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## Greeks Set Smyrna on Fire in (latest) Turkish Textbooks

**By H. Millas**

*‘Ο Έλληνας λένε πως οι Τούρκοι έκαψαν τη Σμύρνη,*

*οι Τούρκοι λένε πως οι Έλληνες την έκαψαν.*

*Ποιος μπορεί να ξέρει την αλήθεια.’*

*Δεν έχω κέφι για συζήτηση. [\[1\]](#)*

Two myths or two mirror images

Turkish history textbooks, as most textbooks worldwide, express the official version of the story of ‘the homeland’. Not only do they interpret the past on a national basis but at the same time reproduce the image of ‘the other’ in accordance to the -real or imaginary- needs of the state. ‘The other’, on the other hand, develops a counter view, an altogether different story. Therefore, the tale of a city differs to the degree the two nations associate themselves with two dissimilar ‘pasts’. The fire of Smyrna (‘İzmir’ for Turks and ‘Smirni’ for Greeks) was an unfair act of the

Greeks in the Turkish discourse, and the culmination of a disaster caused by the Turks in the Greek case. Here I will discuss the fire of 1922 as presented in the Turkish textbooks and I will try to interpret this version.

The narration of the textbooks can be best understood if the perceptions in the two countries with respect to their bilateral relations and the image of 'the other' are taken into consideration. The Greek and the Turkish 'points of view', broadly speaking, can be reduced into two simple myths. These two national argumentations can also be perceived as a framework in which national identity is nourished. [\[2\]](#)

The Greek myth, as it would be phrased by an 'average' citizen, can be summarized as follows: We, the Greeks, compose an old nation. We existed continuously for many thousand years. We have developed great civilizations (the Ancient Greek, the Hellenistic, the Byzantine). In this respect we are unique and superb. Now, if our present might is not so apparent is due to the 'other' (basically to 'Tourkokratia'). The Turks, so different from us, are an Asiatic and barbaric nation. Their characteristic behaviour is repeated through history: they captured our lands, destroyed our country (Byzantium), they enslaved us for hundreds of years. We suffered a lot. Eventually we shed our blood and we liberated ourselves. However, the same Turks are still nearby and similar problems still exist: the Turks still occupy Greek lands in Asia Minor, Constantinople and Cyprus, they are threatening our sovereignty in the Aegean and in Thrace, treat our ethnic groups in Istanbul badly. They hate us since they know they are the invaders; we are the original inhabitants of the lands they occupy. The 'West' is not helping us, as it never did, because it is in its interest to align with Turkey since Turkey occupies a strategic area and/or because the Catholic/Protestant West does not like us. That's why the Westerners pretend to be unaware of our problems and of the attacks we face.

The Turkish myth goes as follows: We originated in Asia but we have lived for centuries in Europe as a sovereign nation. We are part of Europe. When we first came we encountered an Empire in ruins. This empire was not Greek but Roman to begin with. The claims of modern Greeks to be the heirs of Byzantium are not valid: they are not the same race or nation with the ancient people; i.e., the Ionians and the Byzantines are not 'the same' with modern Greeks. Their claim on these lands is not justified. We treated them well during the Ottoman rule and this rule was beneficial to them. Turks proved their good will and unbiased attitude toward the 'others'. We lived together so closely within one benevolent Turkish state for centuries. The Greeks, sometimes serving the interests of the 'West', did not want to live with us, they revolted. And from there on, they continuously attacked and captured our lands: in 1881, 1897, 1912, 1919. They tried to expand their borders in Cyprus in 1974 too. They discredit us as 'barbaric', they hate us, they always mistreat the Turkish populations, especially in Western Thrace. Actually it is the Greeks who are not civilized and are ultra nationalists. The whole 'West' is against us because they are prejudiced: they have a negative image of the (Muslim) Turks and

they always back up Greece because they form a Christian family. [3]

It is natural that in historiography these arguments are voiced in different 'styles' depending on the personality of the writer: nationalistic and aggressive, academic and 'scientific' or sophisticated and disguised, i.e., in a roundabout manner. In the textbook, since they are addressed to students, the language used is quite straightforward and simple. [4] The Greeks are presented as enemies, often as a diachronic threat, a nation which tries to capture 'our homeland' and causes serious problems. The fire of Smyrna, together with other 'fires' of Turkish towns, comes to the agenda in this context.

