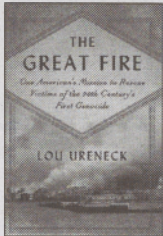


A charred history

An ancient city descends into flames while ethnic battles rage on, trapping the common man in between. Sound familiar? What lessons to be learned from an event from 94 years ago.



The Great Fire: One American's Mission to Rescue Victims of the 20th Century's First Genocide By Lou Ureneck

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CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

"The Great Fire" reads like a fictional thriller, with terrifying events unfolding too fast for considered decisions and everyday humans revealing their character under fire as heroes or villains.

But it is not fiction. It is carefully documented history.

The story could be in today's headlines, with thousands of people brutally murdered, a proud and ancient city burned and destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of people displaced, desperately seeking a place to flee, and finding every exit blocked. But it all took place in 1922.

In 1922, World War I had ended almost everywhere except in the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled many of the lands around the Mediterranean Sea for more than 500 years, from its capital Constantinople, in Turkey. It was already referred to as "the sick man of Europe" when the sultan chose to enter World War I in 1914 on the German side.

Ethnic Greeks had lived along the coast of Turkey for at least two thousand years. The city of Smyrna was founded by Greeks, with a town now called "Old Smyrna" established a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, and with a newer city established by Alexander the Great in the third century B.C. For centuries, Smyrna was a great city and a prosperous port, populated mostly by ethnic Greeks. In the closing days of World War I, the Greek government, which had fought on the winning side in World War I, declared Smyrna to be Greek territory. As of 1922, there was no treaty ending World War I between Greece and Turkey, partly because the winning European powers considered Turkey too weak to bother with.

The government might have been weak, but the Turkish National Movement was gathering enormous power, with anti-Christian sentiment already creating the genocide of Armenians in Turkey during World War I and sweeping all of Turkey in 1922. Greek and Armenian refugees were starting to pour into Smyrna, when, on Sept. 9, 1922, Turkish troops seized the city. They were led by Ghazi Mustapha Kemal, who would later be known as Kemal Ataturk, the father of modern Turkey. The soldiers, and other Turks who had followed them, began a rampage of killing, robbery and rape, driving many Christians into hiding and others to the city's docks in a desperate attempt to escape.

Fire broke out in the Armenian quarter of the city on Sept. 13. Not only was there too much confusion in the city to effectively fight a fire, but, according to eyewitness reports, Turkish troops poured kerosene into the streets. In the harbor were American, British, French and Italian ships, but they were under orders to evacuate only their nationals. For eight days the city burned,



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with one American eyewitness writing that the screams of the people were the only sound louder than the roar of the fire.

The ships left, leaving the desperate people on the shore. Some tried to swim after the ships, only to drown in the harbor. Turkish troops threatened to shoot them if they left the docks, but they had no place to go. And so the situation remained for several days.

Who would help them? There was the international outrage that would send ships, send food, send aid of any kind? There was no aid on its way at this point, and Lou Ureneck's book paints a fascinating picture as to why. Part of it was that information was not getting out to the Americans and Europeans. Reporters had been sent to the area, with specific instructions to send back stories about atrocities committed by the Greeks. The U.S. High Commissioner in Constantinople, who was the highest-ranking American in the area, despised the Greeks and steadfastly insisted that the reports from Smyrna were exaggerations. Business interests had to be protected. While there were still thousands of refugees on the dock, foreign ships put in at Smyrna, would load only the cargoes of tobacco they had orders for — no refugees.

And then an unlikely hero emerges: The only American civilian to remain in Smyrna when the ships departed was Asa Jennings, a 45-year-old minister from upstate New York. Jennings was a small man whose back had been made crooked and weak by a bout with tuberculosis. He arrived in Smyrna as the boys' work secretary at the YMCA. Jennings had been hiding pregnant women and small children at two safe houses in the city, and he realized that if nothing was done, and done quickly, tens of thousands of people would die.

Over the course of two weeks, Jennings and a gutsy American Naval captain would exceed any authority they had, negotiate for the charter of Greek merchant vessels — holding onto their charters even though the Greek government was falling in a coup — and use American combat vessels, plus a variety of half-truths and bribes, and rescue more than 250,000 people from the docks at Smyrna. It was an amazing feat, and Ureneck



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documents it closely and spins out the tension even to the end of the book.

Lou Ureneck has used a fascinating variety of primary historical sources, not only letters and accounts from the Americans and Europeans involved, but also first-hand accounts from sources as diverse as an Armenian doctor and a 12-year-old Greek girl, who escaped with her two younger siblings. Many of the most hideous details surfaced not from some international inquiry, but from a lawsuit filed in London concerning commercial damages suffered by a British company. Ureneck includes those details while outlining the importance of the commercial tobacco industry interests, as well as those of the burgeoning oil industry.

It is a complex story, and Ureneck tells it in a vivid way, keeping the story driving forward. It would have perhaps been easier to write as fiction, because in fiction he could have used fewer characters, but many characters played critical parts, and the author makes their contributions clear.

Some famous people appear almost as cameos: Ernest Hemingway as a young journalist; Aristotle Onassis as a teenager; and Allen Dulles, who would later head the CIA, as a young State Department clerk who receives a critical cable on a weekend. Some of the passages are horrifying to read, and this is not a book for the reader who knows nothing about the history of the area or the time. For those who do, it is an interesting and illuminating read.

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Top, the burning of Smyrna as seen from the HMS King George V. Above, residents of Smyrna overcrowd boats along its famed shorefront to escape the flames.