



FLASHPOINT HAGIA SOPHIA

BRIAN CROKE

ROUTLEDGE

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Istanbul's Hagia Sophia ('Holy Wisdom'), or Ayasofya, is one of the world's most visited buildings. Yet, few visitors have any idea of its long and complex story, or why it has always been a place where history, religion and politics collide. In July 2020, Turkish President Erdoğan set off an explosive controversy by announcing that Hagia Sophia would now be modified into a mosque. This decision provoked fierce criticism from UNESCO because Hagia Sophia was enjoying World Heritage Site benefits. The United States, the European Union, Russia and Greece all chimed in. However, Erdoğan's action was wildly popular in Turkey, with its 99% Muslim population. Why is Hagia Sophia so important to modern Turkey? Why this provocative decision, and why now? How could all the international critics be ignored? Why does the world care so much about this old building? Why should it continue to care?

This book explains President Erdoğan's controversial decision in terms of Turkey's national, independent and Islamic politics, and as a response to the mosque massacre in Christchurch in March 2019 when his life was threatened by the gunman. Any consideration of Hagia Sophia's present and future also requires appreciation of the almost 1,500-year old story of this architectural marvel, from its inception as a church in 537 to its configuration as a mosque in 2020 and beyond. Because all world heritage sites depend on national management, Hagia Sophia will remain Turkey's responsibility, but the international community is watching to ensure Turkey honours Hagia Sophia's entire heritage, from the 6th century to the 21st century.

Brian Croke is an educator and historian with a special interest in Istanbul's Byzantine heritage. He is an Honorary Associate in Ancient History at the University of Sydney and is the author of *Christian Chronicles and Byzantine History, 5th–6th Centuries* (1992), *The Chronicle of Marcellinus* (1995), *Count Marcellinus* (2001), and *Roman Emperors in Context* (2021).



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Brian Croke

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INTRODUCTION

On 10 July 2020, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President of Turkey, delivered a televised address to his nation. It was long-anticipated. He was now announcing the conversion of Istanbul's Hagia Sophia ('Ayasofya' in Turkish, 'Holy Wisdom' in English) from a museum to a mosque. The tall Erdoğan stood rather solemnly alongside a large picture of the interior of Hagia Sophia to his right. To his left, he was flanked by his two customary guards, the Turkish and Presidential flags. In between, hung part of a scroll assigning ownership of Hagia Sophia to Sultan Mehmet II (ruled 1451–1481). This document formed the basis of a court decision, earlier that same day, to return the building to its 15th-century function as a mosque. From now on, for five variable times each day, Hagia Sophia will become the closed and priority preserve of correctly attired Muslims only. As with all mosques, it will be mainly for men, with only a small section marked out for women. President Erdoğan was, in his own view, merely asserting his nation's sovereign right. Anyone objecting, especially westerners invoking 'religious freedom' or 'international heritage', could therefore be ignored. It was a decision most people inside Turkey had long been urging on their President. Indeed, they had wondered what inexplicable force kept holding him back. Outside Turkey, however, most had hoped the President would find the decision too challenging, or politically unnecessary, as long as Turkey was still seeking to become more European.

Predictably, then, after President Erdoğan's address, there was widespread acclamation and enthusiasm in Turkey for what so many regarded as an inevitable and overdue decision. Outside Turkey, there was mainly dismay and criticism. Both inside and outside the nation's boundaries, it seemed like the day Turkey finally stopped pretending to be European. Turkey had snubbed its nose not only at UNESCO, which bestowed the benefit of World Heritage declaration on Hagia Sophia in 1985 but also at the United States, its NATO ally since 1952. So

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too it ignored the European Union as well as the Christian Orthodox countries of Russia and Greece, Hagia Sophia's most vociferous advocates against conversion to a mosque. For centuries, both Greece and Russia had dreamt in vain of being the ones to convert Hagia Sophia back to an Orthodox Christian church; for decades, Erdoğan and his supporters had dreamt in vain of converting it back to a mosque. Now, after 17 years of wrestling with the issue of what to do about Hagia Sophia, Erdoğan looked a palpably relieved man. His decision was finally being revealed and he intended to monopolise the credit.