Greeks are 'not guilty' in early textbooks

The history textbooks which the Ministry of Education prepared with great enthusiasm and expectations for the intermediary education in the beginning of 1930s are the most detailed textbooks ever produced in Turkey. [5] The fire of Smyrna is not especially mentioned however, in *Tarih IV* (of 1931), i.e., in the textbook prepared for intermediary education, even though about seventy pages are allocated to the war of 1919-1922 fought against the Greeks.

[6]

The Greeks do set fire on other places though:

*'As they retreated the Greeks burned down and destroyed the towns and the villages which they controlled. The Rum people ran away together with the Greeks'*

. And thus the West Anatolia is

*'cleaned from the Greeks'*

(pp. 119-120).

[7]

This approach is followed for about five decades. Until 1970s the Greeks are not accused of the fire of Smyrna in the textbooks. Actually this particular fire is not mentioned, it is forgotten or it is perceived as a secondary issue, even though the burning down of villages and other towns by the Greeks is repeatedly mentioned. For example in a textbook of 1947 it is mentioned that *'as they retreated the Greeks burned down our most beautiful villages and towns. The Ottoman citizens Rum population walked out together with the Greek army'* (Su, 1947)

In the textbooks prepared by authors such as Niyazi Akşit (his books were in use in the years 1951-1980), Emin Oktay (books of 1950-1980), Enver Behnan Şapolyo (books of 1961-1979), Enver Ziya Karal (books of 1954-1979) the fire of Smyrna is not mentioned. [8]

### Rewriting of history in the 1970s

The 1970s mark the changing in interpreting the past. Actually in a textbook prepared for technical schools and published in 1969 we find probably one of the first cases where the Greeks are presented as the arsonist of Smyrna: '*The Turkish cavalry in the morning of 9 September entered İzmir which had been burned down by the enemy. Beautiful İzmir which had been under the occupation of the enemy for four years joined the homeland anew. Atatürk had saved the homeland and threw the enemy into the sea*' (Mesleki...). After mid 1970s the Greeks are presented with an increasing frequency as the sole responsible of the fire. In Ferruh Sanır's textbooks, published in 1977, the statement is clear: '*It is 9 September 1922... İzmir is in flames... This is the last evil of those who run away: the Greeks had set the city on fire on several locations*' (Sanır, 1978, p. 109).

This interpretation is almost standardized by time. It is interesting that the date of the fire is changed. It is moved from 13<sup>th</sup> of September to 9<sup>th</sup> for obvious reasons. It appears more convincing to present the enemies setting the fire before their departure and before the city was under the control of the victor.

In the following years the textbooks normally introduced the fire of Smyrna, together with a stressed negative image of 'the other', expressed with an emotional rhetoric. In a civic textbook for primary schools of 1980s for example, we read the following narrative: '*The enemy runs away continuously. Young Mehmet*

(an epithet for the Turkish soldier, H.M.)

*is chasing him without stopping to take a breath. The Greek army, in utter confusion and scattered, runs away leaving behind thousands of dead and prisoners... The only hope to save his live by running away is the combined fleet of the enemies which waits in the bay of İzmir. Alas, if they could only step on board of those ships... The day is 9<sup>th</sup>*

*of 9 September 1922.*

*İzmir is on fire. This is the last evil of those who run away: The Greeks had set the city on fire on several locations. An altogether new, prosperous*

*İzmir is going to rise in the place of the burned down*

*İzmir. A young, alive Turkish State is being born in the place of an empire which withered away. It was not only the Greeks who lost hope, it was also those who supported them. Those hopes were buried in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea. But history did not forget and will never forget that shameful assault... This victory accomplished the cleaning up of Western Anatolia from the enemy'*

(Sanır, 1986, pp. 103-104).

