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The Hellenic Literary Society at Constantinople between Ottomanism and Greek Irredentism

Artemis Papatheodorou

> *… the Turks, public servants or soldiers, remained in sum what they've always been, Barbarians making a life out of plunder and robbery…*[1]

The above statement reveals how one of the finest institutions of Ottoman Greek letters and sciences, the Hellenic Literary Society at Constantinople, described the Turks in a petition to its honorary members, academics, university professors, and learned societies in the Allied countries and in those that had remained neutral during the Great War, just a month into the deliberations of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. The picture of the Turk as a barbarian permeates the petition and juxtaposes that of the Greek as the bearer of civilization. In this way, the society attempted to elicit the support of Western intellectuals in favor of Greek irredentism. Such an approach was not unique to the Ottoman Greeks, as Armenians also employed a similar distinction between the Turks and themselves to enhance their national aspirations.[2] Yet, such a snapshot of the society in the post-Armistice period can be misleading as to its sixty-odd year-long lifetime. The society had remained, for the most part, in favor of Ottomanism, and its endorsement of Greek irredentism tells us more about how and why multi-ethnic and multi-cultural empires can fail rather than providing an accurate depiction of the society throughout its existence.

The Hellenic Literary Society at Constantinople was founded in 1861.[3] Its doors remained open not only to Greeks, but to anyone interested in philological matters, irrespective of their religion or profession.[4] In the following decades, the society rose to a prominent position among Ottoman Greek institutions of knowledge and, at its peak, reached over five hundred members.[5] Many—if not most—of these were Ottoman Greeks from Istanbul, but the society was known in the provinces too. It was also able to attract foreigners residing in the capital and, occasionally, in other cities of the empire. Some foreign members rose to high positions in the society, as illustrated by Julius Millingen, an Anglo-Dutch physician at the imperial court, who was elected president of the society in 1869–1870.[6] Armenians and Muslims joined the society as members too, albeit in smaller numbers.[7] It could even enlist prime ministers, such as British Prime Minister William Gladstone, among its members.[8] Overall, however, it is more accurate to think of the society as a middle-class initiative.[9]

Not long after its creation, the society expanded its scope to encompass many subjects beyond philology. It established a number of committees working on topics as diverse as

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1 Sylloge Littéraire Grec de Constantinople, *Le Sylloge Littéraire Grec à ses membres honoraires, aux Académies, Universités et Associations de savants des pays de l' Entente et des pays neutres* (n.p.: Imp. Chaix, 1919), 2.
2 Lerna Ekmekcioglu, *Recovering Armenia: The Limits of Belonging in Post-Genocide Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 46–47.
3 George Vassiadis, *The Syllogos Movement of Constantinople and Ottoman Greek Education 1861-1923* (Athens: Centre for Asia Minor Studies, 2007), 56–57.
4 Κανονισμός του Εν Κωνσταντινουπόλει Ελληνικού Φιλολογικού Συλλόγου (1861), with no further bibliographical information.
5 Εν Κωνσταντινουπόλει Ελληνικός Φιλολογικός Σύλλογος (ΕΚΦΣ), Σύγγραμμα Περιοδικόν, ΙΗ' (1888), γ'-κβ'.
6 Yusuf Ziya Karabıçak, *The Development of Ottoman Policies Towards Greek Associations (1861–1912)* (Istanbul: Libra Yayınları, 2014), 91; and Vassiadis, *The Syllogos Movement*, 83.
7 ΕΚΦΣ, Σύγγραμμα Περιοδικόν, ΚΔ' (1895), ζ'; ΚΕ' (1895), 82–83; and ΙΗ' (1888), κ'and ιγ'.
8 ΕΚΦΣ, Σύγγραμμα Περιοδικόν, ΙΗ' (1888), ιε'.
9 Χάρης Εξερτζόγλου, Εθνική Ταυτότητα στην Κωνσταντινούπολη τον 19ο αιώνα – Ο Ελληνικός Φιλολογικός Σύλλογος Κωνσταντινουπόλεως 1861–*1912* (Athens: Εκδόσεις Νεφέλη, 1996), 34–41.