This is the story of that controversial decision about Hagia Sophia in 2020. It explains what led up to it, how it was executed and what its implications may be, not only for Turkey but also for the rest of the world. The controversy over Hagia Sophia comes at a time when international agencies and advocates are struggling to secure more binding national commitments to heritage and cultural values. Istanbul's world heritage building is still standing nearly 1,500 years after it was first opened to the praying public, and is the most visited monument in the historic city. Its own history is long and complex. In recent years, notwithstanding an admission charge and the fixed hours of a museum, millions of visitors have entered every year and left in the sort of appreciative admiration suggested by their different guidebooks. In fact, in 2019, over three million people queued to enter the building. It was the most visited site in Turkey and probably the best known of all Turkish sites to foreigners. How, and to what extent, they will continue to do so remains to be seen, now the same building is officially 'The Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque' (Ayasofya-i Kebir Cami-i Şerifi).

Hagia Sophia was originally built in a remarkably short period between 532 and 537 as the church for the Roman emperor Justinian (reigned 527–565) and the patriarch of Constantinople, as the city was then called. When the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II fulfilled a prophetic imperative by capturing Constantinople in May 1453, one of his first actions was to enter Hagia Sophia where many of the local inhabitants had fled for security and safety. Mehmet 'the Conqueror' spared the refugees and enabled their Christian life and liturgy to continue elsewhere, while he took proud possession of Hagia Sophia and had an imam proclaim there and then that 'There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet'. For Mehmet and his army, Hagia Sophia symbolised the Ottoman conquest and control of Constantinople which he immediately enforced by turning the building into a mosque. Few modifications were required, The most conspicuous inside was the off-centre *mihrab*, pointing the way to the holy city of Mecca. The most conspicuous outside was the addition of a temporary wooden minaret that called the Ottomans to prayer. All the Christian fittings (altar, books, sacred vessels, icons, statues, mosaics) were dispatched, melted down or covered up. To imagine the original church today without its minarets requires closing your eyes, or digital manipulation of an image.

Over the centuries, Hagia Sophia has withstood numerous earthquakes and conflagrations that have devastated its neighbourhood, as well as invading armies and political decisions that have transformed its character and purpose. Yet, it is

still standing. From 537 to 1453, it had been the Roman/Byzantine emperor's imperial church, except for the period from 1204 to 1261 during which the western European crusaders captured the city and looted its churches. They made Hagia Sophia their own cathedral. From 1453 it became the Ottoman Sultan's mosque, and so it remained for as long as Constantinople remained the capital of the Ottoman empire. With the demise of the empire in the aftermath of the First World War, uncertainty surrounded the future of Hagia Sophia and the city. Among the occupying forces at Constantinople were strong advocates for turning the Ottoman mosque back into a Christian church. By the time the last Sultan left the city in 1924, however, that opportunity was lost.

In 1923, the Ottoman regime was replaced by the new Republic of Turkey. Istanbul, as it now became, found itself superseded by Ankara. Moving the capital from the more polyglot city of the Ottoman sultans to the much smaller but distinctly Turkish and Anatolian Ankara was the decision of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938). It was part of his nationalist Turkish agenda to emphasise the link to a longer and different Anatolian past. Also part of his agenda was the westernisation and secularisation of Turkish society and politics, accompanied by the privatisation of religion. Hence, Atatürk had Hagia Sophia closed as a functioning mosque in 1931. It reopened to the public in 1935 not as a mosque, but as a museum. One clear advantage of Hagia Sophia as a museum is that it enabled the restoration of its fabric, including the ongoing unveiling of Byzantine mosaics by the *Byzantine Institute of America*, which had commenced in 1930. The mosaics had been hastily covered over by whitewash in earlier times, then yet again following a restoration process in the 1840s. This sort of activity aligned with Atatürk's vision of what Western science and philanthropy could bring to such an historic city by those interested primarily in its pre-Ottoman history as Byzantine Constantinople.

