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According to British observers, during the Turkish period:

“Two independent powers existed in the island, each with a home, a citadel, and a place of arms in Nicosia. One was a material, the other a spiritual power. One was Turkish, the other Greek.”

By nature these two powers were opposed to each other, but they were kept in balance because the representatives of each found it in their interests to give and take.

“These powers were nicely mated and the balance was a growth of ages. When the last Venetian garrison was expelled from Cyprus and the island was united as of old to the great empire governed from the Bosphorus, the work of compromise began.

“Turks, unlike the Latins, imposed no rituals, launched no anathemas against the Orthodox people. Pope and bishop were left alone; to build as many churches as they liked, to have complete freedom of religion.

“Thus year by year, pasha, the soldier, stood alone; in practice, his authority was limited by the priest. The Turkish Governor had no army at his back; his garrison in the capital seldom counting more than a hundred men; and all these men were natives of the soil. He had to rule by wit rather than by material force. Wit pointed out the policy of acting with and not against the native clergy.”

Historians, scholars and authors interested in Cypriot history noted and praised Turkish tolerance, magnanimity and traditional generosity towards non-Moslems. To such celebrated Western authors we can add Greek Cypriot historians and writers who openly acknowledged this policy towards the Orthodox Church of Cyprus and praised the ecclesiastical privileges the sultans granted. George Chakallis, a distinguished Greek Cypriot lawyer, politician and historian wrote in 1902:

“The Church of Cyprus has enjoyed important privileges which were recognized by the Turks since the conquest of the island and always acknowledged whenever a new Archbishop was elected by an Imperial Berat [Decree].”

The last Berat, which was granted to Archbishop Sophronius in 1865, is considered one of the finest examples of respect of rulers for the religion of the ruled. This Berat was similar to others granted to the Orthodox Church, its archbishops and bishops from the beginning of the Turkish rule in 1571.
Even today, it can be regarded as an excellent example of Turkish tolerance towards other religions and faiths.

No one can deny the fact that today, at the start of the twenty-first century, not just in Africa and Asia or in backward and undeveloped countries, but even in civilised Western countries, discrimination and injustice towards other religions and faiths still occurs, whereas none of this kind of prejudice was to be found in Cyprus during over 300 years of Turkish rule. (Bosnia and Kosovo can be mentioned as the latest examples of such ethnic cleansing and intolerance.)

George Chakallis considered the Berat of 1865 “very interesting” and printed a complete translation of it in his book. It is useful to illustrate some of the privileges by quoting from the 1865 Berat, which acknowledged the election of the new Archbishop. With this Berat, the Sultan ordered, among other things, that:

“He [the Archbishop] be by none hindered in the dignity of his Archbishopric and none interfere with or trouble him.

“None without supreme authority shall take away from him [the Archbishop] the churches and monasteries which from the very beginning have been in the possession of Archbishops.

“Without sealed petition of the actual Archbishops, no appointment of metropolitan or bishop be made by any one; nor the authority and exercise of his rights be allowed to any.

“The aforementioned Archbishop, when he has to receive, according to the customs from the very beginning, and in virtue of his Berat, Archiepiscopal revenues from anywhere, from metropolitans, bishops, monks, abbots and other Christians, the Kadôs [Moslem judges] in office shall assist him and so act that these revenues shall be paid to his representatives, sent on purpose for their collection.

“No one shall make a Christian to be a Mussulman [Moslem] when he himself does not wish it.

“All the property belonging to the churches, whatsoever, belongs to the Archbishopric and they are under the dominion and rule of the Archbishop and none shall interfere with them.

“When the Government thinks it necessary and decides to arrest a priest, a monk or a nun, this shall be effected only through the Archbishop.

“For the direction of the affairs which concern their religion and also for the immediate possession and direction of their property, none in any way shall prevent them, nor interfere; but they shall remain uncontrolled and uninfluenced.”

The Turks left it to the Greek Orthodox people to elect their Archbishop, who consequently exercised deep-seated and abiding power in every town and village where Orthodox people lived. Had Turkish rulers appointed him, he would almost certainly have become a puppet of the Pasha and would not have been able to command the level of respect that archbishops enjoyed during the Turkish period, nor would he have been regarded as the true leader of his community.