Figure 1: The headquarters of the Hellenic Literary Society at Constantinople (Εν Κωνσταντινουπόλει Ελληνικός Φιλολογικός Σύλλογος, Σύγγραμμα Περιοδικόν, annex to vol. IH', 1888, 4). **University of Crete – Rethymno. Digital Library of Modern Greek Studies.**

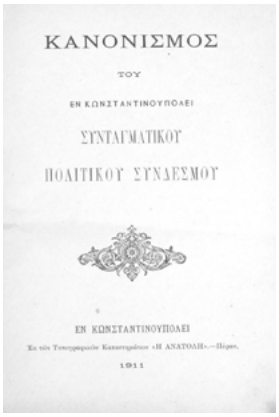
philology, education, archaeology, anthropology, and the sciences.[10] In the early twentieth century, the architectural committee brought together the pantheon of late Ottoman architecture: Alexandre Vallaury, Periklēs Phōtiadēs, Leon Gurekian, and Kemaleddin Bey, to name but a few.[11] In 1909, readers at the library of the society could select among 16,631 books, 666 journal issues and 630 brochures, largely on Greek philology, history, medicine, religion, and archaeology.[12]

By extending membership to any person with an interest in the subjects that it investigated, the society broke with a centuries-old tradition of communitarianism along ethno-religious lines, known as the *millet* system. This was no coincidence. As early as the late

10 Κανονισμός του Εν Κωνσταντινουπόλει Ελληνικού Φιλολογικού Συλλόγου (1871), art. 40.
11 ΕΚΦΣ, Σύγγραμμα Περιοδικόν, ΚΘ' (1907), 9-11, 16, 28, 43, 44, 66 and 68.
12 ΕΚΦΣ, Σύγγραμμα Περιοδικόν, ΛΒ' (1911), 40; ΚΓ' (1893), 62.


ΚΑΝΟΝΙΣΜΟΣ
ΤΗΣ
ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΣ ΣΥΝΤΑΓΜΑΤΙΚΗΣ ΛΕΣΧΗΣ
ΚΟΝΤΟΣΚΑΛΙΟΥ
ΕΝ ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΥΠΟΛΕΙ
1908

Figure 2: Cover Page, *Regulation of the Hellenic Constitutional Club of Kontoskali*, 1908. Sakkoulides Library, Sismanoglio Megaro.


ΚΑΝΟΝΙΣΜΟΣ
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ΕΝ ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΥΠΟΛΕΙ
ΣΥΝΤΑΓΜΑΤΙΚΟΥ
ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΟΥ ΣΥΝΔΕΣΜΟΥ
ΕΝ ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΥΠΟΛΕΙ
1911

Figure 3: Cover, *Regulation of the Constitutional Political League at Constantinople*, 1911. Sakkoulides Library, Sismanoglio Megaro.

1830s, with the initiation of the Tanzimat reforms, there was a shift towards greater equality for Ottoman subjects. The ideology of Ottomanism was formulated and propelled to support the reforms by creating an identity that aspired to unite all Ottomans under the sultan.[13] Progress paralleled the creation of an Ottoman identity as the demand of the day. From the beginning, the society firmly established itself in this trajectory towards equality and progress. It registered itself among progress-oriented initiatives carried out by the state and the non-Muslim communities, such as the establishment of *rüşdiye* high schools, the periodicals issued by Armenians, the newspapers published by Jews, the schools for girls operated by the Greek Orthodox community, etc. The Ottoman Scientific Society (Cemiyet-i İlmiye-i Osmâniye) served as a role model to this prolific institution mainly because it welcomed Greek Orthodox, Armenians, and Europeans alongside Muslim members, and because it published a periodical.[14] The way that the society functioned confirms that it did not only accept the Ottoman state in principle, but looked up to it. For example, it openly acknowledged the Ottoman government as the primary guardian of ancient and medieval monuments in the country.[15]

