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Was nationalism to blame for the Smyrna fire? Foiniki Papadopoulou

This essay examines the role of Turkish and Greek nationalist ideologies in igniting the flames of ethnic tensions that culminated in the Smyrna fire of 1922. The Greco-Turkish war was propelled forward by the nationalist rhetoric of the 'Great Idea' that expressed the fantasy of stretching the Greek state to encompass key areas of ancient and Byzantine Hellenism in Anatolia. This militant ideology was broadly interpreted as a threat to the very presence of Turkish nationals in Anatolia and was thus detrimental to the development of a Turkish counterpart in the form of Kemalist pan-Turkism. As the last event in a cause-and-effect sequence of nationalist conflicts, the Smyrna fire exemplifies the destructive nature of Kemalist nationalism, which was directed against both the human and the material character of Ottoman Smyrna with the aim of purging the city of its non-Turkish elements and creating a tabula rasa on which the history of the newly formed national identity could be rewritten and projected onto the urban fabric.

The Smyrna fire of 1922 exists in history as more than, if one can use the word 'merely', an episode of immense human and material catastrophe that altered the diverse character of the city for good; it signifies the pivotal point in the history of what is now modern Turkey and its transformation from a cosmopolitan Ottoman Empire to a modern nation-state constructed on the basis of a strongly nationalistic mentality. A fitting pretext was given to army official Mustafa Kemal to formulate the Turkish Nationalist Movement, following the commencement of the Greco-Turkish war in 1919 in which Greek troops were given Allied permission to occupy Smyrna and its surrounding area until a referendum could be held to determine which state the inhabitants would join. The movement's military efforts were directed towards resisting the territorial disintegration of the Ottoman state, an empire encompassing diverse peoples including Greeks, Arabs and Armenians, but governed by Turks; thus, the War represented a direct threat to the self-interests of the prevailing Turkish element, whose defense accordingly came to be formulated along nationalist lines. The militant nature of Kemalist ideology came to be tragically exemplified in the Great Fire of Smyrna, when troops chasing after the withdrawing Greek forces deliberately started a conflagration in the city's Christian neighborhoods, spreading panic and death in the Quai. The spark that set Smyrna alight with the Great Fire of 1922 was that of a fierce current of Turkish nationalism, directed firstly against the Christian populations of 'gavur Izmir' (literally 'infidel Smyrna'), and secondly against the material fabric of the paramount symbol of urban cosmopolitanism in the soon to be former Ottoman Empire. However, any effort to trace the roots of the catastrophe also points to a

frenzy of nationalism - this time, its Greek counterpart - that officially commenced with the madness over the arrival of army units in this very city in 1919, and effectively put Smyrna on the frontline of nationalist tensions at the very least three years before the fire itself.

It can be argued that Turkish nationalism would have not necessarily taken the radical form of Kemalist pan-Turkism, which led to such extensive destruction in 1922, were it not for its Greek counterpart that demanded an immediate response. The 'Megali Idea', or 'Great Idea', is a term that dominated Greek political discourse in the years preceding the Smyrna fire. Milton shrewdly points out that the word 'megalomania' comes from the same Greek root¹; it expressed the national fantasy of stretching the Greek state to encompass Constantinople, as well as the Greek-inhabited areas of Asia Minor, liberating the Greek peoples from Ottoman rule. The term had been coined by the future first Prime Minister Ioannis Kolettis in an impassioned speech to the national assembly on 14 January 1844, in which he championed the cause of 'outside Greeks' (culturally and linguistically identified Greeks residing outside the small Greek Kingdom), asserting that 'a native is not only someone who lives within this kingdom, but also one who lives in (...) any land associated with Greek history or the Greek race'². Part of this speech is worth quoting here for it is an intact articulation of the historical rationale on which the Great Idea was based:

*The geographical position of Greece is the center of Europe. With her right hand she touches the hand of the West and with her left hand that of the East, and it connects the two. Greece was destined, as it seems, to give her light to the West when it fell, and today, regenerated, to enlighten the East. It is us, gentlemen, who inhabit this glorious Greece; it is us who should spread this refinement to the East. It is this vow, and this great idea, which we should have of ourselves [...]'*³

Kolettis offered a conceptualization of history characterized by perfect symmetry; the eastern empires of Alexander the Great and Constantine the Great would be reflected in the extension of Greece's boundaries to include areas from ancient and

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¹Giles Milton, *Paradise Lost: Smyrna 1922: The Destruction of a Christian City in the Islamic World* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p.37-39.