Language textbooks of junior high school also blame the Greeks for the fire and express the hope which the fire inspires. The students read a letter of a young boy allegedly sent on September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1922 where the happiness of the Turks is expressed in spite of the fire and even, possibly, due to the fire:

*'If you see beautiful İzmir you won't recognize it. Smoke and flames rise from everywhere. But we know that these are the last places that the cruel enemy burns down and destroys. From now on nobody will dare lay hand on our sacred homeland. If they dare to, they will be thrown into the sea like the ones we saw here and they will perish... You should have seen them early in the morning how they threw themselves into the sea to reach the boats which waited out in the sea! The whole İzmir was in a turmoil... My dear Adnan, never existed such a fire, such a celebration, such a festivity in a place on fire. Our house started burning as the fire reached us from next door. We did not feel sorry for the furniture, for our property. We were carrying water and carrying away the furniture singing, full of joy... Our*

(Greek, H.M.)

*neighbor Niko and his family sought refuge in the ships together with the Greek soldiers. The Rums who for years tortured us they were afraid of us. They sought their escape in running away together with the soldiers... We heard that the next day Mustafa Kemal would enter the city. The fires had not been extinguished. Smokes were coming out from everywhere. But we, full of joy, were in the streets to meet Mustafa Kemal and his friends. My God! What a big joy it was!*

(Demiray: 1986, p. 3-4)

The joy and the sense of relief that the fire inspires is also noticed in some Turkish novels (See Millas: 'Smyrna Fire and the Arsonists: The Absentees of Turkish Novels', in this volume). The fire is clearly dated earlier than the arrival of Mustafa Kemal. This kind of a

narrative continuous until today, the fire of Smyrna *per se* sometimes being mentioned and sometimes omitted. In a textbook dedicated to the War of Liberation and the Kemalist reforms, used almost unchanged throughout the decades of 1980 and 1990 for senior high schools, we read about the traitorous role of the minorities (characterized with religious symbols) and the violence and the vice of the enemy, even though the fire of Smyrna itself is not narrated: When the Greek army enters the city in 1919,

*'The church bells toll, the Rums who crowded along the seashore, men and women, threw bundles of flowers to the Greek soldiers and shouted 'zito!' in a frenzy of demonstration. The archbishop of*

*İzmir, with the cross in his hand raising it high in the air, blessed the soldiers and gave speeches inciting them against the Turks*

... (Then the violence of the Greek army is narrated: killing officers, heroes who resisted the invasion like Hasan Tahsin, etc.)

*... Thus, the Greek violence, which the Turks will never forget, started... (*

*Su: 1992, pp. 42-43),*

(and many pages later the result: )

*.... 'They ran away in a hurry. As they ran away they did not stop committing their last treachery, they burnt down the Turkish villages and killed whoever they met. The fields which were set on fire were burning in great flames...*

*Uşak was in ruins... (p. 166).*

In the junior high school textbook of the same period a similar narration is followed, the fire itself is again not mentioned, but a historic association is introduced: *'The battle of Mantzikert opened the doors of Anatolia to the Turks, the victory against the Greeks (Başkumandanı Meydan Muharebesi), proved that Anatolia will remain a Turkish homeland to infinity'*

(

*Orta Okullar*

*...: 1992, p. 112).*

In the later primary school history textbooks (called Social Sciences / Sosyal Bilgiler ), the fire of Smyrna is not mentioned but two phrases appear in all of them: *'They did not stop doing evil (fenalık) as they ran away, setting fire on villages and cities which they abandoned... West Anatolia was cleaned up from the Greeks (*

*Yunanlılardan temizlendi)*

(İlkokullar için...: 1994, p. 163 and Şenünver: 1999, p. 45). In the second textbook the phrase *'this sacred victory*

*showed*

*that Anatolia will remain a Turkish homeland to infinity'*

*appears again (p. 46).*

A final retouch by changing dates

A recent senior high school history textbook (Palazoğlu: 1996), even though it is only 228 pages long, dedicates many paragraphs to Smyrna and to the role of the Greeks. In this textbook the date of the fire is changed to comply with the well known 'historical truth': the fire is on the 13<sup>th</sup> of September and Mustafa Kemal is already in the city. It narrates the organizations which the 'minorities', the 'Rums', founded after 1919 - Mavri Mira, boy scouts, Etniki Eteryia (SIC), organizations in Pontus - in collaboration with the Patriarchate of Istanbul and sometimes with the Armenians, backed up by the Greek government, all with the purpose, '*to create the Byzantium Empire anew*' (p. 40). Many familiar phrases are repeated but 'barbarism' is introduced - in a dramatic present time tense - for the first time: '*They did not stop doing evil as they ran away, setting on fire and demolishing the environment and killing whoever they met, presenting their barbarism to the world*' (p. 189)...

