The ancient city bustled with trade and naughty pleasures – until it was destroyed by arson a century ago. By *Philip Mansel*

Smyrna, joy of Asia

'Don't forget Smyrna!' shouted Turkish President Recep Erdoğan in a speech this September.

He was referring to Smyrna, the main port on Turkey's Aegean coast, and what happened to it 100 years ago.

From 13th to 16th September 1922, starting just four days after the flight of Greek forces and the entry of a Turkish army, a fire destroyed the city centre.

Greek and Armenian inhabitants fled to the waterfront, where they formed 'a shrieking, terrified torrent of humanity', according to George Ward Price, a British journalist watching from on board HMS *Iron Duke* (which eventually removed some of them). The fire, organised by Turkish soldiers, was followed by the murder or expulsion of 100,000 or more Greeks and Armenians.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey's founding father, denied Turkey's responsibility, but he was the general in command of the city.

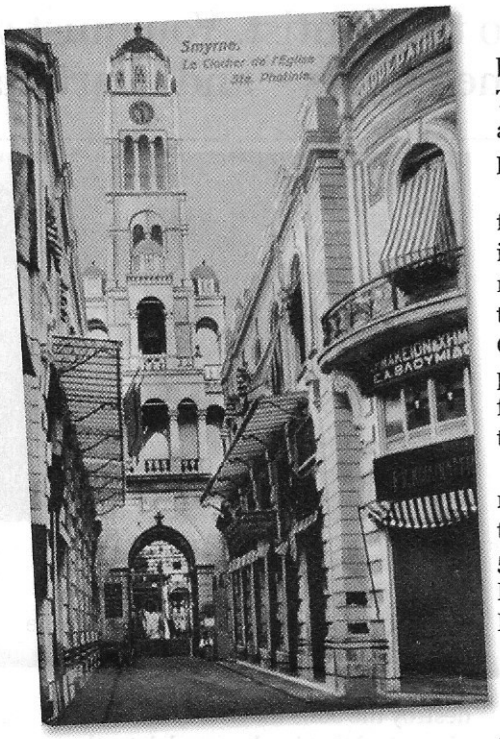
He told his future wife, Latife Hanim, an emancipated Turkish woman from Smyrna, as they watched the city burn, 'Yes, let it burn! Let it crash down! We can replace everything.'

What Turks commemorate every year as the 'liberation' is remembered by Greeks as the 'catastrophe' – the elimination of all Greeks from Anatolia.

Britain has reason to remember Smyrna, too. For centuries, it had been a flourishing world city with a powerful British community – hence the presence of British battleships in the harbour in 1922.

Founded by Greek colonists in the seventh century BC, Smyrna was long a centre of Greek culture and was possibly Homer's birthplace. It is situated at the end of a long, deep gulf where the Aegean projects into the westernmost point of Asia. A natural link between Europe and Asia, it was called by the Romans 'the joy of Asia'.

After over 1,000 years in the Roman Empire, Smyrna was ruled by Turks, the Genoese, the Knights of Saint John and Venice. By 1480, it was a small market

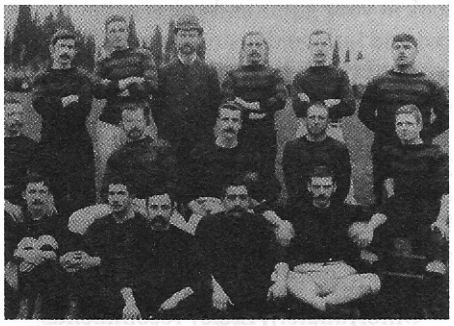


The bell tower of Smyrna's former Greek Orthodox Cathedral, Agia Fotini

town in the Ottoman Empire. Its Turkish name, İzmir, came from the Greek phrase 'eis teen Smyrna': into Smyrna.

Its location and its harbour soon attracted French, Dutch, English and Venetian merchants, as well as Turks, Greeks, Jews and Armenians.

In 1634, the French jewel merchant Jean Baptiste Tavernier could write, 'Smyrna is today for trade by both sea and land the most famous city of all the Levant and the most famous market for every merchandise going from Europe to Asia and from Asia to Europe.'



