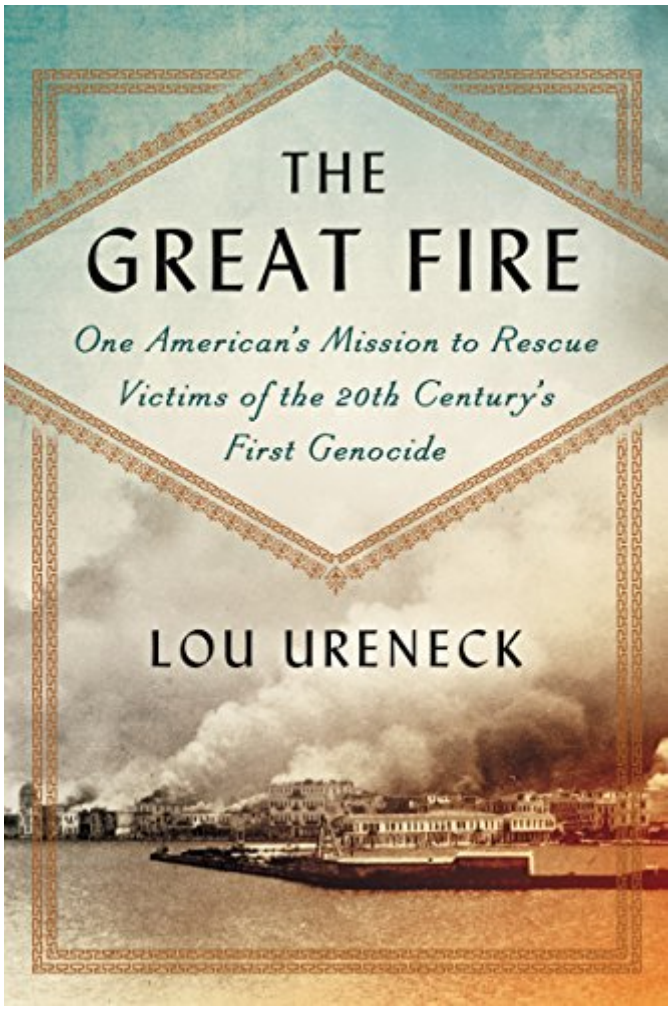
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Smyrna, September 1922: One American's Mission To Rescue Victims Of The 20th Century's First Genocide



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Synopsis

The harrowing story of a Methodist Minister and a principled American naval officer who helped rescue more than 250,000 refugees during the genocide of Armenian and Greek ChristiansÃ¢â ¬â •a tale of bravery, morality, and politics, published to coincide with the genocideÃ¢â ¬â„¢s centennial.The year was 1922: World War I had just come to a close, the Ottoman Empire was in decline, and Asa Jennings, a YMCA worker from upstate New York, had just arrived in the quiet coastal city of Smyrna to teach sports to boys. Several hundred miles to the east in TurkeyÃ¢â ¬â„¢s interior, tensions between Greeks and Turks had boiled over into deadly violence. Mustapha Kemal, now known as Ataturk, and his Muslim army soon advanced into Smyrna, a Christian city, where a half a million terrified Greek and Armenian refugees had fled in a desperate attempt to escape his troops. Turkish soldiers proceeded to burn the city and rape and kill countless Christian refugees. Unwilling to leave with the other American civilians and determined to get Armenians and Greeks out of the doomed city, Jennings worked tirelessly to feed and transport the thousands of people gathered at the cityÃ¢â ¬â„¢s Quay.With the help of the brilliant naval officer and Kentucky gentleman Halsey Powell, and a handful of others, Jennings commandeered a fleet of unoccupied Greek ships and was able to evacuate a quarter million innocent peopleÃ¢â ¬â •an amazing humanitarian act that has been lost to history, until now. Before the horrible events in Turkey were complete, Jennings had helped rescue a million people.By turns harrowing and inspiring, The Great Fire uses eyewitness accounts, documents, and survivor narratives to bring this episodeÃ¢â ¬â •extraordinary for its brutality as well as its heroismÃ¢â ¬â •to life.Ã Â

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Customer Reviews

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. While the book is rich in historical fact, it reads like a suspenseful novel.It is a riveting account of the tragic events that took place 100 years ago in Turkey after WWI. The Turkish Nationalists sought to violently rid Turkey of Greeks and Armenians, culminating in the burning and destruction of the city of Smyrna. The book focuses on the relief efforts of two individuals, a missionary and a US Naval commander, who worked against all odds to save almost a million refugees. As the Turkish Nationalist army approaches Smyrna and the two men frantically devise a plan, the suspense builds and it becomes harder and harder to put the book down.Ureneck constructs multidimensional portraits of the major figures involved in this catastrophe which help us to better understand their actions. He also includes personal stories of some of the survivors which add a unique human dimension. Researching the book, Ureneck visited the actual sites where these events occurred. This enablesd him to paint vivid descriptions of the landscape and locales.Though there are both heroes and villains, in the end it is the story of the heroes that rose to the occasion using every available resource and against all odds saved many more lives than anyone could have thought possible. It is a true story of the triumph of the human spirit.