Then, when did the society abandon Ottomanism for Greek irredentism? Until the Young Turk period (1908–1918), the society overall manifested a firm belief in the merits of Ottomanism. In 1909, speaking at the celebrations organized by the society to mark the first anniversary of the Young Turk Revolution, society member Mēnas Authentopoulos stressed the wish for the Ottoman Greeks to work together with the other nations of the empire for the sake of their shared homeland.[16] The Hellenic Literary Society at Constantinople was not the only Greek Orthodox association endorsing the message of the Young Turks for equality in a constitutional political arrangement. At least two Greek Orthodox associations were established in those years in the Ottoman capital that expressed the purpose of upholding constitutionalism. The Hellenic Constitutional Club of Kontoskali (Kumkapı), founded in 1908, aimed at educating its members, the community, and the wider public on the duties and rights of citizens in a constitutional government (fig. 2).[17] In 1911, on the eve of the Balkan Wars, the Constitutional Political League at Constantinople went even further, setting to propagate the idea of a political union between the various ethnicities of the empire (fig. 3).[18]

Nevertheless, Mēnas Authentopoulos, who in 1909 expressed the support of the society to Ottomanism and constitutionalism, is the same person who, ten years later, signed the aforementioned petition where the Turks were systematically portrayed as barbarians. What caused Mēnas Authentopoulos to change his mind? In 1909 it was already clear that the Ottoman Greeks did not entirely trust the Young Turk regime. In his speech, Authentopoulos conditioned the possibility of all nations in the empire to work hand-in-hand for their shared homeland on freedom being offered sincerely, and equality before the law being secured for all Ottomans.[19]

The territorial expansion of the Greek state, a result of the Balkan Wars (1912–1913) and World War I (1914–1918), emboldened Ottoman Greek nationalists. By 1919, Greece had annexed territories bringing her armies at a relatively short distance from the Ottoman capital. Constantinopolitan Greeks who had previously considered uniting with a small Greek state bordering the Ottoman Empire in Thessaly unrealistic, now had grounds to believe that a union might actually be feasible. A charismatic, victorious leader, Eleutherios Venizelos (1864–1936), had emerged in Greece and was able to summon Greek support to his

13 Carter Vaughn Findley, "The Tanzimat," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey – Turkey in the Modern World*, ed. Reşat Kasaba (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 11–37.
14 ΕΚΦΣ, Σύγγραμμα Περιοδικόν, Α' (1863), γ'-δ'.
15 Artemis Papatheodorou, "Ottoman policy-making in an age of reforms: Unearthing Ottoman archaeology in the 19th and early 20th centuries" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2017).
16 ΕΚΦΣ, Σύγγραμμα Περιοδικόν, ΛΒ' (1911), 6–7.
17 Κανονισμός της Ελληνικής Συνταγματικής Λέσχης Κοντοσκαλίου (Istanbul: Τύποις Αριστόβουλου και Αναστασιάδου, 1908).
18 Κανονισμός του Εν Κωσταντινουπόλει Συνταγματικού Πολιτικού Συνδέσμου (Istanbul: Εκ των Τυπογραφικών Καταστημάτων «Η ΑΝΑΤΟΛΗ», 1911).
19 ΕΚΦΣ, Σύγγραμμα Περιοδικόν, ΛΒ' (1911), 6–7.

