

Mark Mazower: Salonica City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430-1950.

London, HarperCollins Publishers, 2004

£25.00

ISBN 0 00 712023 0

The city of Salonica is the place was the embodiment of the more attractive features of the Ottoman empire. But Salonica also stands for nationalism and genocide, which successively in the twentieth century brought about the demographic and physical transformation of the city, the removal of the Muslims in the compulsory population exchange with the newly created Turkish Republic in 1923, and the deportation of its Jewish population by the Nazis in 1943. The Jews had been the largest community in 1913 - 39 per cent - and were largely unscathed by the population exchange, but less than 5 per cent of them survived deportation. After the war Salonica's leaders continued the task of burying its past while the population itself became overwhelmingly Greek in language and at least nominally Christian in religion.

These bald facts are enough to demonstrate the timeliness of Mark Mazower's moving, evocative and highly accomplished history of the city. Under Ottoman rule the city's ethnic-religious communities enjoyed a good deal of autonomy. Muslim rule focused principally on raising taxes, matters of private law were left to the religious authorities of each community, though people would try to appeal to the Sultan and the Pasha to intervene if they objected to the actions of communal leaders. The Greeks – i.e. the Christians – were weaker than the Jews in number and wealth and their priests were ill-educated. The Jews were governed by Rabbinical authorities who had brought from Spain and later Italy a Talmudic legal tradition which was passed down the generations. The imperial administration itself was chaotic and its security apparatus disastrous. Pashas changed sometimes within a year or two and had to raise an income in order to pay off the debts they incurred by purchasing the post. The security forces were almost a law unto themselves, especially Albanian mercenaries who were prone to terrorize the local population and were often out of the control of the nominal authorities. In 1821 the authorities lost their heads and responded to a Greek uprising in the hinterlands by a slaughter of 'perhaps several thousands' of the city's Greek population. But the next step was the elimination of the janissaries who had carried out the massacre, as a prelude to reform.

In the nineteenth century the Sultans tried to reform their rather unimperial empire and its administration, in response to nationalism in the Balkans and also to Western European pressure, opening up opportunities for the rise of a prosperous and still multi-ethnic bourgeoisie in Salonica and enabling substantial population growth. But the Empire scarcely had the means to modernize itself. Although a proto-rational bureaucracy was created its officials were so badly paid that 'they could not afford to be honest'. But still, attempted modernization did not mean ethnic or religious homogenization. On the contrary, the city's cosmopolitan character was accentuated by influxes of refugees from Southern Russia and from the Balkan wars, and the Metropolitan and the senior Rabbis retained much authority and well as maintaining their respect for the Ottoman authorities, while there was schooling in French, Greek, Turkish, Judeo-Spanish (ladino). Even nationality was a matter of barter and bribery,

at least for those who could afford it, as the Western powers gained extra-territorial prerogatives for their consular representations.

But the creation of a Greek state, and the propagation of its claims to exclusive ownership of the territorial and cultural inheritance of Byzantium Orthodoxy and Ancient Greece, was eventually to bring Hellenization of Salonica and the surrounding region, interrupted though not halted by the trauma of the Nazi occupation. In the twentieth century the rise of the Greek (originally Cretan) leader Venizelos encouraged alternately liberal and ultra-patriotic strands in Greek politics, forcing a multi-ethnic population to be either, and only either, Greeks or Turks, and culminating in a catastrophic military defeat and the agreed population exchange of 1923. Nearly one hundred thousand came to Salonica alone, and thirty thousand Muslims were forced out: thousands of Greeks died in related starvation violence and oppression in Eastern Thrace and Anatolia; Smyrna – another cosmopolitan commercial centre of the Ottoman empire - was burnt to the ground and most of its population forced out. Many of the refugees who came from Anatolia and Eastern Thrace to Salonica barely spoke Greek or did so with strong accents which set them apart. Nevertheless, cultural and linguistic homogenization set in.

Mazower describes the old city as if he himself had walked through it. One of the few remaining mosques is a cinema, all but one of the minarets which once dotted the skyline were torn down in 1926, cemeteries of all creeds have become car parks, their tombstones looted as building materials. Modern planners, political interests and entrepreneurs, aided by a disastrous fire in 1917, have literally buried a world in which diversity was a way of life.

Mazower relishes the innumerable ironies of all attempts to institutionalize culture and ethnicity. The Jewish population had its plutocrats and its innumerable poor, its prostitutes, its thugs and its renowned porters – some of whom were eventually to man the Haifa docks – not to speak of the shameful Jewish police in the holding camps established by the Nazis, as a prelude to deportation. The community was riven by ferocious political disagreement: one figure, an anti-Zionist (in tune with most Salonica Jewish opinion), founder of the Greek Socialist Party, and a leading labour organizer in the interwar period, survived the German occupation and imprisonment in the Greek civil war, and then was exiled to Israel where he ran a newspaper kiosk until his death in 1973.

When Salonica, which by now had received a hundred thousand new immigrants from Russia, Eastern Europe and the Balkans, was named European City of Culture in 1994, the tide began to turn again: while an irredentist faction denied the multi-cultural past, it again became politic to gingerly recognize and even commemorate the city's ghosts. This history teaches us that however violently and apparently definitively they seem to be drawn at a particular time, the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion are also forever subject to unpredictable change. The cafés and crowded streets, which once rang with the cacophony of many languages and the music of many cultures, can all too quickly be buried under the concrete unity orchestrated by the artificers of nationhood, yet modernity can also bring the cacophony back in a new guise.

David Lehmann is Reader in Social Science at Cambridge University.