According to Sir Harry Luke, a high ranking colonial administrator in Cyprus, at one period the supreme authority of the archbishops of Cyprus attained influence greater than that of the Turkish
Pasha himself. His conclusion on this matter is as follows:

“During the Ottoman regime, therefore, the Archbishop represented to his own flock on a smaller scale that which the Patriarch of Constantinople represented to the generality of the Orthodox in Turkey. That is to say, he was not only the spiritual chief of the Cypriots; he became the ethnarch, the political and national representative of his people in its relations with the Ottoman Government. He became even more. By an astonishing reversal of fortune the Archbishop of Cyprus, whose office had been created by the Turks after lying dormant for three hundred years, secured in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the supreme power and authority over the island, and at one period wielded influence greater than that of the Turkish Pasha himself.”

According to Hepworth Dixon, another British author and administrator, the Turks were preferred to the previous Latin rulers because they granted the Greeks religious privileges and full communal autonomy: “they respected their religious rights and their village republics.” The Turks also tolerated their tardiness in paying their local taxes. Although the native Turks paid regularly and punctually, the Orthodox Greeks were very often in arrears. The Turks never forced the Greeks to settle their arrears on time; instead, they tried to obtain the money by making terms with the Archbishop of Cyprus.

Hepworth Dixon continues, “The Church in Cyprus was a free democracy under Turkish rule.” Because of all the privileges and powers the Turks granted, the Orthodox Christians regarded the Archbishop’s order as a voice from Heaven. The Archbishop was a prince in his own world and bore his signs of royalty in his title and his garb. He was “His Excellency and His Beatitude.”

A DUAL SYSTEM AND A BALANCED ADMINISTRATION

Dixon adds that Turkish rule in Cyprus was based on a dual system. On the one side, there was the Pasha of Cyprus ruling from the Konak in Nicosia, while on the other there was the Archbishop at St John’s Cathedral. For the sake of peace and order in the island, Konak and Cathedral came to terms. This was achieved not by articles or treaties but by consent. The Primate gave his hand to his neighbour in the Konak, and the Pasha gave his hand to his neighbour in the Archbishopric.

GREEK WAS AN OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

During the Turkish period, Greek was accepted as an official language together with Turkish. The Greek Cypriots were not obliged to learn Turkish or use it to correspond with government departments and officials. They could use their own language in all official correspondence and documents. Appeals and reports sent to the Turkish government in Istanbul about issues which they wanted the Sublime Porte to consider could also be in Greek.

The names of streets, squares, public places and offices were displayed in both Turkish and Greek. Archduke Louis Salvator of Austria observed, “The names of the localities appear in white characters on blue metal tablets in Turkish and Greek.”

In 1858, Archbishop Makarios I made a written application in Greek to the Turkish Governor of Cyprus on behalf of the Christian inhabitants of Prasyo village for the repair and re-building of Ayia Yiorgi church. The Cyprus Mejlis endorsed this application written in Greek and forwarded to Istanbul where approval was granted.
STABLE AND PEACEFUL

Turkish justice and tolerance provided a stable and peaceful life for the people of the island as a whole and, apart from the minor incidents that took place during the revolt against the Turks on the Greek mainland in the 1820s, the 308 years of Turkish rule in Cyprus saw friendly relations between the two communities. This balance was maintained by applying the principle of give and take, compromise and justice.

Relations between the two races during the Turkish period were sometimes so harmonious that the two communities actually joined to resist a number of tax increases.

CONCESSIONS TO GREEK MERCHANTS

Moving from politics to economics, an even less well-known feature of Ottoman enlightenment was the granting of special concessions to Greek merchants. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, this policy led to the rise of Greek commerce and the Greek merchant marine at the expense of the Italian city-states. Professor George Leon of Memphis University cogently illustrates the point in the main historical contribution to the book entitled The Greek Merchant Marine.

After describing Byzantine maritime activities on the eve of the Ottoman conquest in the fifteenth century as “insignificant”, with their emperors being “puppets in the hands of the Italian commercial republics” (p. 14), George Leon goes on to show how the stability, peace and re-population of towns Ottoman rule achieved regenerated the economy of the eastern Balkans and of the eastern Mediterranean as a whole:

“The new social structure established after the Ottoman conquest created considerable social mobility; it prevented the resumption of the anarchy that had preceded the Ottoman conquest, stimulated local and regional trade, and created conditions favourable to the growth of a commercial class.”

