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Greek Prime Minister Ioannis Kolettis called Constantinople 'the great capital, the city, the attraction and the hope of all the Hellenes'. Photograph by P.Z. c. 1880.

After 1821: Three Ottoman Cities and Greece

***Philip Mansel** examines life in Constantinople, Smyrna and Alexandria in the aftermath of the Revolution*

Cities can transform nations as effectively as governments. The concentration of people, businesses, news and leaders in one city can be decisive. Think of the number of times a revolution in Paris has overthrown or threatened a French government – in 1789, 1792, 1830, 1848 and 1870. The importance of cities outside (as well as within) the frontiers of modern Greece distinguishes its history from those of other countries.

Since 1453 most Greeks had lived in the multinational Ottoman Empire. By 1821 some Greeks had migrated to the Russian and Austrian empires. For example, Greeks as well as Italians and Russians had settled in the booming port city of Odessa, established on the site of the Ottoman village of Hacibey on the Black Sea by Catherine the Great in 1794. At the start of the War of Independence in March 1821, Greeks from Odessa formed the core of the 'Sacred Band' which followed Prince Alexander Ypsilantis, an ADC of Tsar Alexander I from a Phanariot dynasty, to fight for Greek freedom in Moldavia. That expedition was soon defeated by the Ottomans and officially condemned by the Tsar – although his then Foreign Minister, Count Capodistria, a Greek from Corfu, later served as 'Governor' of Greece in 1828–1831.

Other foreign cities, however, would help Greek Independence more effectively than Odessa. Greek merchants in the great international cities of Marseille, Trieste and Vienna, and philhellenes from London and Paris contributed funds, munitions and volunteers to the struggle to free Greece. Their role almost rivalled that of Greek soldiers in Greece and Greek sailors in the Aegean.

Once Independence was won, three cities outside Greece – Constantinople, Smyrna and Alexandria – also played crucial roles in its development. Under the Ottoman Empire, these formerly Greek cities had developed into mixed cities, in which Greeks were outnumbered by Muslims, Jews and Levantines. After Greek independence, they provided attractive alternatives to the new Greek state. Such was the poverty, lawlessness and over-taxation in liberated Greece that many Greeks preferred to 'groan under the Turkish yoke' rather than remain free citizens in their own country.

As Alexander Kinglake wrote in Eothen in 1834, 'There is a greater field for commercial enterprise and even for Greek ambition under the Ottoman empire than is to be found in the dominions of Otho' (King of Greece 1832–1862). Economic realities challenged the appeal of nationalism – as later mass emigrations to America and Australia would confirm. Faced with the need to earn a living, many Greeks voted with their boat tickets. Some would learn to maintain two identities and speak two or more languages: Greek and Ottoman Turkish, often joined by French and, more recently, English.

Constantinople

In reaction to the Greek uprising in March 1821, a six-month reign of terror was imposed by Mahmud II. Greek schools and churches in Constantinople were attacked or destroyed and Patriarch Gregory V (despite the uprising being anathema to him and his condemnation of liberty as 'a destructive poison destined to precipitate the people into chaos and disorder') was killed, as were thousands of other Greeks in the capital.

However, the Greeks soon recovered their dynamism and their roles in Ottoman service. Two months after the patriarch's murder, his successor assured the sultan of the Greeks' 'inviolable allegiance and fidelity'. New churches and schools (88 schools by 1880) were built in the capital. The 'National Regulations of the Nation of the Romans', drawn up by an assembly of Greeks, provided the patriarchate and the community with a degree of self-government after 1862. By 1900 the Greek population of the capital had risen to 22 per cent or more of a total of over a million – roughly twice the number of Greeks in Athens.

Many dreamt of the 'Great Idea' and of a new Byzantine Empire. In a famous speech of 1844, the Greek Prime Minister, Ioannis Kolettis, called Constantinople 'the great capital, the city, the attraction and the hope of all the Hellenes'. Athens was merely 'the capital of the kingdom'. In 1868, King George I named his son and heir Constantine, in the hope that he would one day reign in Constantinople.

