

Terry Stavridis, *Tales From the Last Days of Anatolia*. Schaundung, IL: eBooks2go, 2020.

Reviewed by Penelope Karageorge

With wit and scholarship, historian Terry Stavridis illuminates one of the most pivotal, dramatic and confusing periods in modern Greek history with his novel, *Tales from the Last Day of Anatolia*. By creating fictional characters who speak to us directly, he offers a unique perspective on a blood-drenched and tragic period, the burning of Smyrna in 1922 and the end of Hellenism in Asia Minor. Scholars and authors have written about this time at length and in depth, and yet many questions remain unresolved. Even today feelings remain raw when Smyrna is discussed.

Stavridis's vivid characters, plain-talking but eloquent, uninhibited about expressing their political views, strike a sympathetic chord in the reader. We could be reading a letter from a great-grandmother or uncle, or the legendary great-aunt who went from carrying a beggar's bowl in Constantinople to being the star of the film *Alice in Starvingland*. Stavridis is to be commended for imagining the variety of characters who spring to life in this story of a baleful time that also proved a testimony to Greek values and survival.

The author devoted twenty years of historical research to the subject. He writes, "I examined the tragic events of Asia Minor from a strategic, economic, geopolitical, and humanitarian perspective. I have used countless documents from the British, U.S., Australian, and League of Nations archives to compose my narratives on this terrible conflict...These individuals were witnesses to earth-shattering events that changed the political landscape of the Near East and changed their lives forever. These fictional characters enjoyed rich, comfortable lifestyles before the defeat of the Greek army and losing everything in the end. They became refugees taking with them very few personal possessions to a new place of residence. Life was not easy at the start, but with determination, perseverance, and persistence, they managed to rebuild their lives."

Stavridis largely succeeds in his ambitious undertaking. The book is divided into four parts, with the first section belonging to Mihalis Veziris, the everyman who will triumph over tragedy. As a young man from a prosperous Smyrna family, he grows up with the dream of liberation from Ottoman rule. After witnessing the disastrous failure of the Greeks in 1919, he escapes to the USA to join his brother. Stoical, hardworking and fatalistic, he had hobnobbed with the elite but he's just as ready to serve up moussaka in Astoria – assuring diners it's from a secret family recipe. He recounts the Smyrna disaster from afar, searching for his parents through various agencies, relying on *The National Herald* and the *Atlantis* for information.

He contributes \$200 to President Harding's appeal to help the Greeks. He receives his naturalization papers. "Wow! Holding an American passport was like holding a badge of honor...My beautiful Smyrna will remain forever etched in my heart. The one thing that pleased me was the abdication of Constantine and the execution of the royalist politicians, including military officers. They deserved what they got. Overall, America has been kind to me...The enormous pain of all was losing my parents in 1922. I never got a chance to say a final goodbye."

Melina Panayotides, a refugee from the Black Sea City of Trebizond, reflects the situation of thousands of exiles today. Banished by the Turkish army, she marches with her two children to an unknown destination. Ultimately an overcrowded ship takes them to Piraeus, a tent by the Acropolis, and a two-drachma a day allowance. Thrilled with freedom, Melina happily rises early to forage for wood for a pot-bellied stove, ignores insults, bonds with fellow refugees, takes her kids to the beach, finds an old sewing machine and sets up a business.

She puts down her pen in 1960 vowing "never again to write in my diary," but not until she has expressed her views on the much-admired Venizelos. "I know he was regarded as a national hero, especially by fellow Cretans, and many from Asia Minor. I respected him as a national leader, but he did nothing for us. He told our delegation in Paris to join up with the Armenians instead, and the Greek army never came to protect us. Enough said about Venizelos."

