

# Historic pilgrimage to Pontus

BY George Gilson

WHEN Pontian Greeks left Turkey in 1922-23, they took nothing with them but the scars from the deaths of tens of thousands of their number during their forceful eviction and forced labour, carried out over the previous seven years by the Young Turks and Kemalist forces. The deaths were recognised by the Greek parliament as a genocide in 1994.

On August 15, the feast of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, thousands of their descendants from several countries will make the pilgrimage to the Panagia Soumela monastery in the Turkish region of Trebizond for the first liturgy in 88 years, to be conducted by Ecumenical Patriarch Vartholomeos.

The monastery, which was once home to the famed icon of the Virgin Mary that bears its name, by tradition one of the few painted by the Evangelist Luke, is the cradle of Pontic Greek religious belief and national identity, and a point of reference for all Pontians. Its construction began in AD 385.

Under a 1930 agreement between Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos and Turkish leader Ismet Inonu, Turkey allowed the legendary icon, the monastery's chalice from Emperor Manuel Komnenos, and its Holy Bible to be transported to Greece, after two aged monks revealed the crypt in which they hid the objects in 1922. They are now at the new Panagia Soumela Monastery on Mt Vermio, southwest of the town of Veria in Macedonia, where thousands of pilgrims flock each year.

The historic liturgy was proposed by



Vartholomeos and finally approved in June by a joint decision of the Turkish ministries of culture and tourism, the interior and foreign affairs; it will be an annual event.

Ankara's move is widely considered a significant good-will gesture towards both the patriarchate and the estimated 1.5 to 2 million Pontian refugees in Greece. But it is also intended to burnish Turkey's European image, and the economic windfall from the religious tourism is considered significant.

Ivan Savvidis, president of the International Confederation of Pontic Greeks, also pressured the Turkish government to allow the liturgy. A wealthy businessman and a member of Vladimir Putin's party in the Russian state Duma, Savvidis organised a liturgy with pilgrims from Russia and Greece in 2009, but local authorities stopped it.

## Pilgrimage

The monastery is currently a museum, and Turkish officials said that religious ceremonies there were forbidden by law. Savvidis threatened to take the issue to the European court. The busi-

nessman reportedly reminded the Turkish government that he had funded the completion of a mosque in Russia and had invited many Turks to the opening, and he demanded reciprocity.

Between 3,000 to 5,000 pilgrims are expected to make the pilgrimage from Greece, and thousands more from the large Pontic Greek communities of Australia, the United States and Germany.

Georgios Parharidis, the president of Greece's Pan-Pontian Federation, told the Athens News that every effort is being made to keep politics out of the religious ceremony. "This is neither the place nor the moment to refer to the genocide. I ask the many thousands of pilgrims from around the world to be very careful not to provoke any incidents."

"Turkey will have substantial financial benefits from the tourism after this positive step, which suggests further democratisation and helps its European Union membership application. Greece and Pontic Greeks support Turkey's EU accession. I believe Turkey could even take the giant step of recognising the Pontian genocide. Friendly bilateral relations can survive

in the long run only if they are based on the truth," Parharidis added.

Savvas Kalenteridis, a Pontian who publishes the newspaper Pontic Opinion in Greece but is best known as the intelligence agent who accompanied Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan from Athens to Kenya, told this newspaper that the financial windfall will be substantial for the city of Trebizond.

He says that the support of local officials and businessmen for the pilgrimage played a role in Ankara's granting permission, and that local land prices have skyrocketed since Unesco began funding restoration of the monastery as a tentative world heritage site. He adds that the mayor of the nearby city of Macka asked that the government permit liturgies on other holidays, and that a priest be assigned to receive pilgrims year-round.

## Exclusive

As for reactions from Grey Wolves and other Turkish ultra-nationalists, Kalenteridis believes these will not be significant. Although the Turkish Isci Partisi (or Workers Party, which offers a mix of Marxist rhetoric and nationalism) filed a lawsuit to ban the liturgy, Kalenteridis argues the Grey Wolves organisation is weak in that area of Trebizond, and that the government now largely controls the "deep state", which gives the organisation its marching orders.

Turkish security will be draconian, with armed officers all along the route to the monastery. Only 600 people received invitations to be in the church area, while thousands of others will watch from giant screens outside.

To Vima religion reporter Maria Antoniadou, a Pontian, will travel to the monastery. "At long last we can go to conduct a liturgy without fear. For us, this moment shows the possibility of cooperation between the Greek and Turkish peoples," she told the Athens News.

# Dimitrios Ioannidis, who toppled Greek junta, dies

ATHENS, Greece — Dimitrios Ioannidis, the feared security chief who led a counter-coup against Greece's military leaders and provoked Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in 1974, has died. He was 87.

Ioannidis, who was jailed for life for his part in the 1967-74 dictatorship, died Monday in an Athens hospital, a day after experiencing breathing problems in his prison cell, the justice ministry said.

He had spent the past 35 years out of the public eye in a special wing of the maximum security Korydallos prison, which was built during the military regime.

As head of the brutal ESA military police, Brigadier Ioannidis was a key figure in the military dictatorship that seized power on April 21, 1967 after years of political instability.

The ultraconservative dictators imposed martial law and cracked down heavily on political opponents, imprisoning or exiling thousands, many of whom were tortured by ESA.



The junta was condemned in the West, and the U.S. temporarily banned arms sales to Greece. But a 1971 visit by Vice President Spiro Agnew, who was of Greek descent, was viewed by many as tacit approval of the dictatorship. This led to a surge in anti-American sentiment in Greece, and in 1999 then U.S. president Bill Clinton conceded that Washington had failed its "obligation to support democracy."

Following a student pro-democracy uprising that the army crushed in November 1973, dictator George Papadopoulos tried to slowly introduce some democratic reforms.

But army hard-liners, led by Ioannidis, staged a successful counter-coup on Nov. 25 1973 and ruled Greece with increasing harshness and incompetence for the next eight months.

Although Ioannidis appointed a military president and a civilian prime minister, he was the real man in control, and became known

as the "invisible dictator." Under his regime, relations with neighboring Turkey — as well as President Makarios' government in Cyprus — quickly deteriorated. In mid July 1974, the military overthrew Makarios, prompting Turkey to exercise its rights as a guarantor power on the Mediterranean island and invade on July 20. The attack caught Athens unprepared, and the dictatorship ended with a return to civilian government after four shambolic days in which Greece came close to war with Turkey.

A second Turkish advance in August gave Ankara control of nearly 40 percent of the island, whose continued partition along ethnic lines remains a major thorn in gradually thawing relations between NATO allies Greece and Turkey.

The coup leaders were tried in 1975 and jailed in Korydallos. Papadopoulos died in 1999, aged 80. The only surviving senior junta figure is Brig. Stylianos Pattakos, who has been freed from jail.

In 2008, authorities rejected an application by Ioannidis for temporary release from prison on health grounds. No funeral arrangements for Ioannidis have been announced.

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