In recent years, researchers from all over the world have been able to investigate various aspects of Hagia Sophia. Using a variety of modern technology, they have surveyed and analysed its construction (walls, floor, dome), its marble and glass, its light and sound, and several other aspects such as what lies beneath it and around it. As a result, more is now known than ever before about how the original church was designed and built in the 530s, how it has survived, how it was repaired at various intervals, how it looked in the natural light through its many windows, and how it sounded when a cantor or choir was in full voice beneath its great dome. When UNESCO declared Hagia Sophia as part of Istanbul's World Heritage Site in 1985 that seemed to provide the ultimate seal of recognition, safety and continuity for the museum and its worldwide community of researchers. Yet, Turkish society and Turkish politics kept on changing. At the same time, continued world heritage status always depended on an individual nation's commitment and effort. By 2020, resurgent nationalism everywhere, east and west, was posing a challenge to international heritage organisations such as UNESCO. When tested, it proved utterly impotent against a resolute Turkish president.

The progressive de-secularisation of Turkish society from the 1980s, accompanied by a turning away from the west, provided momentum for the idea that

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Hagia Sophia museum should be converted into a mosque, just like other mosques in Istanbul before it. As long ago as the 1960s, many Turkish leaders and potential leaders began to take up Hagia Sophia's conversion from museum to mosque as a political cause. The pious Erdoğan was one of them. The cause of Hagia Sophia then became interwoven with his expanding political agenda and expanding political career, from Mayor of Istanbul (1994–1998) to his country's Prime Minister (2003–2014) then, via a major constitutional modification, to its all-powerful President (2014+). Those monitoring freedom of religion in Turkey had been anxiously recording for some years the increasing public mention of the possibility of Hagia Sophia becoming a mosque, given its symbolic connection to the conquest of the Christian city in 1453.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has made it his life's project to dismantle the various building blocks of the secular and western direction established for Turkey by Atatürk in the 1920s and 1930s. For this quest, he drew inspiration in his youth in the 1970s from avowed Islamists and opponents of Kemal Atatürk, such as the poet Necip Fazıl Kızaküreck and the politician Necbettin Erbakan. The relegation of Islamic faith and practice from public life should never have been allowed to happen, and it needs to be restored. That has been the argument. Much the same argument was developed for changing the status of Hagia Sophia as a museum. For a Turkish society where more than 99% of the population is Muslim, the museum symbolised what is secular, western and offensive. Despite occasional denials about his intention to convert Hagia Sophia to a mosque, suspicions refused to be satisfied.

Erdoğan was plain enough. The nationalist assertion of any political leader is difficult to dismiss: 'We Turks have a right to make our own decisions. It's our building. We acquired it by right of conquest in 1453'. Finally, while campaigning early in 2019 as President, but in Turkey's local government elections, he linked a vote for the 'Justice and Development Party' (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* or AKP), which he had created and still leads, to the conversion of Hagia Sophia from a museum into a mosque. At a rally a few days later, the President appeared to be stung by a recent (15 March 2019) mosque massacre in Christchurch, New Zealand, and the gunman's pointed threats to Hagia Sophia and to Erdoğan himself. Suddenly, and unexpectedly, he promised his enthusiastic supporters: 'After the election, God willing, we will rename it a mosque'. In other words, whatever the mayoral electoral outcome in Istanbul, here at last was a national decision on Hagia Sophia. The national leader's mind was made up in March 2019, not mid-2020.

This is the story of a single Istanbul building, and a political decision in 2020 to change its status from a museum to a mosque, from an open and universal function to an exclusive and local one. It is an historian's perspective. An anthropologist or sociologist or political scientist might well view the same events and people from a different angle. Central to the story are not only Turkey's President Erdoğan as the key decision-maker, but also the people who most influenced its fabric and its use throughout the centuries: its designers (Anthemius and Isidore, 6th century), its

modifiers (Sultan Mehmet II, 1450s; Sinan the architect, 1560s), its repairers and restorers (emperor Michael VIII, 1260s; Fossati brothers, 1840s; Thomas Whittemore 1930s). Above all, this book is focused on the events of 2019/2020 leading up to and immediately following President Erdoğan's unilateral repudiation of all international opposition to changing the status of Hagia Sophia. His decision was a long time coming although precipitated, eventually, by the massacre of Muslims at prayer in Christchurch in the course of which he was targeted personally by the murderer (Chapter 1).

