

Smyrna in 1908 – 11.5.2023

[1]

At the beginning of July 1908, officers of the Ottoman army in Macedonia belonging to the Young Turk movement sent an ultimatum to the Sultan: either he would dismiss the Grand Vizier and other corrupt members of the administration, restore the Constitution and grant a general amnesty to political prisoners, or they would march towards Constantinople to depose him. This set off a chain of events which affected the whole of the Ottoman Empire, but especially the capital and Smyrna.

About 110 years later, I was trying to collect statistical data on the fires that broke out in Smyrna, and for this I was leafing through Greek-language newspapers of the city for the year 1908. These included the mainstream papers “Amaltheia” and “Imerisia”, the socialist newspaper “Ergatis” and the illustrated magazine “Kosmos”. The richness and variety of events that happened in Smyrna in the first 6 months after the Young Turk Revolution impressed me so much, that I decided to write a book about that period. This presentation is a summary of that book, which I hope will soon be published.

[2]

The people of Smyrna initially reacted to the restoration of the Constitution with understandable reservation, but this soon turned into unbridled enthusiasm. Greeks, Turks, Armenians and Jews celebrated their newfound freedom in a brotherly manner, cheering the Turkish officers as heroes, raising Turkish and Greek flags side by side and wearing red-and-white badges, while bands played the Ottoman and the Greek anthem one after the other.

On 5 consecutive days between July 17th and 21st, the 4 main communities of Smyrna demonstrated every day in support of the Constitution. Why 5 days, one would ask, if there were only 4 communities that demonstrated? The answer is that the Greeks, always politically and otherwise divided, organized 3 different demonstrations. Armenians and Turks on the other side celebrated on the same day, the former in the morning and the latter in the afternoon.

The photo was taken at the Smyrna quay on July 20th, the day of the main Greek demonstration organized by the Greek religious and communal authorities. You can see the banners of various Greek clubs and societies, as well as Turkish and Greek flags.

[3]

Here are two more photos from the demonstrations. On the left is yet another photo of the Greeks, standing between the Grand Hotel Kraemer Palace and the Grand Hotel Huck. The right photo shows the Armenians and was taken in Grande Rue Arménienne, the main street of the Armenian quarter. In the foreground you can see an Armenian girl on a carriage posing as Liberty, dressed in white and wrapped in a red cloak.

[4]

Although the centers of events during this period were of course Thessaloniki and Constantinople, many notable people visited Smyrna in the first months after the Young Turk revolution. The most impressive visit, at least for the Greeks, was that of Prince Andrew, who was returning to Athens from Russia via Constantinople and was accompanied by his brother Christopher, his wife Alice and his two young daughters. The Greeks of Smyrna welcomed him as no other, although he stayed in the city for only a few hours.

The leader of the liberal party, Prince Sabahaddin, also just passed through, and the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople Mateos Izmirlian didn't stay long. On the other hand, two prominent members of the Committee of Union and Progress, Dr. Nazim and Enver bey, stayed in Smyrna for a considerable time to organize the local offices of the Committee. They also got involved in local politics, for example in the wave of strikes that swept through Smyrna for months, and in the events at the Smyrna prison.

[5]

Following the amnesty granted to political prisoners, the criminals held in Smyrna prison revolted. They held guards and political prisoners captive for many days, until their demand to get freed too was met. Finally, the army returning from Macedonia opened the prison gates and all the prisoners were released, including murderers and brigands. To top it off, the prison archives were burned and the entire prison building was demolished.

The brigands infesting the countryside were also pardoned and laid down their weapons, only to return to the mountains a few months later. On the right photo is the most famous of them, Tchakidji Mehmet efe, the Robin Hood of Western Anatolia.

[6]

Another measure was the abolishment of spying on citizens, and the public military degradation of informers who were members of the army. First to suffer military degradation was Tefvik pasha, the military governor of Smyrna, who was degraded privately in his cell because of his old age. He was then sent to Thessaloniki for trial. Civilian informers were also prosecuted, and the salary for their services ceased to be paid.

[7]

The end of censorship resulted in a flood of new newspapers and magazines in Smyrna, in all the principal languages of the city. During the first 3 months after the Young Turk revolution, 425 new newspapers were published in the Ottoman Empire, and about 10 % of them in Smyrna.

