversary of the conquest of Constantinople. The conquest of almost six centuries ago was not conducted as a war of defense, or with the intent of overthrowing a repressive regime, but in order to fulfil the prophecy in the Koran that Muslims would conquer Rome – which Constantinople, as capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, was. It was naked imperialism and Muslims today make no excuses for it – other than it was part of their sacred duty to conquer the Rum.

Unlike in the West, where bygone empires are a source of embarrassment and something for which to apologize and make amends, Turkey has no such qualms. There is no feeling of guilt for past atrocities. The conquest and violence of empire are events to be celebrated. There is no remorse for the sufferings and wrongs inflicted on others. The conquest is a thing of the past, but what does the celebration of conquest say about a society? Is this a society that believes violence and the sufferings and prejudices inflicted on others are wrong? Clearly not.

This year, celebrations included a 'Conquest March', concerts, and laser shows, with Erdogan heralding the event as *enabling the Turkish nation to take root in a continent* – Europe. He further announced the conquest allowed different beliefs and faiths to co-exist; a rather odd claim given the immediate aftermath and subsequent 500 year religious discrimination

against non-Muslims – a situation which only ended with the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Christians at the end of the empire and during the early republic – not to mention his recent rantings against Zionism. He did, however, exhibit a moment of humbleness in asserting he was commemorating the mass violence with *mercy, respect and gratitude* to the conqueror and his army. The first lady joined the president in celebrating the conquest, although only with *mercy and gratitude*, further stating the conquest had *entrusted* to Turkey the legacy of an ancient city.

Celebrating the conquest is the equivalent of Americans celebrating the taking of indigenous Americans' land. It is something that happened, but no American today is proud of it. Those attempting to justify such conquest on the grounds of religious destiny and assertions the indigenous peoples were inferior would be vilified as racist bigots – an abhorrent anachronism. But not in Turkey. Here the equivalent act is a national celebration. The infidels got what was coming to them on the teleological path to Islam's, and Turkey's, manifest destiny.

Pointing out the worrying nature of pride in violence and conquest is usually met with one of two responses. The first that *it is history, an event of its times*. True, those times were violent by today's standards, empire was not a dirty word and imperialism aspired to. But in a world where we judge others according to human rights – not to exclusive religious or racist precepts – a celebration of past values which we abhor today reveals a lack of humanity and an underlying ethnic and religious bigotry.

The recent toppling of certain statues in the West due to individuals' associations with slavery belies the point these had not been erected to celebrate the slave trade. Neither did they remain in place to honour those advancing Britain's Empire. These were not exuberant celebrations of conquest and the sufferings inflicted on others but erected for different

purposes. This is altogether different in Turkey.

Mehmed II – the Conqueror – is a national hero. Which Western countries celebrate conquerors today? Turkey may present itself as a modern democracy that believes in human rights but its values are altogether different. A society that celebrates conquest cannot be judged one that belongs to the civilized family of nations.



The second response is very similar, but subtly different, from the first. It seeks to avoid addressing the issue at hand and deflects attention to the West. *Europeans had empires, why are they not criticized?* Except, we do criticize the age of European Empires. We do reflect on the immorality of killing, enslaving and subscribing to views of the inferiority of others. Such violent and abhorrent acts are not celebrated, they are reviled. There is no place for the celebration of such atrocities and bigotry in societies which genuinely see all human beings as equal.

So how should we view societies, like Turkey's, which do still celebrate these violent acts of imperialism? One has to ask, is this a country which rejects empire, the subjugation of its

neighbours, the desire for lebensraum and a belief in racial superiority? Celebrating an act of mass violence against civilians 571 years on, by one of the wealthiest countries on earth, should be an event the anti-imperialist Left, the woke and those who seek to defend human rights are united against. But who actually seeks to address such issues when they fall outside the purview of *Orientalism*?

Sultan Mehmed II The Conqueror by a follower of Gentile Bellini