Chronos- Revue d’Histoire de l’Université de Balamand, is a bi-annual Journal published in three languages (Arabic, English and French). It deals particularly with the History of the ethnic and religious groups of the Arab world.

Journal Name: Chronos

ISSN: 1608-7526

Title: The Hellenic Literary Society of Constantinople (HLSC), 1861-1922

Author(s): Esin Ozansoy

Irini Sarioglou

To cite this document:


Permanent link to this document: DOI: https://doi.org/10.31377/chr.v31i0.122

Chronos uses the Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-SA that lets you remix, transform, and build upon the material for non-commercial purposes. However, any derivative work must be licensed under the same license as the original.
THE HELLENIC LITERARY SOCIETY OF CONSTANTINOPLE (HLSC), 1861-1922

ESIN OZANSOY¹ & IRINI SARIOGLOU²

Introduction

Despite an increasing interest in historical accounts regarding the Greek community of Istanbul, research on the Hellenic Literary Society of Constantinople (HLSC - Ο Ελληνικός Φιλολογικός Σύλλογος Κωνσταντινουπόλεως) had been sparse (Stavrou 1967, Svolopoulos 1992)¹ until the late 1990s. It was not until that period, with the future prospects of the dwindling Greek community in Istanbul being imminently bleak, that the history of its cultural institutions began to attract the attention of scholars (Sarioglou 2003). This paper attempts to present a brief account of the activities of the Hellenic Literary Society of Constantinople, from its establishment in 1861 to the cessation of its function, in 1922, when all its property was confiscated by the Turkish state.

A Long Tradition

Societies in Constantinople have been characterized by a long tradition of philanthropy and education since the Byzantine era. As early as the first years after the fall of Constantinople, brotherhoods and guilds, the so-called esnafs, contributed significantly to the social and national emancipation of the Greek nation, acting under the supervision of the Church (Mamoni 1969 and 1975).

¹ University of Istanbul.
² University of Istanbul and Hellenic History Foundation (IDISME).
³ For a detailed account on the educational life of Greeks in Asia Minor see Soldatos 1991. For Greek education in Thrace see Belia 1995.
Early in the 17th century, Phanariots rose to the highest ranks of social and political hierarchy, most of them having studied Medicine. Several members of the Greek middle class reached high levels of the state structure of the Ottoman Empire thanks to their qualifications as doctors. It should be noted that the first Ottoman Grand Dragoman, Panagiotis Nikousios, was a doctor (1661), as was the second Grand Dragoman, Alexander Mavrokordatos l’Exaporite [Muharrem Esrar] (1673) and several others. However, following the Greek Revolution the power of the Phanariot ruling class was significantly reduced.

In the middle of the 19th century there appeared a new group of scholars, a “literary” community comprised mostly of doctors, lawyers and bankers, whose members, having completed their studies in Western Europe (and, therefore, having being strongly influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and romantic nationalism) returned to Constantinople and played a significant role vis-à-vis the Orthodox Church (Ecumenical Patriarchate) and Greek education of the Ottoman Empire. These were the so-called New Phanariots. In the context of Tanzimat reforms, the millet-i Rum, having been strengthened by the privilege of equality granted by the Sublime Porte to all its subjects, began to experience an intellectual and cultural prosperity. The partial secularization of the Ottoman state, resulting from the period of these social changes, undoubtedly influenced also the Greek community of Constantinople (Sarris 1990).

In 1861, Constantine Heracles Vasiades⁴, a doctor and philologist from Epiros; a graduate and teacher at the Great School of the Nation at the Phanar district of Constantinople (still functioning today and currently known as Phanar Greek Orthodox College) suggested the foundation of the Hellenic Literary Society of Constantinople⁵. A firm supporter of secular education, after the completion of his studies in Paris and Berlin, he rejected the appointment offered to him by the National and Capodistrian University of Athens in 1859 and returned to Constantinople (Sarioglou & Sarioglou 2010).