It was during this early period of Ottoman rule that the Greek merchant marine’s foundations were laid and it continued to expand during the decline of Ottoman power from the late seventeenth century onwards.

UNIVERSALITY OF TURKISH RULE

On the political side, Lord Kinross, in his book, The Ottoman Centuries, contrasts the Ottoman’s stabilising role with a Europe bedevilled by faction, strife, and intolerance. Summing up the significance of the Ottomans to Christian Europe, Lord Kinross brings out the unique universality of the Turkish rule:

“But for all its Turkish solidarity and Moslem structure, the Ottoman State was above all a universal empire. The minority populations were formed, through a degree of delegation from the central authority, into separate ethnic, social and religious communities, all free to direct, within the framework of the State, their own special affairs, and to preserve in harmonious coexistence their respective identities.”

“The Ottoman Empire became in no sense a national but a dynastic and multiracial empire, whose varied populations, whether Turkish or otherwise, Moslem or Christian or Jewish, were above all
else Ottomans, members of a single body politic which transcended such conceptions as nationhood, religion and race. Alone in its time, it thus gave recognition to all three monotheistic faiths...”11

Turkish rule in Cyprus must therefore be seen in this wider context. The tolerance and justice it brought to all Cypriots were based on this universality. It was not prejudiced and was therefore able to establish and maintain friendly relations and solidarity among the Moslems and Christians, Turks and Greeks of the island for more than three centuries.

INTER-COMMUNAL HARMONY AND

THE PROSPERITY THE GREEKS ENJOYED

Thomas Brassey wrote on 16 November 1878 from Morphou in Cyprus to The Times pointing out that:

“In ordinary years [regarding rainfall] and in certain districts, the Cypriots enjoy a fair measure of prosperity, the fruits of which, in justice to the former Government be it said, seem to have been far more liberally enjoyed by the Greeks than by the Turkish community...In the famine years, 1859-61, supplies of biscuits were distributed by the [Turkish] Government. An English Administration would be expected to relieve the destitute on a still more liberal scale.”12

The Times correspondent in Cyprus during the first months of the British occupation sent to his paper interesting, thorough and objective observations dealing with various aspects of Cypriot life under the Turks. One of his articles, published on 5 November 1878, describes the Turkish judicial system in Cyprus and refers to the inter-communal harmony, which he attributed to the tolerance of the Turks and their capacity for change and improvement. According to that correspondent, the geographical position of Cyprus was also an important element affecting its people.

In his despatch published on 26 December 1878, he stressed the fact that the flow of firmans, instructions and orders from the Turkish capital was in accordance with the Turkish reforms of 1839 and 1856 recommending that the Christian population be treated with consideration, so that the effect of these “novel forces” was soon felt in the law courts.

The comparative prosperity of the Greek Cypriots was visible and The Times correspondent noted, “The Greeks were pushing onward in industry and commerce; were growing rich, and were, in fact, in a position to buy what they wanted.”

This co-operation between the two communities was sometimes reflected in administrative changes when governors, kaimakams or other administrators were removed by concerted action if they were considered to be against the interests of both groups.

The same correspondent reported:

“...The constitution of the law courts aided the assimilation of sentiment between the two divisions of the people and encouraged their fusion...The introduction of Greeks into the tribunals...achieved, in an indirect way, a wonderful object of another nature. It brought together Greeks and Turks in a governing union. It set a common basis of action between them...from which, in this case, good did come. This was one of the quiet ways in which the immemorial barriers of national pride and
religious antipathy were beaten down.

“To those who have not understood, or who doubt still, the capacity of the Turks to grow out of fanaticism, to yield to the civilising motives of enlightening self interest, to know and to value the advantages of peaceful living, quiet and prosperity, I recommend a careful study of the history of Cyprus for the last twenty years.”