Additionally, many theater plays with patriotic content, both Greek and Turkish, were performed, and the confiscated books kept in depots of the Ministry of Interior began to be returned to their owners.

[8]

To commemorate the restoration of the Constitution, many existing and new businesses were given the name "Constitution". These included the Café and Cinema de Paris on the quay, the former hotel "Elpiniki", also on the quay, a new restaurant on Rue Parallèle, a shoe shop, and many others. Even a pocket watch called "Constitution" was advertised by a watch maker. Other businesses got related names, such as the waterfront hotel "La Patrie".

[9]

Already on July 25th, harbor workers who loaded cargo onto ships began striking for higher wages and better work conditions. Porters, coachmen, wooden box makers and many other trades followed. The strikes continued until November and most of them ended successfully for the workers without resorting to excessive violence.

One of the two exceptions regarding violence was the strike of the workers and employees of the Aïdin Railway. Their strike started on August 18th and lasted 5 weeks, with 2 short breaks in between. During that time, the strikers did not allow any trains to operate at all, whereas normally during this period 2 or 3 trains would arrive daily, loaded with dried figs from the interior. This had grave consequences for the trade in figs, perhaps the most famous of Smyrna's products.

There were also 3 deaths during the strike. The first victim, an Italian blacksmith who had been outside the railway station out of curiosity, was shot by gendarmes after another shot had been fired at them. The second was a Greek from Adalia who was looking for a job, after all railway workers had been fired. He was bayoneted by a soldier and died shortly afterwards. A soldier was also killed by unknown persons during these events.

The railway strike was finally ended with the help of members of the Committee of Union and Progress, who mediated between the workers and a delegation sent from the company's London headquarters.

[10]

In the evening of September 17th, disaster struck Smyrna. The small steamboat "Stamboul", bound for Cordelio, collided with the large steamer "Cassandra" which was coming from Aivali. The "Stamboul", carrying more than 170 passengers, sank within 4 minutes and 63 people drowned.

Responsible for the horrifying accident were the two captains: The first one of "Stamboul" because he piloted without holding a captain's license, and the other one of "Cassandra" because he drove too fast near the harbor, and also because he moved in reverse after the crash, opening a large hole to the smaller ship and accelerating its sinking as a result.

Next morning, while boats were searching for bodies, a furious crowd tore down and burned the pier of the "Hamidiye", the company that owned the small steamers connecting Smyrna with the suburbs. In the lower right photo, search boats and smoke from the burning pier can be seen.

The city mourned for many days. Memorial services were held in Greek and Armenian churches, and even in a Jewish synagogue, although no Jews were drowned.

[11]

At the end of September, the Bulgarian declaration of independence, the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by Austro-Hungary and the desire of the Cretans to join the Greek kingdom had serious repercussions in Smyrna.

Bulgarian and Austrian ships were driven out without unloading their cargo, products of these two countries and the shops selling them were boycotted, and many protest rallies were held, in which all communities of Smyrna participated.

The protests culminated on November 24th, with a war against the fezzes, which were mainly Austrian-made. Groups of people, including small children, snatched the fezzes from the heads of passengers, ripped them off with their teeth and trampled them.

By the end of the year, Muslim Cretan refugees started protesting against the actions of Christian Cretans as well, but their protests would only attain serious proportions 6 months later.

[12]

The Committee of Union and Progress initially tried to show that it would protect Christians from Muslim excesses. Characteristically, in July a Muslim Albanian was executed in Skopje for kissing a Christian girl.

In Smyrna, such radical actions were not needed, but here the C.U.P. was engaged in a campaign to protect morality. Measures were taken to curb corruption and bribery among government officials, gambling casinos were closed, brothels were removed from the city center, and a Muslim anti-alcohol society was established. The only exception was the hashish dens, which were left undisturbed.

On the other hand, criminality was very high during this period. At right you can see a statistic for different types of crimes. All but murders increased even more after the departure of the Chief of Police, forcing the newspapers to introduce special columns reporting on the crimes of the day.

[13]

In October 1908, elections for the Ottoman Parliament were held in the whole of the Empire. Voters should be Ottoman subjects over 25 years old, and a number of other restrictions applied.

