

**LOU URENECK. THE GREAT FIRE, ONE AMERICAN MISSION  
TO RESCUE VICTIMS OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY'S FIRST GENOCIDE**

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**Book Review**

Lou Ureneck's "The Great Fire" was published in 2015 by Harper-Collins Publishers, New York, USA. Released during the Armenian Genocide centennial, the book proved to be a successful attempt in unpacking the hidden story of the 20th Century's First Genocide for the public in the United States, Canada and beyond, as long as it is available from HarperCollins e-books, Amazon, and other online retailers. Special thanks to my very good friend Robert J. Willey - former Dean of School of Human Services, Springfield College, MA, USA, who suggested me to read this book and secured the hard copy for my studies, including this review.

L. Ureneck is a professor of journalism at Boston University College of Communications. He has long-time editorial and writing background. "The Great Fire" is his third book: the previous two - "Backcast" (2007) and "Cabin" (2011) - are recounts of his personal experiences in life. However, his move to history is not by accident. Back in 1994 - 1995, as a Niemen fellow at Harvard University L. Ureneck carried out studies on comparing the methods of historians with the practices of journalists. Thus "The Great Fire" can be contemplated as a delayed by the author's difficult life journey product, yet with decades of reflection and study behind it.

The book is a result of five years intensive work, including repeated visits to the sites of the historical events, tete-a-tete interviews with the descendants of the featured personages and experts in the field, intensive research in the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and the YMCA Archives in the USA, as well as the Izmir (Smyrna) Municipal Archives in Turkey and the Asia Minor Research Centre in Athens, Greece. The content of the book is extracted from the reports, letters, and diaries of US naval officers, declassified American intelligence reports, American and British diplomatic cables, accounts of American missionaries and relief workers and British sailors who witnessed the fire and its aftermath, personal papers and letters of key figures in the story, some of these available for first time. Notwithstanding those above, the discourse of "The Great Fire" is rather of journalistic investigation. It has no intention of framing itself within the traditional academic research style. However, this does not diminish its added historiographical value. "The Great Fire" is a precisely factual book on the concluding violent peak of the 20th century's first genocide - the holocaust of Smyrna in 1922. Every single chapter of the book is linked with references (in total 394) to the published and unpublished primary, as well as to the secondary sources where from the information is collected and collated. After all, as the American writer, author of famous "Superman," Larry Tye puts, quote: "It is a terrifically compelling read."

In his interview to Boston Globe (July 11, 2015) L. Ureneck acknowledges quote: “My project really began as a search for the story of Asa Jennings. In the process of researching his life, the project broadened and opened up into something much more ambitious, but Jennings was always at the center.” Asa Jennings (1877 - 1933) was a YMCA secretary assigned to Smyrna. He and his family arrived there just after the battle of Afyonkarahisar (July 1921), where the Kemalists defeated the Greek Army and started the unstoppable offensive cleansing them out from Asia Minor.

The YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) ideology, as a new wave of the missionary movement, infiltrated into the Ottoman Empire in the early eighties of the 19th century. After the arraignment of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (July 1908) and restoration of the “constitutional” rule (“Hurriyet”), European and particularly American YMCAs started to send so-called fraternal secretaries to coordinate and structure organization’s operations through the whole Empire. By 1914 there were around 30 YMCA local associations in the Ottoman Empire, predominantly working with Christian youth and communities, especially Armenians. Smyrna as the most affluent and cosmopolitan city of the eastern Mediterranean was amongst the first spots in the empire where the YMCA prospered. Originally it was initiated as purely an Armenian association. Later on due to the intervention of American secretaries it started to enrol also other Christian youth and communities, especially Greek. During World War I the Ottoman regime terminated the function of the organization. But shortly after the Greek troops landing in Smyrna (May 1919), it was back to full operation for about three years. YMCA Smyrna finally lost its constituency and assets in the flames of the Great Fire (September 1922), which as the author of the book describes, quote: “Before it burned itself out, the fire would destroy 13,100 buildings - homes, hospitals, schools, warehouses, businesses, churches, and factories - and cause 250 million dollar damage, billions of dollars in today’s terms. Only the Turkish and small Jewish quarters of the city and a few patches at the perimeter would remain unburned” (p. 6).

The narrative of the book clearly sticks to the chronology of the historical events, starting with the Battle of Afyonkarahisar, summing at the days of Smyrna’s extermination and summing up with the developments that followed it. L. Ureneck delivers the chronicle through individual cases of selected historical figures and just ordinary people, whereby relevant also providing backstories précising their character. Besides Asa Jennings the author embarks on other key people, such as: Halsey Powell (1883 - 1936), the commander of the USS Edsall; Mark Lambert Bristol (1868 - 1939), the United States’ High Commissioner in Turkey; Arthur Japy Hepburn (1877 - 1964), Chief of Staff of the United States’ Naval Detachment in Turkey; and the organizer of the Smyrna’s annihilation Mustapha Kemal. Concurrently L. Ureneck expressively features some ordinary survivors of the Great Fire in the way of recounting their personal journeys through it. Those are Theodora Gravos, a twelve-year-old Greek girl from Gritzalia village in Asia Minor and Garabed (Karapet) Hatcherian, a forty-six-year-old Armenian doctor from Smyrna itself.