The Times correspondent also observed:

“Good fortune has blessed Cyprus in her time with more than one Pasha of repute for integrity. One, you are told, aimed at the improvement of irrigation, at the sinking of wells, at the destruction of locusts; he was a good man, ‘he ate nothing’, that is to say, he did not steal. Another showed no favour to Turk or Christian; he made the two sit down side by side when they came with their petitions. In conversations such as these, evidence may be gathered of the appreciation in which a good Governor is held by those over whom he is set.”

In another despatch, dated 11 December 1878, The Times correspondent describes the four days of religious festivities (bayram) and the state reception in the Konak of Nicosia. After explaining the traditional reception held in the Konak and the presence of the first British Administrator, Sir Garnet Wolseley, and his staff, he says:

“His Eminence the Greek Archbishop was present, and His Eminence the Armenian Vicar; and there was a conspicuous Dervish, with a tall brown hat and a green turban wound veil-like around it, somewhat as though the wearer had been going to the DerbyÉ

“Then I noticed that the Greek Archbishop was decorated with the Order of the second class of the Medjidie. It was strange enough to see the great expounder of the Koran robed in green from head to foot sitting next to the Greek Archbishop, who wore his tall hat with its dark veil falling backwards upon the shoulders; but it seemed stranger still to see the Order of the Medjidie sparkling upon the robes of the Greek Church. The Greek Archbishop, my informant told me, was a dear friend of Said Pasha, who was Governor here; and Said (the good Said, who destroyed the locusts and built the archway for the water which leaps out of the mountain at Kythrea) sent to Constantinople to say that the Archbishop was a brave man and had helped him, and so Said got an Order of the Medjidie of the second class for his Eminence.”

CYPRUS: NOT A PLACE D’ARMES BUT A LAND OF SELF RULE

The Turks never used the island as a place d’armes and the army in Cyprus was always kept at a minimum. Kyprianos, Drummond and Ali Bey all refer to almost identical figures and details in their descriptions of the organisation and composition of the Turkish troops in Cyprus.13

In 1825, during the heated years of the Greek revolt, an official list giving the numbers of troops in five fortresses in Cyprus indicated a total of only 1,865 men for the whole island. An army list for the year 1841-2, giving details of each soldier, his birthplace and rate of pay, indicates that by that time this figure had been reduced to less than half, leaving a total of only 840 men. In later years, towards the end of Turkish rule, the number of soldiers on the island was further reduced leaving only a token presence.

The despatches of the British Consul, Niven Kerr, written in 1845 referring to the military situation,
informed the Foreign Office that there had been some troops on the island in 1843, but they had since been completely withdrawn, save for a few men left to handle the guns, and these were so incompetent that they could hardly be described as artillery men.14

During the British occupation in 1878, the Turkish garrison consisted of about 100 artillerymen, 300 nizamis (regulars) and a few militiamen. There was also a small police force called the zaptieh.

Hepworth Dixon concluded admiringly, “The Turkish Governor had no army at his back, his garrison in the capital seldom counting more than a hundred men, and all these men were the natives of the land.”15

A correspondent of The Times reported in December 1878 that the Cypriots had enjoyed peace and had never been obliged to take part in any war that the Ottoman Empire had fought. Thus, Cyprus could be counted as one of the luckiest provinces of the Turkish Empire in never having suffered the calamities of any war.

The troops raised in Cyprus were only for service in the island and were never taken beyond it.16

THE PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE OF ARMENIANS AND TURKS IN CYPRUS

It is very disturbing to see historical facts distorted for petty political purposes. For instance, claiming that the Armenians of Cyprus suffered oppression under Turkish rule is quite contrary to the truth and so far, has not been substantiated or documented. There is concrete evidence from many authoritative historical documents that clearly testify to the tolerance and respect of the Turkish authorities towards all the Christian communities in the island, including the small Armenian population. Furthermore, the harmonious and happy relations between the Turks and Armenians all over the island are still within the memory of the older generation on Cyprus. People can actually remember the peaceful coexistence and very friendly neighbourly attitudes of the two communities, who shared the same streets in the Turkish sectors of the main towns.