The reality in the city was different. To take only a few examples, members of the Musurus, Aristarchi, Karatheodory and Mavroyeni families – a 'second Phanar' almost as influential as the first – served Ottoman sultans as senior officials. Georgios Zarifis was one of the richest Greek bankers of the city, hailed by the *Levant Herald* of Constantinople as 'beyond all question a financial power'. A generous benefactor to Greek schools throughout the empire, he was also an Ottoman who preferred to travel on his Ottoman rather than his Greek passport. When a French customs officer called him Greek, he replied, 'I am an Ottoman.'

In 1867 he refused to subscribe to a Greek government loan, on the grounds that it was destined to cover military expenditure. In contrast he, and other 'Galata bankers' of Greek origin made loans to the Ottoman Empire even in 1877–1878, when Russian armies were at the gates of Constantinople. He became personal banker to Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1909) and helped establish the Ottoman Public Debt in 1881.

Many Constantinopolitan Greeks felt that, while the Ottomans reigned, the Greeks governed through their economic power. In the words of one Greek businessman:

We lend them the vivacity of our intelligence and our business skills; they protect us with their strength, like kindly giants ... The future belongs to the Greeks; distant no doubt, but peoples can wait.

United by hostility to the rising power of Bulgaria, Patriarch Joachim III regularly assured the sultan, both in Greek and Turkish, of the loyalty of the Greek nation. He was once seen to kiss a pineapple brought to him by the chief eunuch from the palace hothouse as a present from Abdulhamid.

The Secretary of the Greek Legation, Ion Dragoumis, who founded the 'Constantinople Organization' in 1908, complained of the lack of interest of the city's Greeks. Some sent their children to Catholic schools: 'we are losing the city completely.'

Nationalism became increasingly ferocious, on all sides, particularly after the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913. Nevertheless, Constantinopolitan Greeks, unlike the Armenians, survived the First World War relatively unscathed. Only on 16 March 1919, when the Ottoman Empire seemed a spent force, did the patriarchate officially renounce cooperation and demand that Constantinople become Greek again. The Turkish writer Aziz Nesin remembered seeing Greeks stamp on their Ottoman fezzes as they hailed their Prime Minister: 'Zito [o]Venizelos! Zito [o]Venizelos!'

After Mustafa Kemal's troops entered the city in 1922, however, the Greek population, oppressed by discriminatory taxes and laws, and later by the 1955 riots, began to decline. Only around 3,000 remain today. The patriarchate survives, but the Greek schools founded with such confidence in the 19th century are empty.

Smyrna

On 11 April 1821, in reaction to Greek uprisings in the Peloponnese, armed Muslims appeared on the streets of Smyrna, then a thriving international port of around 130,000 people, of whom 30,000 were Greeks. The

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Smyrna, photographed in the later 19th century, with minarets visible in the landscape.

British consul Francis Werry reported: 'killing has been the order of the day, and night too'. Muslims from Anatolia and Crete, hungry for spoils, were often 'the chief instigators', rather than Smyrna Muslims. As they would a hundred years later in September 1922, Greeks fled to the shore in search of boats. Some jumped into the water to save themselves. Such was their economic dominance in Smyrna that trade became entirely paralysed. Up to 1914 anti-Greek boycotts did not work, as the city depended on Greek tradesmen.

On 18 June 1821, as they would on 13 September 1922, the British and French consuls embarked their nationals on ships in the harbour. Finally, on 2 August, Werry reported with relief:

No murder of the Greeks has been known some days past. The shops are all open and the Greeks as gay as ever. They are an extraordinary set of people.

By 1840 (or by some counts 1870), the Greeks in the city outnumbered the Turks. In a population of about 130,000 there were now approximately 55,000 Greeks, 45,000 Turks, 13,000 Jews, 12,000 Franks and 5,000 Armenians. It was indeed, as the Turks called it, 'gavur Izmir' – infidel Izmir. Nevertheless Sultan Abdulaziz himself showed his approval by visiting the Greek banker Baltazzi on 28 April 1863 in his villa outside the city.

Smyrna became a global port, exporting dried fruit, carpets and opium as far as Boston and Jakarta. It was both the Europe of the Orient and the Orient of Europe, according to Dimitri Agyropoulo. 'If Smyrna is the eye of Asia', wrote Christos Solomonidis, the 3km-long quay, lined with ships and cafes, was 'the pupil of the eye'.