² Ioannis Kolettis, 'Address to the National Assembly' (1844) in Demaras, K.Th., *Ellinikos Romantismos* (Athens: Hermes, 1982), p. 405-7. (Translation my own)

³ Ibid.

Byzantine Hellenism, in which a number of Greeks still resided under Ottoman control. These allusions to past glories stimulated the national imagination in support of what was essentially a Greek adaptation of European imperialism in the form of a 'civilizing mission' to the East that would actively spread the same 'light' and 'refinement' that Greece had unintentionally given to the West through its classical heritage. This vision also reflected the messianic longings found in oracular texts of the Byzantine and Ottoman times; the prophecy of a 'blonde race' (*xanthan genos*), associated with their co-religionist Russians, taking back Constantinople and liberating the Greeks from the Ottoman yoke, had become a common superstition in the course of over four centuries, which had been popularized and orally reproduced through the use of rhyme in many of the oracular texts⁴. With the invention of the 'Megali Idea', the Greek state took a leading role as the savior of its Orthodox 'unredeemed brethren' from four centuries of Turkish yoke, which itself had successfully managed to shake off. Loaded with appeals from the whole spectrum of a romanticized Greek past, the 'Great Idea' was a brilliant, emotional invention that would serve concrete purposes; through its nationalist rhetoric, it centralized the allegiances of a fractured society, functioning as the primary tool for internal nation-building, as well as external expansion. The 'Great Idea' was to be the dominant ideology of the emergent state, a doctrine of national unity that would prove to be a cohesive force for the Greek nation, until it was consumed in the ashes of Smyrna in 1922 with the defeat of the Greek army by the Kemalist forces.

The city of Smyrna, where the Greek population was in majority and ruled over a flourishing culture of commerce and entrepreneurship, was naturally at the heart of this dream and thus constituted the intended foundation in the construction of a newly revived Byzantine Empire. The extent of this ambition, both in terms of territorial aims, and in the intensity of support it inspired in the Greek public, establishes an inextricable connection between the concept of 'Megali Idea' and the current of Greek nationalism that was climaxing in the beginning of the 20th century. Thus, it hardly comes as a surprise that when the first step was taken on May 1919 with the arrival of 13,000 Greek troops in Smyrna, large portions of the Turkish population interpreted it as a threat to their very existence in Anatolia. The arriving troops hardly made an effort to quiet such concerns; they indulged in all sorts of racial violence, including rape, murder, and pillaging of Turkish shops, while Greek crowds showered them with flowers and joyful acclamations, ending

⁴ Richard Clogg, *A Concise History of Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 17.

any remaining facade of peaceful coexistence. The sheer hysteria of this violence is evident in the accidental killings of Greeks wearing the customary Ottoman fez, and thus mistaken as Turks by the pillaging soldiers⁵.

Greek nationalism, epitomized in that day's display of ethnic hatred, had an unprecedented effect on the organization of a Turkish national movement with the sole aim to revenge the occupying forces and defend Turkish independence. Only four days later, on May 19, army official Kemal Atatürk reached Samsun and began assembling a Turkish armed force; in June he issued the Amasya Circular, denouncing Ottoman authority as incompetent in protecting its Turkish subjects in Anatolia, declaring that the country's independence was under threat and calling upon various defense organizations to be united in a central body⁶. The Greek occupation of Smyrna was the pretext that Atatürk needed to create a strong military front under the label of national defense, as it provided his cause with the necessary legitimacy and urgency to be widely accepted by the Turkish public. In the meantime, the Greek army advanced further in the depths of Anatolia, occupying towns with Turkish majorities and engaging in more mistreatment of the local populations; this only strengthened the decisiveness of the Turkish resistance and the bitter feelings against Greeks. In the words of Philip Mansel, 'the occupation's baptism in blood helped ensure its failure'⁷ by unifying Kemal's army around a growing feeling of nationalist resistance, which was to escalate on the 13th of September 1922 as Turkish troops entering Smyrna set the Christian districts alight with the 'Great Fire'.

It is interesting to note that despite the amount of controversy that this event has generated in historiography, all conflicting interpretations agree that the blame resides in the nationalism of one or the other community. Turkish official history propagated the myth that the fire was started by the Greek and Armenian populations of Smyrna in order to destroy the city they knew they would be leaving behind. This claim gains some realistic dimension on the grounds of atrocities committed by the retreating Greek troops, who in some occasions even burnt down cities, something they had threatened to do if forced to evacuate according to testimony by Hortense Wood, a British resident whose diary makes frequent

⁵ Philip Mansel, *Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe in the Mediterranean* (London: Yale University Press, 2011), p.160.