The well-known Cypriot Armenian lawyer, writer and poet, Naubar Maksudian, most of whose articles have been published in an English periodical called Great Britain and the East, has on many occasions explicitly emphasised Turkish tolerance towards all the Christian communities on the island, including the Armenians. One of his articles demonstrates Turkish respect for foreign religions by recalling that the Turks gave to the Christian communities within their provinces possession of those churches they did not need, to be used once more exclusively for religious purposes, and not as stables, warehouses or stores, as had been the case under Latin domination.

Another Armenian writer, Dr Takvorian, in an article published in Mangoian’s book about Cyprus, says, “The Armenian church of Nicosia, called ‘The Holy Mother of God’, formerly the Latin church of Notre Dame de Tyre, was handed over to the Armenians as a gift under a firman of Sultan Selim II, after the occupation of the town in 1570.”17

GREEK DOMINATION OVER THE ARMENIANS

Although the Greek Cypriots were given greater civil authority and substantial privileges under Turkish rule, their ambition was always to become the dominant Christian power on the island. Despite the superior position and powers Turkish firmans granted to them, the Greek Orthodox Church was never happy about seeing churches of other Christian sects such as Catholics, Protestants
or Orthodox Armenians surviving separately and prospering. In fact, Sir George Hill records that Pagouran’s work, Kipros Gueghizi, states (p. 69) that “in the time of Kyprianos the Armenian church in the capital made an annual gift to the Archbishop in token of subjection. According to Pagouran, this custom lasted until the beginning of the present century.”

The Greek Cypriots wanted not only the subjection of the Armenian church, but to obtain possession of the church building itself which the Sultan had given to the Cypriot Armenians as a gift.

Hill continues: “from the same writer, it appears that the Greeks long disputed possession of the church in the capital, which had been granted to the Armenians as a reward for their helping the Turks in the siege.”

The Turks had also granted tax exemptions for both the Armenian church, Notre Dame de Tyre and the Sourp Magar monastery, situated at Halevka, seven miles north of Değirmenlik (Kythrea) on the northern slopes of the Kyrenia Range.

Greek Cypriots have always been opposed to Armenian settlement in Cyprus. When the British Consul at Erzurum in eastern Anatolia suggested that some of the Armenians emigrating from his consular district might be settled in Cyprus, the Foreign Office took up the suggestion and approached the Colonial Office. However, we learn from British documents that Joseph Chamberlaine, Secretary of State for Colonies, who was consulted about this project, replied: “The Armenians are not liked either by the Christian Cypriot, and any proposal to establish here a colony of Armenian refugees would not be regarded with favour by the rest of the community.”

Earlier, in 1896, following the Ottoman Bank raid in Istanbul, a number of Armenians who were probably implicated in those incidents had wanted to emigrate to Cyprus, but the Greek Cypriots raised an outcry against them.

This protest began with an article by Y.S. Frankoudi, the London correspondent of Phoni tis Kiprou (The Voice of Cyprus), one of the most popular Greek Cypriot papers with a high circulation. In its issue of 1 October 1896, under a banner headline, ‘A New Danger: Beware!’, Frankoudi drew the attention of Greek Cypriots to the “danger” that was threatening the island of Cyprus from the “contemplated collective descent of the Armenians.” Frankoudi claimed that it was proposed that around 10,000 Armenian families should settle and colonise Cyprus.

His warning ran: “You understand the danger. There is a national danger that such a great number of Armenians, even if it does not Armenianize the island, will certainly greatly alter the present entirely Greek character of our fatherland.”

TURKISH TOLERANCE AND ARMENIAN WEALTH

The Armenians not only enjoyed religious freedom under Turkish rule in Cyprus but were also a successful population group. They had full and equal rights, practised the most profitable professions and made a lucrative living as moneylenders, goldsmiths, businessmen, bankers and merchants. In the 1850s, they began to be employed in the Ottoman civil service. The Armenian Charter of the 1860s granted to them the status of Millet.