Greek schools were so good they also attracted Muslim and Levantine pupils. After 1856 the bell tower of the Greek church of Saint Fotini was higher than any minaret. By 1900, the majority of the city's population was Greek, and only 30 per cent Turkish. In both 1897 and 1912 young Greeks of Smyrna, like those of Constantinople, openly left the city to join the Greek army fighting the Ottoman Empire in which they lived.

National feelings became so fierce that, before 1914 and without consulting the populations concerned, Greek and Turkish officials had begun to discuss the transfer of each other's minorities to new nation-states. Desire for Smyrna, however, led Greek politicians, especially Eleftherios Venizelos, to ignore the geographical realities.

The arrival of Greek troops on Greek ships on 15 May 1919 ended hopes of continuing the relatively peaceful cohabitation with Turks that had lasted in Smyrna even during the First World War. Commemorations in 2022 will remind the public of the catastrophic fires, massacres and expulsions – unparalleled at the time – that Smyrna suffered in September 1922. For decades thereafter, refugees from Smyrna left an indelible mark on Greek politics.

Alexandria

During the War of Independence of 1821–1830, Greek ships twice attacked Alexandria. Egyptian troops under Ibrahim Pasha captured people from the Peloponnese, who were then sold as slaves in Egypt. Such horrors, however, were soon forgotten, as thousands of Greeks arrived in Alexandria, at the same time as they were moving to Constantinople and Smyrna, to profit from the economic boom in Egypt under the modernizing Ottoman Governor Mohammed Ali Pasha. They thrived as merchants, builders and gardeners. Like Smyrna, Alexandria was becoming Greek again – more Greek than at any time since its surrender to a Muslim army in 642.

The first Greek consul-general and head of the Greek community (posts that would often be combined) in Alexandria after Greek independence was a friend of Mohammed Ali Pasha called Michael Tossizza. The Tossizza family is said to have advanced the young Mohammed Ali a loan at a crucial moment.

Greek success in Alexandria was helped by language. Mohammed Ali never learnt Arabic: until the 1860s, Turkish, not Arabic, was the first language of the dynasty, court and government in Egypt. Since Greek immigrants like the Tossizza often came from areas of the Ottoman Empire with large Turkish populations, they probably knew some Turkish. They could enjoy easier relations with government officials than regular Egyptians, who often spoke nothing but Arabic.

Alexandrian Greeks became even richer after the British bombardment and occupation of their city in 1882. Most supported British rule, whereas Egyptians preferred the nationalist government of Arabi Pasha, with its slogan of ‘Egypt for the Egyptians!’ The letters of the Greek businessman John Cavafy to his brother Constantine, the poet, now housed at the Hellenic Literary and Historical Archive Society in Athens, reveal the brutality behind the alliance between Alexandrian Greek business and British imperialism. British marines, he wrote with approval in August 1882, ‘shot down every passing Arab as they went along’. He hoped the British would hang Arabi: ‘what a sell if they let him go Scot free … the English are such fools sometimes’. On 30 October John Cavafy wrote: ‘Alexandria is becoming quite brisk again’ – meaning business was brisk.

The alliance of Alexandrian Greeks with the British invaders was also displayed at parties. On 2 April 1883 John Cavafy wrote:

On Thursday last I went to Zervudachi’s grand ball with Aristides … Altogether the ball was a success: the rooms were well-lighted and adorned with flowers. The [British] officers were magnificent: all of them in full dress and gilt belts. Your friend Mrs. [soon to be Lady] Z.[ervudachi] was conspicuous for her small stature on the arm of General Harman, – the boss of the evening. Dancing was kept up till 7 o’clock in the morning … Competent judges state that Mrs. Gabriel Zogheb was the ‘reine du bal’. A good many English people were there.

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Historic Alexandria attracted many Greeks, including the poet Cavafy and his family.

Constantine Cavafy, the greatest Greek poet of his day, wrote in Alexandria, not Greece (another great Greek poet, George Seferis, was born in Smyrna in 1900). Cavafy's remark to E.M. Forster in Alexandria in 1918 confirms the commercial character of the cities of the Levant:

We Greeks have lost our capital – and the results are what you see. Pray, my dear Forster, oh pray, that you [Britain] never lose your capital.