Other leading intellectuals of the Greek community, such as Alexander Paspates; Xenophon Zografos; Stephen Karatheodores; Spyridon Mavrogenes,

---

⁴ One of the most important representatives of the Ottoman Greek professional class in mid-nineteenth century Constantinople, and a leading member in the emergence of the syllogos movement was the physician Constantine (nicknamed Iroclis) Vasiades (1821-1890).

⁵ For a detailed account on the HLSC’s history see the ΚΕΦΣ, vol. 12 (1877-1878), pp. 6-18. On the Syllogos movement in general and the Hellenic Literary Society of Constantinople in particular see (between 1861-1912), see Exertzoglou 1996.
were also members of the Hellenic Literary Society of Constantinople. With the support of other intellectuals of the Greek middle class of Constantinople, and thanks to the great number of inspired benefactors, such as Zarifes; Zografos; Syngros; Vlastos; Negrepontes, and several others, Vasiades’ idea for the foundation of a “laboratory of letters” came to life. Ninety personalities from Constantinople signed the original regulation of HLSC, whose first president became Stephen Karatheodores, Sultan Mahmud II’s personal physician, by whose proposals and efforts the Medical School of Istanbul was founded in 1828.

At first the Hellenic Literary Society of Constantinople functioned purely as a scientific society, addressing itself to scientists by announcements of special academic interest. Its first meetings would take place in the former residence of the Patriarch of Jerusalem Cyril II, Patriarch of Jerusalem, in Pera; the same building which houses today the Greek consulate, after its transfer by Hadjigeorgios Konstantinides, who was in charge of the Patriarch of Jerusalem’s property in Constantinople. Later, meetings reverted to the residence of Spyridon Mavrogenes, manager of Haydarpasha hospital and chief doctor of the Sultan’s palace.

The HLSC’s 1864 regulation stated that its aim was “the cultivation and dissemination of letters in the East, at large”, altering the Society’s activities from strictly scientific to comparatively more popularized, including scientific lectures; the publication of a journal; the foundation of a public library and reading room (1869); public lessons, contests and scholarships, one of which was granted to George Vizyenos for his studies at the School of Halki island. Soon afterwards the HLSC moved to a chamber of “Byzantion” club, having in the meantime acquired a library and accumulated archives and an important collection of byzantine antiquities. Soon after, it was divided into six departments: financial; editorial; educational; literary; archaeological; scientific-anthropological. The Society’s intense activity continued uninterrupted from 1861 to 1870 but was briefly halted due to a big fire which started in Pera on 24 May 1870 and destroyed almost all its acquisitions. In the meantime, the first three volumes of the HLSC’s journal had been published.

---

6 For Ottoman Greek education see ΚΕΦΣ, vol. 10 (1875-1876), pp. 186-200.
7 Cultural initiatives of the HLSC included the organisation of public lectures of scientific content and the publication of an annual journal. This was a learned, scientific journal of the highest international standard. A full run of this can be found in the Main Library of Birmingham University/UK.
furthering significantly its reputation and international acknowledgement among scientists, and allowing for the materialization of a significant degree of its original aims; for example, the competitions sponsored by Christakes Zografos and Eugenios Xeropotamenos on the description “of the four Greek provinces in the European part of Turkey, that is, Thrace, Macedonia, Epiros and Thessaly”; the Negrepontian contest for the awarding of newly founded schools for girls, etc. Between 1862 and 1870 fifty-five acknowledged members of the European and Ottoman communities were elected honorary members of the Society, among which the Grand Vizier Fuad and the Foreign Minister Ali Pasha; a fact that contributed to the Society’s international recognition (Alexandris 1985).

The establishment of the Hellenic Literary Society of Constantinople was the earliest motive for the creation of many societies and educational foundations within and outside the Ottoman Empire, such as the Thracian, Epirotic, Thessalian, and Priestly ones; also the Macedonian Educational Brotherhood, etc. (Sarioglou 2011). In this context, following a proposal by Vasiades, a Society for Women’s Education was also founded, whose first concern was the foundation of Zappeion school for girls, in Constantinople. Following this example, French philhellenes established in Paris, in 1867, the Association pour l’encouragement des études grecques. However, occasionally during this creative period one also comes across negative references in Constantinople's satirical papers, such as Koudounatos [“Embraced in bells”], Embros [“Forewards”], and many others, to this multitude of Societies.