□□□ *'The occupation of İzmir which started on May 15<sup>th</sup> 1919 ended on September 9<sup>th</sup> 1922 and the harbor of İzmir was now full of tragic and comic scenes of the enemy soldiers who were pushing each other into the sea in order to get into the boats that will take them to the ships... Still lots of foreigners and especially Rums remain. They are afraid. They are afraid that the Turks will do to them what they did to the Turks three years ago when the Greeks occupied İzmir. But their fear has no base. It is out of question for the Turks to answer back barbarism with a counter barbarism... On the other hand the representative of the Allies applied to Mustafa Kemal to stop the possible acts of vengeance of the Turks against the minorities. But this was an unnecessary act, because Mustafa Kemal had already taken the appropriate precautions...*

□□□□ *However, the barbarism comes again from forces which are outside the Muslim people. İzmir all of a sudden is in flames. The minorities which collaborated with the Greeks who were running away from the Turkish army, added a last anti- civilized act to their behavior of the last three years and turned beautiful*

*İzmir*

*to ashes. Exactly like the villages, towns and cities which left behind as they ran away*  
*(September 13*

*th*

*1922). Mustafa Kemal watched this terrible scene with great sorrow. But he tries not to give*  
*great importance to it. He shifted his thoughts to the civilized and prosperous*

*İzmir*

*of the future* (p. 190).

### An assessment

This short review of the textbooks shows that some components of the ‘Turkish national myth’ mentioned at the very beginning of this article can be detected in the discourse associated with the fire of Smyrna: ‘The other’ is an enemy who threatens our sovereignty (the Greeks want to create Byzantium anew, claiming they are the heirs of ‘our’ lands). The westerners are behind them (they help the Greeks with their ships and they are disappointed when the Greeks lose the war). The Westerners are prejudiced (the Greeks are the barbarians, not us who protect the minorities and do not do what the Greeks have done to us). [9] The Greeks hate us and they treat us badly (they destroy and burn down our cities). The ‘Rums’ (derived from ‘Romans’) who live on our lands, and in Smyrna, are not associated with the ‘Greeks’ (Yunan) of Greece, they are traitors, they do not compose a single nation, so the Greeks are invaders and not liberators of their compatriots.

[10]

The victory of the Turks against the Greeks demonstrates that these lands will remain Turkish (and the historical era that started with ‘our arrival’ from Asia to Anatolia in 1071 and with the battle of Mantzikert is now completed). The religious demarcation line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is also dominant in the texts: the cross of the archbishop, the church bells which toll in nationalistic joy and the ‘barbarism that comes outside Islam’ are such cases.

A trend in the last decades of presenting the fire of Smyrna in a more emotional way is also apparent. Anatolia was ‘cleaned’ of the Greeks and the enemy who ran for his life ‘set fires in the villages and cities’ in all textbooks throughout, from 1930 to present. However starting with the 1970s a more nationalistic approach is noticed. [11] The fire of Smyrna is narrated in detail and usually in a dramatic present tense and the accusations against ‘the other’ become predominant (barbaric, evil etc.). Eventually the Rum minority, characterized as the ‘foreigners



still lived in Anatolia' are shown to be the ones, in collaboration with the Greek army, who 'turned Smyrna into ashes'.

There are some issues which are silenced or at least not clearly stated. The way the Greek army and the Rum population left Anatolia is not clear. The general impression is that they left all together, before the liberation of Smyrna by the Turkish troops. Only in the last textbook mentioned above the date of the fire is stated as September 13<sup>th</sup>. This infers a relative Turkish control in Smyrna on the day of the fire.