Yet his lament – perhaps reflecting his own family's bankruptcies – was contradicted by Alexandria, as well as by Constantinople and Smyrna. Greeks from those cities built up reserves of capital that would help support Greece, as well as their own cities. The Greek community of Alexandria constructed two hospitals, nine primary and two secondary schools, two orphanages, sports clubs and a cathedral.

Emmanuel Benakis, born in Syros in 1843, was 'king of the bourse' in Alexandria, when it was the largest bourse outside Europe and North America. His family considered anything Greek 'holy and sacred' and their business 'the power and glory of Hellenism', according to the writer Penelope Delta, daughter of Benakis. In reality, the basis of their fortune was Egyptian cotton picked by Egyptians and the boom conditions in Egypt both before and after the British occupation in 1882. But, Delta also wrote, 'we had the greatest contempt for fellahs [peasants] and regarded them almost as cattle'. Benakis left Alexandria for Athens in 1911 and became Minister of Agriculture in Greece and later Mayor of Athens.

The following year, from 1912–1913, the great battleship the *Averoff* would play a historic role in conquering Aegean islands, as well as in ferrying Greek troops to Constantinople and Smyrna in 1919 and to Alexandria after the German conquest of Greece in 1941. The ship was named after another wealthy Alexandrian Greek business family, the Averoff from Metsovo, who financed the Olympic stadium and other buildings in Athens.

The prosperity of the Alexandrian Greeks continued in the 20th century. The city provided a refuge from German-occupied Greece for sections of the Greek government, army and navy in 1941–1944: King George II found the house in Alexandria of Delta's sister Argine Salvago more impressive than his own palace in Athens. Greeks comprised at least 30,000 of the city's population of around 900,000 in 1947, and this underestimate excludes the many Greeks who had acquired Egyptian citizenship. The writer George Pierides remembered 'all our intellectual activity concentrated almost exclusively on Greek matters and problems'. Perhaps deceiving himself, he attributed this not to aversion to Egypt, but to 'the self-sufficiency of our community with which our whole social, national, family, professional and intellectual existence was identified'.

In July 1952, a military coup replaced the parliamentary monarchy of King Farouk with a government of 'free officers', led by General Neguib and Colonel Nasser. On 15 September 1952, Neguib visited the Kozzikion hospital for Greeks, and proclaimed sentiments similar to those once expressed by Ottoman officials about Greeks and Turks: 'Greece and Egypt are in essence one country … everyone is a child of the same country, if they all work for its benefit.' When Britain, France and Israel invaded in 1956, many Greeks supported Egypt and helped keep the Suez Canal working.

Nasser's regime, however, soon revealed itself as a military dictatorship. Greeks left Alexandria, as they had arrived, for economic reasons, and departures accelerated as their businesses were nationalized, with the rest of the economy, after 1961. They included the singers George Moustaki and Demis Roussos and the writer Stratis Tsirkas. The Greek hospital was renamed Gamal Abdul Nasser Hospital. The Greek schools of Alexandria are now as empty as those of Constantinople (the best Greek schools of Smyrna, on the other hand, protected from fire in 1922 by Turkish troops, have long been Turkish schools). The roles of Constantinople, Smyrna and Alexandria in Greek life appear to be over.

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Foreign cities, however, could still be more attractive than Greece. Many Greeks from Constantinople, Smyrna and Alexandria chose to move to London, Paris or Montreal rather than Athens. The Greeks of these cities show that cosmopolitanism can be as Greek as nationalism, and that there are many varieties of both.

While some Greeks of Constantinople, Smyrna and Alexandria lived entirely Greek lives, supporting Greek causes, bound by Greek community structures, Greek Orthodoxy and intermarriage with other Greeks, others did not, as their knowledge of Turkish and French, and acquisition of Ottoman or Egyptian nationality suggest. Further research in Turkish and Egyptian archives may show more examples of flexible nationality and shared loyalties. What has been said of Germany by Friedrich Meinecke, could also apply to Greece: 'there is no German history, there is only European history' – provided that the Ottoman Empire and Egypt are also considered as, in the words of the Khedive Ismail of Egypt in 1878, 'part of Europe'.

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