Following the fire of 1870 the Hellenic Literary Society of Constantinople, realizing the critical situation of Hellenic education and the multiple dangers that Hellenism was facing (with the Bulgarian language prevailing in Thrace, the Arabic in Syria and the Turkish in Asia Minor), assumed a “national” role:

---

8 When by the 1850s, the Ottoman Bulgarians began to emerge through a separatist movement, they soon set about demanding their religious and educational autonomy feeling that they deserved a separate millet from that of the Greeks. After several attempts at reconciliation, when all options for preventing the establishment of an independent Bulgarian national church had been exhausted, on 16 September 1872, the Ecumenical Patriarchate formally declared the Bulgarian Exarchate to be in schism. In the same period, as a result of a network of Bulgarian primary schools, the attendance of the Bulgarians in Greek schools declined dramatically. Likewise the Bulgarians began to search for alternative forms of higher education when the Hellenic curricula and patriarchal affiliation of the principle Greek secondary schools failed to respond to their cultural needs and provoked their nationalistic feelings. For the educational and nationalistic movements in the northwest of Macedonia between 1870-1904, see Vouri 1992.
it changed its regulations and assumed the responsibility for “a general national reformation” of enslaved Greeks and the coordination of every educational and cultural activity of the Nation, with the primary aim of fighting illiteracy and establishing schools. Vasiades took a leading role, and the HLSC started defending the unity of the Nation, stating characteristically: “Our Society was called Hellenic, not Greek, despite the wishes of some, who wanted to split our Nation into Hellenes and Rum”.

Soon the HLSC was seen as the nucleus of an extensive educational network. In 1872, thanks to a donation by Christakes Zografos, it acquired its own private premises in 18 Topçular Street, in Pera; it also established an annual prize for the collection of living monuments “in the language of the Greek people”, on funds provided by the same donor. One participant in this contest was Nikolaos Polites, subsequently founder of Greek Folklore. The linguistic material was initially published in the Society’s journal, later appearing in a separate volume. Another benefactor, Theodore Mavrogordatos, assisted the efforts of Athanasios Papadopoulos-Kerameus to form a list of Greek manuscripts in libraries of the East (from 1883 to 1887). This project was published in four appendixes of the Society’s journal, under the title Mavrogordatos’ Library.

The years between 1861 and 1878 were the period of the HLSC’s greatest prosperity, during which it gradually transformed itself from a scientific foundation to a “Ministry of education of all Greeks living in the Ottoman Empire”\(^9\). In the same period it became the object of admiration of many European and Turkish scholars, such as Dumont; Schliemann; Millingen; Perrot; Brun; Ignatiev; Cevdet Effendi, et al.

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 caused a brief interruption of the Society’s function, but soon afterwards the HLSC re-assumed its activities, if only at a visibly smaller scale. Subsequently, it attempted to support Greek claims in the Congress of Berlin\(^10\) by a memorandum addressed to the Great Powers. It also invited the board of directors of the Thracian, Epirotic and

\(^9\) Although the syllogos movement was exercising secular administrative supervision over Ottoman Greek education, it would be wrong to assume that it was therefore involved in any political propaganda, encouraging the Megali Idea. The syllogoi in general and the Hellenic Literary Society of Constantinople in particular sought to reinforce ‘Hellenic’ awareness among Greek population of the Ottoman Empire more as a cultural mission than anything political.

\(^10\) Lyons to Stanley, 6 March 1867, Parliamentary Papers, ‘Reports received from Her Majesty’s Ambassador and Consuls relating to the condition of Christians in 1867 in Turkey’, no. 27, p. 77.
Thessalian Societies, as well as the Macedonian Educational Brotherhood, to a general assembly, with the purpose of declaring the rights of Hellenism over Thrace and Macedonia. At the same time certain distinguished members of the HLSC, whose interests were tightly interconnected with the Ottoman state, left the former, to create in 1880 alongside the Patriarchate the *Educational and Philanthropist Society “Love each other”*. One of them was George Zarifes, a firm supporter of compliance with authorities. Although the HLSC’s highly significant work had been acknowledged by the Church, its relations with the Patriarchate were not always cordial, as the HLSC had intervened in fields such as education, which were controlled exclusively by the Church.