The conversion decision is best understood as an integral part of an ongoing movement to systematically reverse the secularisation of Turkey promoted by the founder of the modern nation, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Chapter 2). Although this is not the first such decision involving the status of Hagia Sophia, Erdoğan made sure it would be the last, by presenting it as an essential stepping stone to the future greatness of Turkey (Chapters 3 and 4). The international reaction (Chapter 5) was immediate and direct. To trace briefly, the history of the building (Chapters 6, 7 and 8) illustrates how often it has found itself at a political crossroads in its nearly 1,500-year life so far. These chapters have the added benefit of filling in its life as a Byzantine and Latin church for the first 900 years, which is mainly elided or ignored by President Erdoğan and others in justifying the contemporary use of Hagia Sophia. Indeed, systematically suppressing Istanbul's Byzantine past has become an increasingly manifest component of Turkish public policy.

Nor is Hagia Sophia the only building to find itself at the centre of a cultural struggle that is seen differently through overlapping national and international views of freedom of religion and worship, as well as through clashing national and international approaches to heritage. Current questions of national sovereignty, and international responsibility, for the curatorship of important heritage buildings are highlighted by a better understanding of the complexities of other cases (Chapter 9): the Parthenon at Athens (first a temple, then a Church, then a mosque), the Pantheon in Rome (first a temple, then a church), and the Mezquita in Cordoba (first a mosque, then a church), as well as similar controversies in other cultures and places such as India.

Finally, there has been wide and outspoken interest in the future status of Hagia Sophia, but what are the implications? Now that the building is clearly a mosque and will almost certainly remain so for the foreseeable future, those most opposed to its change of status, political and religious leaders from Washington to Moscow, from Paris to the Vatican, will need to accommodate themselves to the new Hagia Sophia. As for the building's daily visitors, they will just have to negotiate their visit around prayer times and ensure they are appropriately covered. More problematic, however, will be access for genuine scholars and researchers who know the story of the building and want to know more about it, particularly its Byzantine phase. For them, Hagia Sophia may now be out of bounds. Instead, they will probably need to rely on the many close studies undertaken between c.1930 and 2020.

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Just as in 537, 1453 and 1934, so in 2020, Hagia Sophia has entered another era of its long life. If it is to reach yet another new phase in future, it must continue to be preserved and to inspire, as it surely will. Above all, outside Turkey, 'The Grand Mosque of Hagia Sophia' will need to be appreciated as much as the Hagia Sophia museum has been since it opened in 1935. Presupposing Hagia Sophia's unharmed survival against the unpredictable forces of vengeance, malice and earthquake, all eyes will be on Istanbul in 2037. They will be watching to ensure the 1,500th anniversary of one of the world's most venerable and familiar buildings is celebrated suitably and inclusively.

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TRIGGERING CONTROVERSY, 2019

Most of the Islamic world was asleep, and it was late Thursday night in America too, when a horrific event started unfolding in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 15 March 2019. It was already 1.40 pm on Friday afternoon in Christchurch, prayer time at the two local mosques, Al Noor and the Linwood Islamic Centre. As the world kept spinning to reach the Muslim prayer time in Sydney, Djakarta and Singapore, then Lahore, Dubai, and Teheran, then Ankara, Tripoli and London, the news slowly emerged from Christchurch: two mosques attacked, over 50 Muslim worshippers from ages 5 to 77 killed, many wounded, the gunman in custody, a city full of tension and grief. Christchurch, a planned English settlement of the mid-19th century in verdant volcanic country, was still recovering from a destructive earthquake in 2011 in which 185 people perished. Its Al Noor mosque, with its golden dome and its gold-tipped minaret, was built in 1985. That same year another former and future mosque, Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, was inscribed as part of a World Heritage site by the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation* (UNESCO). Al Noor had survived the earthquake intact. The Linwood Centre was more recent. In a city of migrants, those mosque murder victims represented 20 different countries. For the Muslims of Christchurch, the city was the place where they found peace and purpose. They were all refugees from the violence and insecurity of their original country – Afghanistan and Iraq, Somalia and Pakistan, Egypt, Bangladesh and Kuwait. Suddenly, the place, the time, the event, the perpetrator or perpetrators, were all a puzzle.¹