To the author's credit, he invents a Turk, Ahmet Kaner, who had lived side by side with Greek neighbors in Smyrna. "We didn't care much about politics. How we loved playing hopscotch and hide and seek." But hearing rumors of the Greek army approaching, his "father was horrified at the prospect of our former enemy taking control. I remember Father saying it was the war that brought out his lousy blood towards Greece...I remember hearing shots ringing out as the Greek army marched down the main street of Izmir. All hell broke loose as Turkish businesses and properties were looted and destroyed by our local Greek compatriots. Some of our Turkish friends were killed in this horrible episode. No one ever found out who fired the first shot."

Perhaps the best fleshed-out character in Stavridis's story is Harry Mulvaney, an ardent philhellene, born in Fairview, New York, a college graduate with a degree in Greek and Roman literature. He goes to work for the *Chicago Times Herald* in 1886 and gets to know "Greek boys who toiled long hours to earn enough to pay their rent and remit money to their parents in Greece...I was to learn firsthand the racism, discrimination and xenophobia these poor Greeks faced in America."

President Grover Cleveland invites Mulvaney to be the U.S. Consul in Greece, and he's off to Athens, a friendship with King George I, the discovery of Greek antiquity and the first Olympic games. "At last the Greeks heard their national anthem being played and sang along with it. It was a fantastic moment and I got goose bumps hearing the Greeks sing their national song. I, too, thought I was Greek."

Throughout a career that sees Mulvaney bouncing back and forth between the USA and Greece, he remains constantly aware of the ongoing conflicts and dutifully makes note. But he stands back, writes several books about Greece and ancient Greece, and his own experience in Greece. His books sell well and he becomes a major speaking celebrity. Renown brings him the position of US General Counsel in Greece in early 1905. "I was thrilled to be back in the land of Pericles. I continued my private visits to the palace discussing the major political events of the day with King George. We sipped our brandy and smoked our Havana cigars until late into the evening before heading back to the legation."

He moves on to posts in Constantinople, Thessaloniki, and Smyrna, marrying the daughter of a Smyrna merchant, thoroughly enjoying the cultures and variety of people he meets. He calls the political situation in Greece "fluid." Well-intended, he loves Greece but the reality of Greece eludes him. With Smyrna on the brink of disaster, he persists in wishful thinking rather than making a move to request American support. "A cataclysm of biblical proportions was about to descend upon Smyrna. I knew things were neither good nor bad for the Greek army. My feeling was that they could hold their own against the Kemalists for some time to come. How wrong I was. The Kemalists drove them out of Asia and Smyrna went up in flames within a few days of the Kemalist occupation."

Stavridis creates more characters with their own special tales of tragedy and survival. A young Greek witnesses his family's brutal murder before escaping to the Pontic Mountains to become a guerilla. An American relief worker, "witness to the worst humanitarian disaster in the annals of human history," establishes a Greek orphanage in Athens.

Orphan Alik Swann provides the book's Hollywood ending. She roves Constantinople with a beggar's bowl until discovered by a New York socialite making a promotional film *Alice in Starvingland*. Alik stars in the film, comes to the United States.,

is adopted by her benefactor, earns a college degree and meets and marries the man of her dreams, an Arthur Murray dance instructor living in Astoria.

Stavridis's final witness tells a bitter tale of a happy life as a member of a loving family destroyed in the Smyrna inferno. The lone survivor, he stands weeping on the quay until an American professor pulls him aboard his boat and ultimately brings him to the United States.

Author Stavridis, born in Cairo, Egypt to Greek parents, migrated with them to Australia. He is an academic/author/historian/public speaker/ and freelance writer. The author of several books, his main interests are the Asia Minor campaign and disaster, Middle East History, the Assyrian and Armenian genocides, Greece in the Balkan Wars 1912-13, and the First World War, enthusiasms that serve him well as background for *Tales from the Last Days of Anatolia*.

The author creates characters who spring to life from the ashes of Smyrna and play their parts on history's stage. It would be interesting to see a dramatic staging with actors performing the roles, and it seems like a natural for today's dramatic Zoom world. Regardless, Stavridis's book should intrigue anyone interested in learning more about a fascinating and heartbreaking period.

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