The *Last* Ottomans: the Muslim minority in Greece *between* international and domestic conflict, 1941-49.

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AHRC Research Project:

‘The Enemy That Never Was…’
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• A 2+ year research project focussing on the Muslim minority of Western Thrace in the 1940s. Work in progress…..

• A gap in the historiography of the period & of the minority.
A research ‘puzzle’: 

- Why did the Muslim minority of Western Thrace remain overwhelmingly passive, disengaged and ‘loyal’ despite the instability (and therefore the opportunities) in the period of the Axis Occupation and the subsequent Greek Civil War?
Research challenge:

- Explaining non-occurrence: passivity, disengagement?
- What is this a case of?
  - League of Nations’ minorities & conflict: why a divergent case?
  - Minorities as strategic assets in foreign policy.
  - Identity formation and kinship states.
  - Social order and leadership in a traditional rural setting.
  - Factors affecting resistance & collaboration.
- Historical record:
  - Oral history – before generation disappears.
  - Primary sources: availability of local archive material.
  - Diplomatic sources: London; Washington; Athens; Sofia; Ankara & Istanbul.
- Contextualisation:
  - Remembering the past in the present. Identity: Pomaks?
  - Accuracy of events via oral history & diplomatic reports.
Who? Where?

- 1928 census: 106,000 Muslims or 33% of region.
  - 1940 total population of 355,940 (Greek census)
- Geography: Thrace west of Evros River. Was Ottoman, then Bulgarian, then Greek. Districts of Xanthi, Rhodope, Evros.
Treaty of Lausanne (1923)
An historical curiosity…. 

- **A legacy of conflict, still remembered:**
  - Decline & withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire;
  - The rise of competing nationalisms: e.g. ‘Megali Idea’ and Kemalism;
  - Repeated changes of borders affecting the region.

- **International recognition of a ‘problem’:**
  - Treaty of Lausanne (1923) defined and protected the minority, alongside compulsory exchange of populations defined by religious identity.
  - Lausanne followed pattern of League of Nations’ Minority Treaties. Other cases led to conflict in Second World War: Poland, Baltic states, Finland, Czechoslovakia…

  » CONTINUED….
.....an historical curiosity:

- Complex and mixed identities within region:
  - Existence of a ‘kin country’ (Turkey)
  - ‘imagined communities’: defined in contradistinction from the ‘other’.
  - In civil and social structures, aspects of ‘dual authority’.

- Minority brought in to strategic conflicts: conflict before and after, but not during the 1940s – why not?
C20th Precedents for independence

- 1913: Republic of Gumuljina - Gümülcine (Komotini)
  - A Turkish-led entity (historiography has different names), supported by Greeks, against Bulgarians. Lasted 3 months, in-between peace treaties.

- 1920: Western Thracian Government
  - A Young Turk-backed initiative, alarmed at prospect of Greek control over whole of Thrace, never developed state-like institutions. Became mainly guerrilla, mountainous force, lasting almost 2 years; resolved by Lausanne Treaty.
But in reality, the minority:

- **Suffered** greatly under both Occupation & Civil War. *But remained*...
- **Passive**: Limited Greek resistance activity in the region (though more in Evros which was more openly KKE) & no ‘minority’ resistance.
- ‘**Loyal**’: Very little evidence of collaboration with the Axis Powers. No threat to Greek State in Civil War.
- **Disengaged**: from Greek Civil War & no separatist moves.
‘Loyal’…

- Campaign against Mussolini:
  - 42 Muslim soldiers from Western Thrace recorded as being killed;
  - 10 missing in action.
  - Families received army pensions in recognition.

- Examples:
  - Giousouf Oglou Osman, Giousouf, Komotini, 1918, 29th Regiment of Infantry, Killed in Pogradets/ Albanian Front, 6 December 1940 Corporal Topal Sali
  - Ahmet, Sali, Organi, 1917, 29th Regiment of Infantry, Killed on the Senteli Hill / Albanian Front, 10 March 1941.
  - Ahmet Oglou Sadik, Ahmet, Sykorahi Alexandroupolis, 1920, 33rd Regiment of Infantry, Killed in Kako Oros Heraklion, (Battle of Crete), May 1941.
List of Donations (livestock) to Greek Army from Xanthi – includes Muslims.

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T. T. 750, της 29ης Οκτωβρίου.
The onset of Occupation:

• Abandonment of Western Thrace by Greek forces: state collapse after priority to Albanian front (Metaxas Plan). Germans arrive in April 1941.
• Initially, some positive responses to arrival of German soldiers.
• Memories of brutality of earlier Bulgarian occupation following the Balkan wars (1913-19): e.g. violently baptised.
• Bulgarian occupation from 5/1941 to 10/1944.
Occupation zones – Note: German strip in Evros thinner; Zones changed after Italians left
The experience of Occupation:

- *Equal* misery across religious groups.
- Attempted ‘*Bulgarisation*’ of Pomaks: change of names, defined as Bulgarian.
- *Famine* in Pomak villages, better conditions in valleys.
- *Roma* also suffered lootings, abductions.
- More than 10,000 Muslims escaped W Thrace, most of them Turks. Many returned after the War.
The Minority & the Civil War

- Mountainous area of Rhodope under control of Democratic Army. Popular councils, courts; newspaper in Turkish; school books; songs.