As the Friday prayers came and went across the rest of the world, a sigh of relief gradually rose. The realisation dawned that the Christchurch massacre was not, as first feared, an internationally inspired or co-ordinated event, the mere prelude to a cascade of such massacres in other places throughout the day. Then came the blame game. All the usual international suspects, such as Islamic State/Daesh and Al Qaida, were canvassed. Some claim of international responsibility was awaited, but nothing showed up. It looked increasingly like the handiwork of a solitary human being, acting alone and self-motivated after all, plain Islamophobia on the murderer's part.

The immediate news was slow and fuzzy. There is no CNN office in Christchurch, no BBC, no Aljazeera. Soon a hastily convened local police news conference confirmed

to the world that they were not dealing with a terrorist gang as originally feared, just a solitary gunman. He had calmly driven his own vehicle from one mosque to the other, cradling his arsenal and accompanied by a rapidly growing troupe of followers live on *Facebook*, streamed through his head camera. On his way to a third mosque, much further afield at the town of Ashburton, he was cornered by police and arrested. Brenton Harrison Tarrant, to give him his full name, was no fanatic who had somehow acquired automatic weapons. Instead, he was a careful and systematic planner who knew what he was doing, and why; definitely an Islamophobe, then. Before long, media outlets had acquired the *Facebook* footage, if they had not themselves been monitoring it. Some showed it with the dramatic breathlessness of breaking news. Others hesitated, or were still seeking legal advice when a moratorium dropped.

The New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, had quickly intervened to phone the Chief Operating Officer of *Facebook*, Sheryl Sandberg, of 'lean in' fame. No more *Facebook* footage, Sandberg guaranteed. Just in advance of the massacre, Ardern's office had received a lengthy manifesto from the gunman. It was passed immediately to security police. The manifesto had been sent elsewhere too. The police reported it as an extensive and prejudiced rant against Muslims by a white supremacist, but with all sorts of historical references. Here was a man with many axes to grind. Yet, for those in the know beyond Christchurch this manifesto had a telling name, 'The Great Replacement'. Moreover, it contained the clues to explaining the attack of a fanatical gunman on Muslims in their mosque at Friday prayer (Sparrow 2019). The 'replacement' in question was what he saw as the eventual overwhelming everywhere of white Caucasian and Christian races with migrant Muslims ('invaders') and their higher birth-rates; Islamophobia confirmed. In his manifesto, he asked the rhetorical question 'Was the attack "Islamophobic" in origin?' He answered frankly that there was an 'anti-Islamic motivation to the attacks' in so far as 'Islamic nations have high birth rates, regardless of race or ethnicity' and his 'want for revenge against Islam for the 1,300 years of war and devastation it has brought upon the people of the West and other peoples of the world'.

In most of the world, it was still not Friday. That explains why the news and pictures from Christchurch were rather slow to ignite. Even then, it appeared to be more curiosity than shock that such a remote and safe place could be the venue for such appalling carnage. As neighbours do, New Zealand was quick to proclaim that the gunman was not one of them, but an Australian. He was just as quickly disowned by Australia, and the whole of his country hometown, Grafton. 'He does not represent us', proclaimed a prominent local billboard greeting the various international media suddenly descending on the town in search of the gunman's friends, family, schools and childhood home. In the hours and days that followed, Prime Minister Ardern and other civic leaders were to the forefront in their demonstrations of genuine sorrow and sympathy. When the planned Hollywood movie of these events was announced in June 2021, it met with an outcry in New Zealand. Notwithstanding her conspicuous sympathy at the time, a focus on Ardern as the 'white saviour' rather than on the victims, was immediately dismissed as inappropriate, even by Ardern herself. More importantly, it was considered too soon to be casting these events on the big screen. The grief is still too raw.