In the discourse of these textbooks the liberation of Smyrna, together with all incidents related to this, the fire included, as a general metaphor, is a happy incident. The fire of Smyrna does appear as a treacherous and evil act of 'the other' but not necessarily an unhappy incident which brings only sorrow. We have seen scenes where joy among the Turks prevailed along with a narration of the fire. The fire is like a tribute to be paid for better days. One may even suspect that it is a necessary means to wipe away the last traces of the loathed 'other'. Contrary to the Greek case in which the fire is perceived as the final act of a national catastrophe, the very same fire, among the Turks is the 'last evil act of the other' which opens the way to a happy future.

Finally, from historiographical point of view the rewriting of history, as is disclosed in these textbooks, is of utmost interest. We see that the time factor does not secure more mature history writing: neither the time elapsed nor the general improvement of history writing secured a more sound interpretation of the fire of Smyrna. The textbooks appear to be seriously influenced by politics, ideologies and other similar factors which are not supposed to determine the discipline of historiography. In the 1970s the Greeks - who up to that time had not been presented as the arsonists of Smyrna - suddenly are accused of the fire. For 25 years it was repeatedly claimed that the Greeks (mostly the Greek army) started the fire before the entrance of the Turkish army in the city. The date of the fire changed only lately from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> September, the arsonist still remaining the same.

And all this alchemy is performed about an incident which took place only a few decades ago for which there are eyewitnesses alive...

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[1] “‘The Greeks say that the Turks burned down Smyrna, the Turks say that it was the Greeks who did it. Who can ever know the truth.’ I did not feel like getting into a discussion” . From the memoirs of Yorgos Seferis (July 1, 1950), visiting Smyrna and talking to a Turkish diplomat.

[2] These myths can be named paradigms, metaphors, national discourses, (imagined) national past and/or identity, perceptions of us versus the ‘other’, national ‘consciousness’, world-views (weltanschauung) etc. Actually not the ‘name’ but the existence and function of these myths and the perceptions of the people are of importance.

[3] For a detailed exposition of these ‘myths’ see also Millas: 2000, pp. 274-278 and Millas: 2001 pp. 391-395 (for the references see Bibliography below).

[4] For the image of Greeks in Turkish textbooks (and some cases of Turks in Greek

textbooks) see Copeaux: 1998, 1998b; Koullapis: 1993, 1995; Millas: 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1995, 1997, 1988.

[5] For the political and ideological climate of the time and the preparation of these first textbooks of the new republic see Ersanlı: 1992.

[6] The book which is allocated to Modern Turkey and to the Turkish War of Liberation is in total more than 500 pages. 133 pages are about the war and 240 pages about the reforms of the new state. There are another 131 pages of photographs on both topics. The textbooks of the later periods hardly ever exceed 350 pages.

[7] In Turkish the term 'Yunan' is used for Greeks and 'Rum' for ethnic Greeks of Ottoman or Turkish nationality/citizenship (and for other non-Greek citizenship, such as Greeks of America, of Cyprus etc.). The term 'temizlendi' is used in Turkish for the 'cleaned' Anatolia.

[8] See bibliography for the particulars of these textbooks.

[9] In an civic textbook for junior high school (Dal: 1992, p. 75) among the properties of the 'character of the Turks', along with good manners, hospitality, love for the home country and the family, etc., it is mentioned that Turks 'do not cast a malignant eye at the people entrusted (SIC) to them' (Kendisine emanet edilen insanlara kötü gözle bakmaz).

[10] In other parts of these textbooks it is stated that the Ionians a) are actually ancient Turks (in the textbooks of 1930), and b) are not associated with the ancient Greeks (in later periods). (See: Copeaux: 1998; Millas: 1998 and 2001, pp. 64-100.

[11] This is the opinion of Türker Alkan too, who writes with respect to the textbooks of Turkey: *'in the text of 1977 there is a rising tendency of nationalism... The policy of the pro-fascist National Front Coalition was probably one of the reasons'* (Alkan: 1982, p. 68).