- But Democratic Army leadership ignored status of minority.
Explaining Minority’s response:

Local, not international:

- **Conflicting strategic interests abated:** rapprochement in geo-strategic relations - Greece and Turkey – prior to 1941. 1930 Friendship Pact - minority not a bone of contention so the factors shaping the minority’s response were primarily local in nature.

- **The role of the kin-country:** Although Turkey had encouraged ‘Turkish’ identification – and Kemal Attaturk had referred to possible annexation - from Friendship Pact onwards and throughout WWII, Ankara made no significant move to take up their plight. Fear of Axis and later of Communist expansion in the region.

- **(Self-)Marginalisation:** Unlike other minorities overseen by the League, the Muslims of WT irrelevant to the pre-WWII conflicts. Also, minority did not engage with ‘European Nationalities Congress’ (1925), Vienna, for example.
The Minority’s self-identity:

- Determined more by Ottoman Empire than reformist regime of Kemal Attaturk’s Turkey. Empire’s collapse left them isolated, disoriented.
- New Republic seemed somewhat alien: distant, stridently secular, ‘invented’ history. Kemalism left many uncertain and created a political cleavage within the minority.
- Pomak element did not identify themselves so easily as ‘Turkish’ in this period. Also, part of Roma were Roma Muslim. Minority felt more heterogeneous in 1940s.
Lack of local leadership:

- Minority mainly agrarian, uneducated and poor. Lacked a local intelligentsia, which left after Ottoman collapse. Local Turkish notables had lost basis of power; ‘flatter’ social pyramid.
- Deeply traditional, based on patriarchy and religiosity. ‘Cultural stagnation’ after 1923 (Dogo 1998). Life akin to Stirling’s classic depiction of Anatolian villages: insularity; informal structures; lack of clear leadership.
- Apolitical and deferential attitudes.
- Lacked organisational structures to assert political, as opposed to religious, authority.
Rejection of Bulgarians:

- Pomaks – as they spoke a proximate Bulgarian dialect: subject to ‘Bulgarization’ - given Bulgarian names & cards, conscripted into Regular Army. But negative response; no significant collaboration. Suffered famine, beatings.
- Other Muslims drafted into Bulgarian labour battalions. [Post-war: received benefits from Greek State for their forcible removal.]
- The equal misery of both majority and minority lessened economic marginalisation of Muslims & the potential politicisation from their economic condition.
Neglected by Resistance:

- EAM-ELAS, but also their right-wing counterparts - made practically no effort to involve the Muslim community in their struggle against occupation. Not invited, the Muslims kept away.
  - Earlier KKE slogans about a ‘united and independent Thrace’ and the party’s more recent demands for the ‘full autonomy’ of the minorities put aside in KKE campaign in the region, in stark contrast to the activation of parallel slogans in neighbouring Macedonia.
Anti-Communist:

- Rejection of KKE’s atheism, rebelliousness.
- Repulsed by behaviour of the ‘andartes’ in seizing their food and materials – night raids.
- The leader of the few minority members to join with the Communists (Mihri Belli or ‘Kapten Kemal’: somewhat maverick) had been ‘imported’ from Turkey (via Bulgaria & US), rather than having been ‘home grown’. Compelled to join, played a secondary role; later some shot fleeing; few returned home.
- To most of the minority, the Civil War remained something of an alien affair, irrelevant to their own situation.
Neglected by National Government

• National Government wary towards the Muslims, but did not seem them as a major threat.

• Minority punished during day for ‘having supplied’ Communists by night.

• Minority seeks return of order, but limited sympathy for Athens, though receives benefits under Marshall Aid, etc.
Summary:

- Uniquely, in 1940s the international dimension was of limited relevance.
- Minority lacked leadership & agenda.
- Neglected by resistance & KKE, then by National Government.
- Others allowed minority to wallow in its own marginalisation.
- Only from 1955 was its stable, insularity disturbed: amidst tensions over Cyprus (and effect of those events on Istanbul Greek-Orthodox).
Implications?

- A unique case? Early (League) expectations of conflict not fulfilled.
- Self-identity of minority in this period: more mixed (more ‘Pomaks’); ambiguity towards Kemalism; traditional rural life follows Ottoman legacy.
- ‘Loyal’ – not the ‘enemy’ within. Minority is made an issue later by geo-strategic interests.