In response to events in Christchurch, other governments around the world issued their own statements of regret and support for New Zealand's prompt action. 'This was an attack on Islam and Islamic values' was the common condemnation. That the murderer was taken alive seemed not to attract much notice even though it was a big investigatory advantage. In August 2020, he was tried, sentenced and imprisoned for the term of his natural life. Several nations were surprised to discover that there was no death penalty in New Zealand. For the media and governments, alas, catastrophes around the world including mass murders are daily events that come and go. Even so, most perpetrators do not usually have automatic weapons, let alone historically detailed manifestos. When they do, their bigotry becomes even more incomprehensible. So it was on this occasion too, but with one notable exception – Turkey.

Turkey's envoys to New Zealand

Within hours of word of the massacre reaching Ankara, doubtless reinforced by urgent diplomatic reports from New Zealand to the Turkish government, a high-level delegation was already winging its way to New Zealand. Aboard were the Turkish Vice President (Fuat Oktay), Foreign Minister (Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu) and other senior officials. Why? There were no New Zealanders of Turkish origin reckoned among the fatalities, although there was one in the list of wounded. The urgency was that in Ankara at least they had been pawing over the assailant's rambling manifesto, alerted no doubt by the reported insignia inscribed on his weapons. The alert was heightened with the hasty discovery by local immigration and intelligence agencies that he had twice spent time in Turkey in 2016. Soon, Turkish investigators were searching hotel records to find out more about his stays. At the same time, they might easily have discovered that in 2016 and 2018 he had spent much longer periods in Greece and in Central and Southern European countries traditionally hostile to Turkey and to Muslims, as well as in Russia and Armenia. Their focus was on Turkey. Above all, there was the gunman's explicit call to exterminate the current Turkish President as 'the leader of one of the oldest enemies of our people and the leader of the largest Islamic group within Europe'. By 'Europe' he really meant NATO which Turkey had joined in 1952. Earlier in his manifesto he expressed the need to 'drive a wedge between the nations of NATO that are European and the Turks that also make a part of the NATO forces, thereby turning NATO once more into a united European army and pushing Turkey once more back to the true position of a foreign, enemy force'. Alarm bells rang immediately in Ankara.

What the murderer was doing from faraway Christchurch was actually sending a clear message to one Muslim nation and its leader in particular – Turkey and its President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. First, his guns were emblazoned white with names, dates and places, some even in Cyrillic, Armenian and Georgian script, but the majority of them were Turkish and readily deciphered: 'Vienna 1683' and 'Lepanto 1571' were both European defeats of the rampant Ottoman empire

whose capital was Constantinople. ‘Tours 732’ denoted the much earlier battle at which the Frankish leader Charles Martel turned back the Islamic army from Spain. Among the other names, Miloš Obilić was credited with assassinating the Ottoman sultan in the aftermath of the Serbian battle of Kosovo in 1389; Bajo Pivljanin, Marko Popović and Novak Vujosevic, all led successful military operations against their Ottoman overlords in the 19th century, as did Feliks Kazimierz Potocki from Poland in the 17th century. Most arresting of all, however, was the conspicuous label on one of his weapons – ‘Tourkofagos’. Besides the Turks, this piqued the curiosity of the Greek government and was much commented on in the Greek media. ‘Tourkofagos’ is a very provocative and loaded word. It means, literally ‘Turk-eater’ and was made famous during the Greek war of independence from the Ottomans in the 1820s. The original ‘Turk-eater’ was the Greek revolutionary Nikitas Stamatelopoulos (1784–1849). He acquired the moniker from his spectacular, single-handed fighting against the Ottomans in 1822, armed with five swords. Four broke with lethal overuse. His fifth and final sword proved decisive in beating off the enemy.

Soon, it transpired that the Christchurch murderer had made several trips to the Balkans in recent years visiting battle-sites and museums such as that of Marko Popović, a Serb general who fought against the Ottomans in the 1870s. People interviewed in Bulgaria expressed surprise that someone from so far away would bother to come to their country, but he had a motive and he planned well ahead. His visit to the location of the Russian-Ottoman battle of 1877–8 at Pleven, for example, was booked five months in advance. Then he took the winding road up to the summit of the Shipka Pass where an impressive stone memorial celebrates the Russian and Bulgarian victories over the Ottomans in 1877. In March 2019, police were making inquiries about Tarrant’s visit to all these places. So too, his movements were now being tracked in Romania where the same war is known as the ‘Romanian War of Independence’, that is, independence from the Ottoman hegemony in 1877. The modern Ottomans in Ankara remained anxious.