The plot of the book builds up as the “roads” of all the above personages lead to Smyrna. There the Turks, under the direct command of their leader Mustapha Kemal, were brutally executing the annihilation of Smyrna while the great powers – British Empire, France, Italy and the United States - were on standby watching at it from their warships at a gunfire distance. The only undertaking was the evacuation of their citizens from the city to their warships. “It was the last violent episode in a ten-year holocaust that had killed three million people - Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians, all Christian minorities - on the Turkish sub-continent between 1912 - 1922” (p. 1). Could Asa Jennings have any role in this giants’ game of indifference? He was just a low-rank YMCA staff, on top of all in crippled by tuberculosis health condition. Logically he could be the first in the line seeking refuge. As Boston Globe (July 11, 2015) writes, quote: “Like so many stories from the Armenian genocide, the tale of Asa Jennings has been lost for years. Lou Ureneck first encountered Jennings as a bit player in a larger history of the genocide. He wondered how this sickly young man, brought to Smyrna to instruct young Christian, Jewish, and Muslim boys in athletics, led one of the world’s biggest rescue missions”. But as “The Great Fire” discloses, he together with Captain Halsey Powell decided to choose humanity over politics. Together they initiated spontaneous evacuation of local and refugee Armenians and Greeks, sandwiched between the fire and water at the Smyrna Quay, and with this triggered the unfolding of and led an unprecedented rescue operation saving more than 250,000 people. To do so, they had neither the authorization nor even the sympathy of their superiors, especially those of Admiral Bristol - the United States’ High Commissioner in Turkey during 1919 - 1927.

“The Great Fire” is not limited to telling the forgotten story of one of the great humanitarian acts of history. It also examines the other side of the coin, i.e. what were the causes, which led to that humanitarian crisis. With hard facts the author discloses Bristol’s and his aids’ pro-Turkish motives characterizing them, quote: “The mass slaughter and deportations of Armenians during World War I seemed to not have made strong impression on either of them. Bristol was an early form of a type that would emerge later in the century – the holocaust denier” (p. 97). Those days Bristol had the United States’ diplomatic representation and military presence all concentrated in his hands and did play a key role in shaping Washington’s retreat from the mandate in Armenia, assumed by the Treaty of Sevres (August 1920). Through the whole period of his career in Turkey Bristol had been an outspoken advocate of good relations with the Turkish authorities whoever they were, considering it crucial to the American interests. For Bristol, access to resources, especially oil and tobacco, and control over their transit were the American interests, and he was not alone. While the humanitarian crisis in Smyrna was at its full magnitude, “Bristol sent a message to Powell that said the USS Manhattan Island, an American fighter in Constantinople, would make the trip to Smyrna if an American agent in the city could guarantee a cargo of tobacco. There might be room for refugees, he said, but the tobacco came first” (p. 293).

As the author of the book evaluates, quote: “The Smyrna catastrophe offered him [Bristol] his one opportunity for a genuine legacy. He could have responded with speed and compassion; he might even have saved the city with mediation. But Bristol was no Henry Morgenthau; of course, there was no room in the Harding administration for a Morgenthau. Idealism was out; the missionary impulse and rural Protestantism was fading. Consumerism, oil, and public relations were in. Power was shifting. The America that was emerging in 1922 was not the America of 1914” (p. 247). Manipulating public opinion was the main tool used by Bristol. “He [Bristol] controlled the press by staying on message and using his authority to provide transportation to news hotspots and allowing the reporters to use the naval radio system for transporting stories at no charge” (p. 101). L. Ureneck exposes series of evidence-based cases when Admiral Bristol and his aids were deliberately blocking or delaying information, which could raise compassion and action for suffering Armenians and Greeks, or the other way around - could harm the image of the raising Kemalist regime. Lack of information was never a problem for Bristol: as “The Great Fire” accents, intelligence and surveillance where the key fields in his travail. Neither the personalized stories of the victims, such as of Theodora or Garabed (Karapet) Hatcherian, so eloquently narrated by the author, nor the mass Midnight Prayer of vanishing Christians at Smyrna Quay would move Admiral Bristol’s heart. His sympathy was with Mustafa Kemal, who made the first impression of a “well-trained superior waiter” (p. 30) on one of Bristol’s aids, an American intelligence officer Robert S. Dunn.

On September 13th, the day when the fire broke, Bristol reported to Washington, quote: “Generally speaking conduct of Turkish troops of occupation extraordinarily good, discipline perfect...” (p. 236). Challenging this disinformation, L. Ureneck reveals hundreds of reports, testimonies, and cables witnessing the explicit vandalism of the Turkish mob and the military before, during and even after the Great Fire. An example from September 16th, quote: “...a proclamation went up around the city, in Turkish... It announced that all Christians must be evacuated by October 1 - two weeks away - or they would be deported to the interior. Women, children, and old men could leave, but all Greek and Armenian men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five would be held as prisoners of war. The Turkish authorities also declared that the names of refugees who wanted to deport must be furnished in advance. Given that at least 250,000 refugees were in the city, the overwhelming number without documents, the requirement was a logistical impossibility. The Turks seemed to be setting up a situation that had no logical outcome except the erasure of the refugees through death and deportation” (p. 270). And the author summarises, quote: “The decade of mass killing, engineered by two successive Turkish governments, was the first religious and ethnic cleansing of modern times – and the end of Christianity, for all intents and purposes, in the place where it had first taken root, Asia Minor” (page 10).

To conclude, “The Great Fire” is a powerfully evidence-based account, proficiently assessing an epic chapter of humanity at its best and worst. On the one hand, it’s a

catchy intellectual read for general public, with making the reader reflect on its actuality in the context of the current world order chaos, the aggravating humanitarian crisis in the Middle East especially considered. On the other hand, it is an obviously useful resource for the researchers of the history of the 20th century's first genocide. To this end, the book unearths colossal volumes of information on the historical events described, with clear references to the primary and secondary sources of that information. To my opinion, this makes "The Great Fire" a solid reference by itself.

And the last but not the least: a word should be added of the author. Lou Ureneck's time and effort have been duly appreciated by the Greek society, home, and diaspora. The Greek translation of "The Great Fire" was published in 2016. It's high time for the Armenian society to take action.