Between 1881 and 1884 the Society’s journal was suspended by the Ottoman authorities. Two years later, in 1886, the Sublime Porte cancelled the scientific conference which had been planned for the celebration of 25 years of the Society’s operation, with the excuse that it was addressed to an international audience. In 1890, following the death of Heracles Vasiades, its spiritual father, the HLSC’s period of prosperity came to an end. Placed now under the aegis of the Patriarchate, which assumed the responsibility of its financial support and secured a license for the publication of its journal, the Society revised its regulations in 1896. Its anthropological committee was replaced by a biological one, and its scientific by a physico-mathematical one, while the literary merged with its educational one, to create a new committee, a sociological. At the same time, the Society’s numismatic archaeological and natural history collections were enriched.

1912 marked 50 years from the foundation of the Society, an anniversary celebrated with glamour. A volume under the title *50th Anniversary* was published in 1912 as an appendix of the journal’s 34th volume (which was never published) but it was to be the HLSC’s last publication. The ultimate regular volume, concerning the activity of the period 1910-1911, was published in 1914.

After the prevalence of Young Turks, the Society’s activities were suspended; however, they were reactivated immediately after the signing of the Moudros armistice (10 November 1918). The Society appointed triumphantly the Greek Prime Minister, Eleftherios Venizelos, honorary president and a reception was held in honor of General Leonidas Paraskevopoulos, in charge of the Greek armed forces in Asia Minor. Making good use of its international

---

11 For the fiftieth anniversary of the *syllogos* see *ΚΕΦΣ*, vol. 35, pp. 3-16.
relations, the Society submitted once again to its honorary members and various academic foundations a memorandum on the rights of Greeks, mentioning the strong desire of Greeks of Asia Minor and the Pontus for national independence and exposing statistical data that proved the strength of the Greek element in those regions.

The library was further enriched and, by an innovative mood, elected for the first time in that year (1918) a woman, Miss Noemi Zoerou, in its board of directors, with the title of chief librarian. The library’s growing needs were satisfied with the addition of another floor to the Society’s building, whose construction expenses were covered by Alexander Mavrogenes. The reading room was visited by an impressive number of researchers who would also attend public lectures, with topics relevant to national politics.

During the same period, that is, in May 1919, Turkish authorities “invaded” the Society’s building (Sarioglou 2010) confiscating its furniture and having them thrown in the street, under the pretext that the Society had deliberately delayed payment of its taxes. The painting of the deification of Homer was also removed and later auctioned. Its place in the Hall of Ceremonies was subsequently taken by a photograph of Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos.

Apart from the aspects of the HLSC’s activities already mentioned in brief, little is known on the way the National Division affected its function during the period of the Greek campaign in Asia Minor. The files of Kostas Misailides, a well known correspondent to the front, provide information on the turmoil caused among Greek intellectual circles of Istanbul by two lectures of his own impressions from the Asia Minor front. Misailides’ testimony covers the period from 23 December 1921 to 6 April 1922. A well known figure in Istanbul’s society because of his publications, Misailides aroused enthusiasm with his accounts in plain language (demotic). However, public persistence for a sequel to his accounts and his own disposition to continue with them were met with a restricting order by the HLSC.

The Society’s formal excuse, that it was bound by an article in its regulations, was deemed unacceptable by the majority of the Greek press of the time. Apart from its linguistic aspect (the resurfacing of the language issue), the whole issue soon took political dimensions, since untimely political changes in the Greek state also had an impact on life in Istanbul. The language issue and the intense political confrontation that occurred at
the time, at an unsuitable period for Hellenism, also brought about a division of Istanbul’s Greek community into a progressive party, supporting the use of demotic, and an opposite one, consisting of the conservative supporters of katharevousa (old fashion Greek). Misailides himself attributed the Society’s refusal to allow a continuation of his lectures to jealousy caused by them as a result of high attendance, vis-à-vis frequent low attendance during lectures by certain regular orators who were strong supporters of katharevousa.