It is worth recording the number of senior positions they filled within a short period after it was decided in the 1850s to allow Armenians to be employed in the Ottoman civil service. There were 29
Armenian Pashas, the highest rank in government; 22 Armenian Cabinet Ministers, including those of Foreign Affairs, Finance, Trade and Postal Services; 33 Armenian Deputies in the Ottoman Parliament; 7 Ambassadors; 11 Consuls-General and Consuls; 11 university professors and many high-ranking Armenian officials.19

Ottoman tolerance towards the non-Moslem peoples of the Empire has been the subject of many works of research and scholarship by authors such as Claude Farrere, Pierre Loti, Nogueres Ilone Catani, Philip Marshall Brown, Sir Charles Wilson, Edgar Granville, Bernard Lewis, Geoffrey Lewis, the Shaws, Clain Price, Lewis Thomas, M. Hornus, Gwynne Dyer, W. Langer and many others.20

In Cyprus too, Armenians have for centuries lived among the Turkish community with Turks as their friends and neighbours. The music that they enjoyed and played was Turkish rather than Greek. Kegam Djelalian and other well-known Armenian musicians played Turkish musical instruments and Ala Turca melodies throughout their lives, and joined with Turkish Cypriot musicians to give concerts of Turkish music.

It is particularly significant that even the first Turkish-language publication in Cyprus was prepared, edited and issued by an Ottoman Armenian, Aleksan Sarrafian. His weekly Ümid (Hope) first appeared in 1879 and was published in Larnaca. In Ümid, he conducted a campaign against the Turkish Sultan Abdül Hamit II, criticising him for signing the Cyprus Convention of 1878 which allowed Britain to take over a Turkish land that he believed had been left to the Turks as an ancestral inheritance.21

Let us turn to Mariti. He lived and served in Cyprus as an official of the Imperial Tuscan Consulates for the period between 1760 and 1767. In his book, Viaggi per l’Isola di Cipro (Travels in the Island of Cyprus), he says of the Bedesten in Nicosia, “It is the business resort of the chief merchants of Turks, Greeks and Armenians.”22

Thus, he informs us of the fact that Armenians in Cyprus were among the “chief merchants” of Nicosia during the Turkish period. Later, he states, “Armenians are the richest section of the inhabitants.”23

According to Mariti, most of the Armenian families had settled in the capital and were living in their own houses situated within the famous Arab Ahmet quarter of Nicosia. He also verifies that “members of those Greek and Armenian families living in Nicosia occupied various posts in the central Government.”24

The Austrian Archduke Louis Salvator, who visited Cyprus towards the end of the Turkish period and printed an account of his visit in 1873, wrote, “The Armenians are everywhere integrated with the Turks.”25

CONCLUSION

To ignore, in some cases intentionally, these historical facts, to shut one’s eyes to the harmonious and well-balanced administrative system of Turkish rule vis-à-vis different Christian communities of the island, to base opinions on anti-Turkish feelings, misjudging and, purposely or ignorantly, misrepresenting the Turkish period as “harsh and oppressive” towards Christian inhabitants, is both unreasonable and regrettable. It is just not true. Such disregard for the realities of history can only be
harmful and serve to cause irreparable damage to prospects for peaceful coexistence in a multi-communal country.

If the Turks had not exercised tolerance and justice towards the Christian communities in the island, there could not have been prosperous and influential families in existence during the Turkish period such as those of Richard Mattei, Mantovani (of Latin descent), Sakis (Armenian), Haji Georgiakis Kornessios (of the Greek Orthodox Community) and many other well-known wealthy personalities whose names would fill many pages.

It is quite clear that the Greeks and Armenians in Cyprus owe a great debt to the peace, tolerance and prosperity that resulted from three centuries of Turkish rule.

2 Chakallis, G., Cyprus under British Rule, 1902, p. 25.
5 Ibid., p. 42.
6 Ibid., p. 42.
11 Ibid., pp. 613-614.
12 The Times, 26 December 1878.
13 Excerpta Cypria, pp. 279 and 346.
14 Niven Kerr, Foreign Office 78/631, 31 December 1845.
16 The Times, 5 November 1878.


18 Public Record Office doc. No. CO 67/101/21466. (From an article by Dr Salahi R. Sonyel, New Cyprus magazine, Nicosia, November 1986.)

19 Sonyel, Dr S.R., Armenian Terrorism, London, 1985, p. 11.

20 Ibid., p. 11.


22 Mariti, p. 43.

23 Ibid., p. 44.

24 Ibid., p. 45.

25 Salvator, Archduke Louis of Austria, op. cit., p. 18.