My mother used to say to my brothers and I as we wolfed down dinner, "You all eat like a bunch of starving Armenians!" Why were they starving Armenians, and not, as in my youth, Biafrans, Ethiopians or Bangladeshis? Because, as I would learn, even though the events of this book take place before her birth, the plight of Anatolian Christians would concern Americans for the better part of a decade and become a part of the American consciousness at least until the Depression. Americans, in unions, clubs, parishes, schools and groups formed expressly for Armenian relief, would respond to successive waves of Turkey’s oppression of its Christian minorities with a zeal that would establish America’s reputation for generosity in the face of humanitarian crises.Two Americans, Asa Jennings -- a slight, hunchbacked, sickly missionary in a straw boater, largely

ignored by a boss who wondered why he was burdened with such a subordinate -- and Halsey Powell -- a widowed Navy officer from Kentucky who subtly resisted pressure from his pro-Turkey admiral in Constantinople -- are the heroes of this narrative. Jennings, who gives shelter to Christians in the port city of Smyrna as the advancing Turkish army robs, rapes, beats and starves its Ottoman minorities while rounding up its military-age men for firing squads or death marches to concentration camps in the interior. Jennings, who on his 45th birthday decides that God had spared him when he was deathly ill years before for ... for what? For this. To save tens, eventually hundreds of thousands of Greeks and Armenians. He uses his powers of persuasion and organization to bend parts of the U.S. Navy and the Greek government to his will. Or His will, as Jennings no doubt saw it.Despite the resistance of some parts of the Navy and the State Department, the Americans end up doing the right thing, with help from the Greeks, the British, some of the other Allied powers, and even the occasional Turk. The individual American sailor comes off very well in this story, displaying courage and compassion in guarding safe houses and trying to mitigate the cruelties of the Turkish soldiers as refugees queue up to be loaded onto ships for resettlement.In the right hands, this could make a hell of a movie. One cannot help but think of the parallels to "Schindler's List."I found an occasional mistake, such as the date given for President McKinley's assassination. It's rather like bad note in the midst of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Yes, it's a clinker, but it's still a hell of a symphony.Lou Ureneck has given us a dandy narrative of a crisis of nearly a century ago and has shown us how Americans responded. The civil war in Syria is leading to the greatest refugee crisis since World War II. I'm not sure it's a stretch to say that this book begs the question: How should we respond today?

A must read for anyone interested in learning more about turn of the 20th century Middle East history, the rise of the Turkish Republic, the massacres and persecution of Greeks at the hands of Turks and the Armenian Genocide carried out by sultan Abdulhamid during the last days of the Ottoman Empire, the Young Turk government followed by Mustafa Kemal and his cabal.Ureneck gives a factual account of the events that led to the conflagration that destroyed a once prized city and so many of its Christian citizens. He weaves a story drawn from well researched and fully documented facts that not only educates but fully engages the reader with personal accounts of tragedy, suffering, courage, heroism and great sacrifice. This is a compelling historical event that needed to be told that the author handled masterfully.Greeks, Armenians and anyone interested in genocide will not only learn a great deal but will be deeply moved by Ureneck's poignant account of the events of September, 1922. This book will not disappoint and may well leave a lingering mark on

the psyche of the reader.

This was an absolutely intense look at a historic event about which I knew little. Although I was familiar with the Armenian genocide, I did not know about the post WWI events covered in this book and the attempt by defeated Ottoman Turks to exterminate the Christian population remaining in Asia Minor. Sad to say, all I thought as I read was that not much has changed in that peninsula called Asia Minor. Turkey is going through a new period of a return to a militant nationalism and has an egotistical, power hungry, zenophobic leader who will stop at nothing to achieve his ends - so much like the Turkey post 1919. Reading about the refugees fleeing the advancing Ottoman armies was like reading the front pages of today's newspapers and seeing the Syrian, Afghan, Iraqui refugees crying out for help. I was encouraged, however, to learn about the unknown and historically unappreciated minister from upstate New York who together with a couple of brave US Naval officers defied the odds and did make a difference in this historic event. I put this book on an "absolute must read" list. Not one boring minute in it - reads like fiction.

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