In the 1st round, the voters would elect one elector for every 500 male Ottoman subjects. More specifically, each district would elect 1 elector for 250 to 750 subjects, 2 electors for 750 to 1,250 etc.

In the 2nd round, the electors of a sanjak would elect one deputy for every 50,000 male subjects, that is 1 for 25,000 to 75,000, 2 for 75,000 to 125,000 and so on. For the Smyrna sanjak, this would correspond to 6 deputies, and for the Aïdin vilayet to 17.

After negotiations between the Committee of Union and Progress and the Greeks, an agreement was reached for the Smyrna sanjak: 2 Turkish and 2 Greek deputy candidates were to be supported jointly, while for the remaining 2, the Committee would support 1 Jew and 1 Armenian, while the Greeks would support 2 more Greek candidates.

[14]

The agreement between the Greeks and the Committee of Union and Progress was violated in various ways. In the 1st round, an example is the electoral district of Seydiköy with 2,787 male subjects, 1,681 of whom were Greek. Since there were much more Greeks than Muslims, according to the electoral system all 6 district electors would probably have been Greek. See the numbers on the left side of the slide.

To avoid this, the C.U.P. split the district into 6 new sub-districts. Seydiköy town, with 1,310 subjects, almost all Greek, would elect 2 electors instead of 3, and 5 small village districts with an average population of 300 would elect 1 elector each. The 5 sub-districts were carefully chosen to have a Muslim majority, so that Muslim electors would be elected in all of them. The final result for Seydiköy was 2 Greek and 5 Muslim electors, instead of 6 Greeks and no Muslims.

Another serious violation occurred on the 2nd round, when the C.U.P. electors in the city of Smyrna didn't vote as agreed for Pavlos Karolidis, the 2nd Greek candidate for Member of Parliament, preferring instead Dr. Ethem bey, a 3rd Turkish candidate. Karolidis got only 40 votes, 37 of them from the Greek electors and just 3 out of 75 from the C.U.P. Fearing that Karolidis would not be elected, the Greek community organized a furious demonstration in support of him, which prompted the C.U.P. to instruct the electors of Bergama, who voted one day after Smyrna, to vote for him rather than the Armenian Stepan Spartali. The Greek candidate was thus elected in 6th place, leaving the Armenian in 7th place and out of Parliament.

[15]

These were the final results for all the kazas in the sanjak of Smyrna, with Karolidis in 6th and Spartali in 7th place. In the city of Smyrna, the Greek Aristidis Georgandjoglou pasha was first, and 3rd overall, with the Turks Mufti Sait effendi and Taşlı Sait bey preceding him.

Now it was time for the Armenians to be infuriated, since their candidate was not elected, although the C.U.P. had promised to do so. To solve this problem, the 3rd Muslim, Dr. Ethem bey, was persuaded to resign, and in a subsequent election, the Armenian Stepan Spartali was elected in his place. Consequently, the election result in Smyrna now coincided with what was originally agreed upon.

[16]

These were the 6 Members of Parliament for the kaza of Smyrna: In the top row the 2 Muslims, Mufti Sait effendi and Taşlı Sait bey, and the Jew Nisim Mazlia. In the bottom row the 3 Christians, 2 Greeks, Aristidis Georgandjoglou pasha and Pavlos Karolidis, and the Armenian Stepan Spartali.

[17]

On this slide you can see the names of the 24 Greeks elected as members of the Ottoman Parliament, as well as the sanjaks where they were elected. Half of them came from districts that would soon be incorporated into the Greek Kingdom. The poster on the right has photos of 22 of the 24 Greek deputies.

[18]

The foul play and irregularities during the elections by the Committee of Union and Progress that was directed against the Greeks, resulted in the over-representation of Muslims and the under-representation of Greeks in the Ottoman Parliament.

According to the official Ottoman census of 1906-1907 and the various estimates of the number of members of the Parliament, 37 to 39 Greek deputies should have been elected, and much more if all Ottoman Greeks were registered in the census. Instead, only 24 Greeks were elected.

After the first period of enthusiasm and brotherly feelings between Turks and Greeks that followed the restoration of the Constitution, this was a sure sign of the discriminations and the hard times that would soon follow, resulting in the almost total elimination of the Christian minorities in Turkey.

[19]

This concludes my presentation of the events in Smyrna in the second half of 1908. Thank you for your attention!