Clearly, the Christchurch murderer understood the region’s long and tortured history of conflict between Christians and Muslims, between national and imperial interests. Particularly fresh and live for him was the most recent conflict in the 1990s. Besides his championing of the anti-Muslim forces, he approached the Christchurch mosques, weapons in hand, blaring out from a personal speaker the most provocative Balkan war song of the 1990s. It extolled the deeds of the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić who was later (2016) convicted by the United Nations Tribunal as a war criminal responsible for the murder of thousands of Muslims and Croats, men and boys, at Srebrenica in 1995. With a hero like Karadžić, the Christchurch murderer was bound to attract immediate attention in the Balkans, not to mention Turkey, even if most of the connections were lost on the media and the New Zealand police at the time. Nor are they analysed in the 800+ pages of the Royal Commission *Report* (December 2020). More familiar would have been the author’s acknowledgment of other recent mass murderers before him, a Norwegian white supremacist Anders Breivik (2011) and Alexandre Bissonnette (2017) in Quebec,

Canada, and terrorists such as Luca Traini (2018) in Macerata, Italy. Even Oswald Mosley, England's notorious fascist leader from the 1930s, rated a mention. What struck the American media in particular was Tarrant's claim to have been tipped over the edge into taking violent action by listening to controversial young black American commentator Candace Owens. As an aspiring politician, it was publicity, then media scrutiny, Owens could have done without.

The focus of reporting on the Christchurch massacre, however, was not on the gunman's Islamophobia, nor his historical references which remained a mystery to most, nor his self-declared heroes, nor the deleterious impact of higher Muslim birth-rates on European society, the so-called 'great replacement'. Rather, it was on the extent and unjustified nature of the horror. The Christchurch gunman was motivated not only by the past. He was just as perturbed at what he had come to assume the modern Ottomans, namely President Erdoğan's Turkey, intended for the future. Hence, he wrote in a section headed 'To Turks' that they can live peacefully on the Asia side of the Bosphorus, the waterway that divides Istanbul, but if they attempt to live in Europe, that is, anywhere west of the Bosphorus 'we will kill you and drive you roaches from our lands'. What most disturbed Turkish authorities was the threat that 'We are coming for Constantinople and we will destroy every mosque and minaret in the city. The Hagia Sophia will be free of minarets and Constantinople will be rightfully Christian once more'. In other words, mosques may be destroyed but not in the case of Hagia Sophia because it is not a mosque. Rather, it was built in the 530s by the Roman emperor Justinian (reigned 527–65) as the prime Christian church of the imperial capital of Constantinople, now Istanbul. Since 1935, it had been a museum. Now it was the most visited site in Turkey. Ottoman additions, particularly its 15th and 16th century Islamic minarets, would be the only target in this vision. No wonder the Turks were disturbed.

President Erdoğan was forthright from the start, denouncing the Christchurch massacre on 15 March as 'the latest example of rising racism and Islamophobia'. Then he tweeted 'May Allah have mercy on the victims and grant a speedy recovery to the wounded'. In a news report first published at 1.08pm Istanbul time, that is, nine hours after the events in Christchurch, but when most of New York City and Washington DC was still asleep or just waking, it was already clear the Turkish reaction was going to be more comprehensive than other Islamic countries. The reaction would also be more personal. Erdoğan said that what just happened at Christchurch was not mere 'impulsive behaviour'. It was an attack on Turkey and on him personally. 'We invite the whole world, especially Western countries, to urgently take precautions against this dangerous trend threatening entire humanity', he tweeted. The Turkish government was quick to portray the events in Christchurch as having a Turkish impact too. Erdoğan phoned New Zealand's, head-of-state, Her Excellency the Governor-General Patsy Reddy, to explain Turkey's particular concern at the massacre. He also presumably advised the Governor-General what his personal envoys might discuss and discover when they arrived in New Zealand the following day. At this stage, he was obviously