After the collapse of the front in Asia Minor the status quo changed dramatically, and the function of the HLSC was terminated. On June 1922 its operation was banned by Turkish authorities and its members were interrogated repeatedly. The HLSC was sealed approximately for a year, until June 1923, when the Republican People’s Party took over the Society and its Library with the consent of the chief of the Police. The board of directors sent a protest to the Turkish Prime Minister, Ismet Inonu; the chief of the Police; the prefect and the chairman of the Republican People’s Party. These protests were repeated three times, but no answer was ever received by the board. The Republican People’s Party settled in the building, removing the Library’s books, archives and manuscripts (apart from the building, at that time the Society possessed a library of 30,000 volumes; rare publications; manuscripts; a gallery; a museum; furniture; and valuable objects). The manuscripts and the most valuable volumes were transported to the Society of Turkish History, in Ankara, and the HLSC’s archives to the Suleymaniye Library, in Istanbul. For a short while the building was used by Turkish authorities as an orphanage and, subsequently, as a court house, until it was finally demolished, in the early 1970s.

The establishment and operation of the HLSC was the most important function of the millet-i Rum, praised by the Greek society and both foreign

---

12 In June 1922 the Hellenic Literary Society of Constantinople ceased to function by the order of the Ankara government. Under police observation its governing body was asked to sign a petition claiming that the authorities had shut down the society because it violated its Regulations and acted against the purpose for which it was built. One year later the Republican People's Party (RPP), with police assistance, confiscated the building, its large library, museum and expensive furniture. Despite written appeals made to the Turkish Prime Minister, the chief of police and the Prefect as well as the head of RPP to free the Syllogos' portable property, no reply was ever received. Diamantopoulos to Foreign Ministry, Constantinople, 2 June 1926, AYE/B/28. Regarding the considerable legacy of the Syllogos (such as Evantheion, Satheion, Mavroyeneion, Vassiadeion among others) kept in the National Bank of Greece and in the Credit Suisse (Geneva), see Dalietos to Foreign Ministry, Constantinople, 27 January 1931, AYE/B/33.
and Turkish intellectuals of the time. Despite the fact that it started as a private initiative, aiming at the reinforcement and distribution of Hellenic education to all Orthodox communities (even to those in the most remote villages of the Ottoman Empire), it greatly surpassed its own original expectations, assuming the functions of a public organization (and with great success, one would say).

**Conclusion**

In this brief account we have attempted to examine the significant role of the Hellenic Literary Society of Constantinople from 1861 to 1922. As an “unofficial Ministry of Education” of the Ottoman Hellenism (as it has been called), the HLSC undoubtedly played an important role in the dissemination of Greek culture and education during the Ottoman era. However, its prime goal of “the cultivation and dissemination of letters in the East, at large” was frequently questioned by the Ottoman/Turkish authorities.

Despite increasingly nationalistic Turkish policies vis-à-vis non-Muslim foundations of the time, the HLSC managed to continue its operation until 1922 (Sarioglu 2010). Whether or not one can be prove beyond any doubt that in the aftermath of the Greco-Turkish War of 1922 the Turkish government intended to eliminate minority foundations from Turkey, the cumulative results of the various policies it pursued ultimately had this effect.

October 2014
BIBLIOGRAPHY


BELIA E., 1995, Εκπαίδευση καὶ αλυτρωτική πολιτική, Η περίπτωση της Θράκης 1856-1912, Thessaloniki.


STAVROU T., 1967, Ο εν Κωνσταντινουπόλει Ελληνικός Φιλολογικός Σύλλογος. Το Υπουργείον Παιδείας του Αλύτρωτου Ελληνισμού, Athens.


ANNEXES

Fig. 1: Grande Rue de Pera - Constantinople. The district where the HLSC was based
Fig. 2: The Mansion of HLSC
Fig. 3: Zappeion High School for Girls, Graduation Certificate
Fig. 4: The 2-monthly scientific journal of HLSC