⁶ George W. Gawrych, *The Young Atatürk: From Ottoman Soldier to Statesman of Turkey* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003), p.75.

⁷ Mansel, *Levant*, p. 161.

reference to contemporary events⁸. Some contemporary observants, not all Turkish, blamed the Greeks or Armenians disguised as Turkish soldiers for starting the fire, in order to protect their own businesses or claim insurance under the Turkish state⁹. The 2006 official Greek history textbook caused widespread academic and political outrage by its failure to mention the fire, and its description of the catastrophe as an ‘overcrowding at the port’¹⁰, leading to its withdrawal by the Greek Ministry of Education only a year after it was published. Although Repousi, the leader of the project, defended the language on the basis of restructuring the teaching of history in Greek schools away from nationalistic lines, the chapter preserved perfect silence over the acts of racial violence committed by Greek soldiers upon their landing in Smyrna in 1919; omission and misrepresentation of events associated with the Great Fire show its central role in the production of nation narratives of blame. This article will not engage in efforts to prove the Turkish responsibility for the starting of the fire, as numerous evidence presented in international historiography have established it as fact; the point of mentioning the Turkish line is merely to show that all interpretations, even when factually incorrect, place nationalism at the heart of the Smyrna fire by attributing the assumed motives of ethnic communities on nationalistic feelings.

Kemalist nationalism burned with rage towards both the Greek population of Anatolia and towards the accommodating, diverse, and therefore nationally ‘weak’, character of the Ottoman Empire that failed to contain it; accordingly, the fire, started by Turkish troops on the 11th of September in Smyrna, was aimed both against the non-Muslim inhabitants that formed the backbone of Ottoman cosmopolitanism, and against the very establishment of the Empire which it aimed to replace with a modern nation-state under the motto ‘Turkey belongs to Turks’¹¹. An innovative study by Biray Kolluoğlu Kırılı, explains the Turkish intention behind the fire in symbolic terms, describing it as an act of punishment aimed to purify ‘gavur’ Izmir of its literary infidel elements, and as an act of creation in the context of a new Turkish national identity¹².

⁸ Hortense Wood’s diary, Brian Giraud Archives, Izmir, 2 Sept. 1922.

⁹ Mansel, *Levant*, p. 173.

¹⁰ M. Repousi and others, *Istoria St’ Demotikou: Sta Neotera kai Synchrona Chronia* (Athens: OED, 2006).

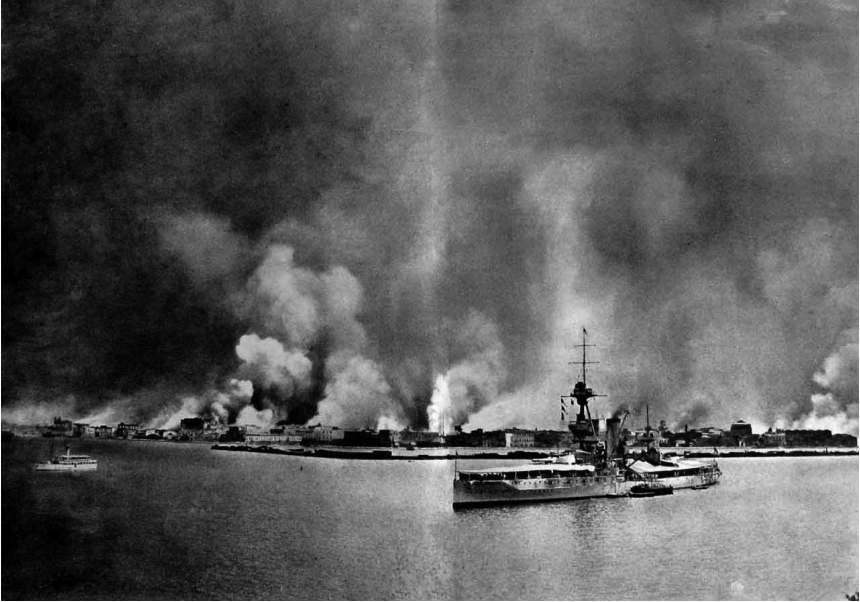
¹¹ Erik Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p.138.

¹² Biray Kolluoğlu Kırılı, ‘Forgetting the Smyrna Fire’, *History Workshop Journal*, no. 60. Oxford University Press: 25–44.