Figure 4: Refugees of the Great War from the interior of the Black Sea region (Πατριαρχική Κεντρική Επιτροπή, Η Περίθαλψις και Εγκατάστασις των εν Τουρκία Προσφύγων του Ευρωπαϊκού Πολέμου, 1918-1921, 5. Sakkoulides Library, Sismanoglio Megaro.

irredentist plans. The occupation of Constantinople by the Allied powers only reinforced the feeling that the demise of the Ottoman Empire was imminent.[20]

Notably, several Ottoman state policies alienated the Greek Orthodox community in the empire. Erik Zürcher argues that although the Young Turks, and more precisely the Committee of Union and Progress, ostensibly supported Ottomanism, they understood this as something "close to Turkification of the non-Turkish elements."[21] This was, for example, clearly noticeable in their economic and financial policy which aimed to Turkify the economy, largely at the expense of Greeks and Armenians. Moreover, a "campaign of threats and intimidation" pushed at least 130,000 Ottoman Greeks from the western coastal parts of Anatolia to flee their country.[22] The forced relocation of the Christian populations from the war zones that the Ottoman government ordered and carried out during the Great War was, in the eyes of Ottoman Greeks in Constantinople, "no other thing than a brutal persecution."[23] The plight of destitute Ottoman Greek refugees, mostly children and women seeking refuge in the capital during the post-Armistice period, exacerbated the disillusionment of Constantinopolitan Greeks with the Ottoman government (fig. 4).[24]

By 1919, no Ottoman Greek in Istanbul could easily argue that the Ottoman Empire treated them as equal or, worse, that it guaranteed their lives. Venizelos' vision for a Greece that would stretch over two continents and five seas acquired a particular allure; even to those who, like the Hellenic Literary Society at Constantinople, had spent half a century pro-

20 Richard Clogg, *A Concise History of Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 73–95; Dimitris Kamouzis, *Greeks in Turkey: Elite Nationalism and Minority Politics in Late Ottoman and Early Republican Istanbul* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021), 45–52.
21 Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey, A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 129.
22 Zürcher, *ibid*, 123–127.
23 Πατριαρχική Κεντρική Επιτροπή υπέρ των Μετατοπισθέντων Ελληνικών Πληθυσμών, Η Περίθαλψις και Εγκατάστασις των εν Τουρκία Προσφύγων του Ευρωπαϊκού Πολέμου (1918–*1921)* (Istanbul: Εκ του Τυπογραφείου Κ. Μακρίδου και Ι. Αλευροπούλου, 1921), 11.
24 Ibid.

moting progress in a common Ottoman homeland. This, however, was not without consequences for the society.

After hitting a virtual standstill during the Balkan Wars and the Great War, things seemed to return to normal for the society during the post-Armistice period. Several of its committees resumed their activities; it published the volume of its periodical dedicated to its fiftieth anniversary; and restored its ties with institutions of knowledge abroad. Yet, what marked its outlook in those years was a new element of activity: the promotion of a Greek irredentist agenda. In December 1918, the society elected by acclamation Eleutherios Venizelos honorary president for life. In the national schism that pitted royalist Greeks against Venizelist ones, the society had decidedly sided with Venizelos and adopted his irredentist vision. In its plenary sessions, it considered political topics more often than scholarly ones. With the petition discussed, it took political activism abroad.[25]

As soon as the post-Armistice period ended, the society too faded away. Its stance in the years leading to the establishment of the Turkish Republic had made it unpalatable to Turkish leadership. By 1925, the society had been officially closed down, and, in violation of international law, its movable and immovable property confiscated.[26] Thus, within just a few years, nationalist competition had condemned to oblivion half a century of contributions to a shared homeland.

25 Γιώργος Γιαννακόπουλος, "Ο Ελληνικός Φιλολογικός Σύλλογος Κωνσταντινουπόλεως (1861–1922): Η ελληνική παιδεία και επιστήμη ως εθνική πολιτική στην Οθωμανική αυτοκρατορία" (PhD diss., Εθνικό και Καποδιστριακό Πανεπιστήμιο Αθηνών, 1998), 335–378. On the national schism and Constantinopolitan Greeks, see Kamouzis, *Greeks in Turkey*, 77–88.
26 Γιαννακόπουλος, *ibid*, 378–381; Alexis Alexandris, *The Greek Minority of Istanbul and Greek-Turkish Relations, 1918–1974* (Athens: Centre for Asia Minor Studies, 1992), 131–132.