Bournabat FC, Smyrna, 1890s

It exported fruit – Smyrna figs are the best – carpets, opium and antiquities. The population rose from 5,000 to around 100,000, periodically reduced by plagues and earthquakes.

Mosques, churches and synagogues flourished side by side. Christians lived in 'great freedom' – despite occasional massacres. After Greek independence in the early-19th century, thousands of Greeks moved to Smyrna. They preferred prosperity in the Ottoman Empire to freedom and chaos at home. Turks called the city Gâvur İzmir – 'Infidel İzmir'.

By the mid-19th century, the city contained more Greeks than Turks – 55,000 Greeks to 45,000 Turks (and 13,000 Jews and 5,000 Armenians). Some 12,000 western Europeans included several thousand English and Maltese.

Helped by the city's English merchants, Smyrna started the Ottoman Empire's first newspaper, first railway and first football club: Bournabat Football and Rugby Club, established in a Levantine suburb in 1894. The red-and-yellow *Tulipa whittallii* is named after a prominent British family of Smyrna. Praising its modern schools and businesses, the Austrian consul-general wrote, 'Smyrna illuminates like a beacon all the other provinces of the Ottoman Empire.'

The two-mile-long stone quay, known as the Kordon, built by French engineers in 1869-76 (where so many Smyrniots would perish in 1922), was lined with cafés, hotels and warehouses. If Smyrna was 'the eye of Asia', it was said, the quay was 'the pupil of the eye'.

The writer Norman Douglas called Smyrna 'the most enjoyable place on earth'. One café, where you could 'pick up a girl or anything else you fancied', had bedrooms on the upper floors for 'an hour's rest'. He asked, 'Why are such delectable places not commoner?'

The city's brand of music, called Smyrnaika or rebetiko, mixed western polyphony and eastern monophony.

Songs described the torments of love, and the pleasures of hashish and alcohol: 'You stay up all night at the cafés, *chantant*, drinking beer.'

Above left: **the Greek Army march in Smyrna, May 1919.** ***Left:*** **the fire in September 1922 prompted a chaotic evacuation.** ***Above right:*** **after the fire.** ***Below:*** **4th-century BC Agora of Smyrna, ruined in 178 AD by an earthquake**

A Papazoglu, a musician in one of the cafés on the Kordon, said, 'We played Jewish and Armenian and Arab music. We were citizens of the world, you see.'

Indeed 'Gâvur İzmir' was so cosmopolitan that, to many visitors from the Turkish hinterland, it seemed – as does London or New York today – like a foreign country. Envy and resentment, as well as the Greek occupation in 1919-22 and Greek atrocities in Anatolia, contributed to the 1922 catastrophe.

Since 1922, however, İzmir has reverted to its natural role as a great Turkish and Mediterranean port. Only 40 per cent of the city was destroyed: the Greek and Armenian districts, not the Turkish, Jewish or Levantine ones.

New Turkish inhabitants were often immigrants from Greece and the Balkans. The remaining Levantines helped restart the export trade.

In 1941-44, Major Noel Rees, the British Vice-Consul from a prominent Smyrna family (whose initial R can still be seen on the ironwork of their former office on the Kordon) and the local head of MI9, made Smyrna and its coast the heart of the escape lines for thousands fleeing German-occupied Greece.

Confirming the power of geography, İzmir and the coasts of Turkey are today bastions of the secular CHP (Republican People's Party) against the increasingly dictatorial Islamist government in Ankara. There are seven universities.

Turkish friends say that it is the last big city in their country where they 'feel freedom'. In alcohol consumption, and in the number of unmarried couples, the packed cafés on the Kordon resemble those in other Mediterranean ports more than those in inland Turkish cities.

For a city of four million, İzmir is exceptionally peaceful.

The city is reconnecting to its past. In 2009, it was twinned with Thessaloniki in Greece. Museums founded by the local shipping magnate and wine-producer Lucien Arkas commemorate the glories of Smyrna.

September 2022, like every September, was marked by a military parade – and also by a pop concert on the Kordon by the Turkish singer Tarkan. No one mentioned the fire and massacres of 1922.

Smyrna's catastrophe in 1922 remains a warning to world cities today. The hinterland always bites back. Nationalism corrupts. Absolute nationalism corrupts absolutely.

Philip Mansel is author of Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean *(2010), a history of Smyrna, Alexandria and Beirut*