The first strand of Kırılı's argument, the purging of the city of non-Turkish elements, is central in explaining the Great Fire with respect to its nationalist cause. When Turkish soldiers scattered petroleum on buildings in the Greek and Armenian quarters of the city and started setting them alight, Turkish inhabitants had already been notified to leave the Christian districts; the fire had been orchestrated with great care in order to target only the populations that had been actively engaged in opposing Turkish nationalism. This assertion is further backed by the fact that the Turkish and Jewish areas were completely unaffected by the conflagration, which is remarkable given that the different fires had merged by night, uniting into a thick wall of flame and smoke (Illustration 1:1) that would have been impossible to escape if trenches had not been dug around them during the previous days to provide protection. Numerous accounts from contemporary observers note not merely the sheer extent of the fire, but the horrific images of people being burnt alive and drowning into the sea in an effort to escape the flames¹³. In the following days, Turkish soldiers continued the ethnic cleansing of Greeks and Armenians by killing even more people belonging to these ethnic groups. The argument for the nationalist intention of the fire is strengthened by the forced deportations of males between eighteen and forty-five years old, with liberal allowance on both sides: Turkish soldiers forcibly removed Greek men from their families while waiting for rescue boats, who were then sent to repair the damage caused by the Greek retreating army, and effectively starve or die from exhaustion in forced labor camps in Anatolia. This command reflected the desire for revenge as well as that of 'removing the biological power base' of the enemy, as in other ethnic cleansings.¹⁴

¹³ Mansel, *Levant*, p. 187.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*



1.1: The Burning of Smyrna, taken from the forebridge of HMS King George V: "HMS Iron Duke stands in the foreground against "an unbroken wall of fire, two miles long" in *The Illustrated London News* (September 30, 1922).

The destruction of Greek and Armenian Smyrna, though on a first level motivated by the desire for revenge and extermination of non-Turkish elements, was also conceived as a necessary step towards transforming the city from the cosmopolitan Smyrna of the Ottoman Empire to 'a Turkish Izmir, purged of two thousand and more years of history'¹⁵: the latter rose as a phoenix from the former's ashes. This historical transition thus required what Kirli describes as the 'drawing of a new human and spatial geography'¹⁶, a complex work of redesigning the community of Izmir and the material fabric that would host it, which was made much easier by the 'clearing out' of the map. Just as Kemal's purpose of creating a fresh national identity required the overthrow of Ottoman rule and the removal of foreign populations, the reconfiguration of the urban fabric of Smyrna was made possible by the creation of a blank slate, a *tabula rasa* on which the blueprint of the city could be designed from scratch with no compromises or accommodations. In a reported dialogue that took place between Ataturk and his future wife Latife only

¹⁵ Michael Llewellyn Smith, *Ionian Vision: Greece in Asia Minor (1919-1922)* (London: St Martin's Press, 1923), p.311.

¹⁶ Kulloglu, *Forgetting*, p. 27.

a few days after the destruction, Latife said that she did not mourn the destruction, and that they could 'rebuild [Izmir] in a better way'; Kemal is reported to have proclaimed in response 'Let it burn! We can replace everything!'¹⁷ Indeed, the new Izmir entered in an intensive programme of 'replacement' which became synonymous with Turkification, as all of its streets were renamed in Turkish, its official documents produced in the same language, and its new buildings constructed in a style that resembled nothing of its previous architecture. The Smyrna fire thus called for the reconstruction of a national identity that would be imprinted on the urban fabric of the new city; Turkish nationalism was able to radically break from the Ottoman past due to an equally radical destruction of the Empire's former symbol of cosmopolitanism. In a sense, just as the fire of 1917 facilitated the Hellenization of Thessaloniki¹⁸, the Great Fire of 1922 was the signal for Turkification not only of Smyrna, but of the whole of the territories of the former Ottoman Empire.

Both Greek and Turkish nationalism are to blame for the Smyrna fire of 1922. Greek nationalism ignited the spark for Turkish resistance through the atrocities committed by troops in the name of the 'Megali Idea' during their first occupation of Smyrna in 1919, and Turkish nationalism wrote the next big chapter in the history of racial hatred by literally setting alight the city three years later. Ottoman Smyrna was thus purged of it of its non- Turkish elements and a tabula rasa was created, on which the newly formed and exclusively Turkish national identity could be reimagined and projected onto the urban fabric.

¹⁷ Ipek Çalışlar, *Madam Atatürk: The First Lady of Modern Turkey* (Istanbul: Saqi Books, 2006), pp. 43-5.

¹⁸ Albert Charles Wratislaw, *A Consul in the East* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1924).

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