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Stirring up the Ashes: Exhibiting the Great Fire of Smyrna in the Context of Turkish Politics of Memory

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Stirring up the Ashes
Exhibiting the Great Fire of Smyrna
in the Context of Turkish Politics of Memory

Torsten Janson, Ege Mehmet Akman & Biray Kolluoğlu

A series of centennials have swept the Turkish nation in recent years, namely celebrating the victorious end of the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922), and the founding of the Turkish Republic (1923). Focusing on Izmir, this essay explores how such national commemorations have surfaced in local urban spaces and imaginaries, prompting engagement and/or non-engagement with the city's contested past. For this purpose, we shall scrutinise the memorialisation of a historic event long avoided in Turkish official memory: the 1922 Great Fire of Smyrna. Three exhibitions about the fire were organised in Izmir in 2022, as part of the centennial commemorations of *Dokuz Eylül* (September 9). On this day in 1922, Turkish forces entered the city at the end of the 'National Struggle' (*Milli Mücadele*). In official historiography, it is hailed as the 'Day of Liberation', a key moment in the founding of Turkey and Turkish nationalism. While this is not a formal national holiday, September 9 remains a central fixture in Izmir's calendar of festivities and the scale of celebrations at the 2022 centenary was unprecedented.

This triumphant memorialisation by modern Izmir has co-existed with a hegemony of amnesia, smothering the memory of the humanitarian disasters accompanying the establishment of the national state. The horrific fire of 1922, ravished the city within a week after the reconquest and completely obliterated Armenian and Frank quarters and large parts of the Greek quarter. Followed by the forced population exchange of 1923 between Greece and Turkey, it brought an end to the multiethnic character of this Ottoman city, while paving the way for the discursive, political, and physical construction of modern Izmir as a Turkish city. Incongruent with the tale of national triumph and unity, the fire and population exchange have been systematically repressed in official memory,

despite the cataclysmic dimensions of those events.¹

Meanwhile, memory discourses in Turkey are diversifying. Commercial, as well as independent, memory-cultural interventions have begun to revisit traumas past, challenging national taboos and state historiographies. The Netflix series *The Club* (2021), Defne Sumar's novel *The Silence of Scheherazade* (2016), and art house short film productions like Begüm Aksoy's *Smyrna's Pit* (2021), and Emre Yaksan's *Park* (2022) are examples of artistic memory works venturing to acknowledge and reverse longstanding regimes of forgetting. Such subversive memory-cultural expressions indicate that the rules of engagement with memory in Turkey are slowly but steadily transforming.

Against a backdrop of this disputed Turkish mnemonic/amnestic landscape, we will focus on the exhibition "Izmir Encircled by Fire: From Occupation to Liberation" (*Ateş Çemberinde İzmir: İşgalden Kurtuluşu*), which was on hosted in Izmir for about nine months in 2022-2023. We will not dwell on the history of the fire itself, nor account for its social, cultural, or economic consequences. Rather, we aim at probing the exhibition as a memory-cultural intervention in the political present. Specifically, we will discuss how the exhibition, in its ambition to deal with a traumatic past, related to current national/local and official/unofficial memory constructs and disputes in contemporary Turkey. Even if the exhibition memorialised a historic event largely omitted from official historiography, and even if it accentuated the humanitarian costs of the establishment of the Republic, we argue that the exhibition remained firmly embedded in an official-national narrative, and, hence, fell short of challenging prevailing politics of memory regimes.

Yet, it still represents a significant event related to politics of memory in its own right. Even when reproducing national narratives, local commemorative fixtures contribute to diversifying the engagement with the past(s). Once appropriated in the context of the politics of memory trope, events ignored, such as the Great Fire of 1922, are subject to (partial) revision and re-signification, with specific relevance for local memory. While the sticky smoke of amnesia still hovers over offi-

¹ Kolluoğlu Kirli, "Forgetting the Smyrna Fire"; Kolluoğlu Kirli, "The Play of Memory".

cial Turkish historiography, we argue that contemporary memory processes contribute to stirring up the ashes of past atrocities, and, hence, to diverging from a singular narrative of nation building.

We begin with a discussion of Turkish national memory and territory, and how the conception of republican Turkish Izmir has been predicated on systematic forgetting of pre-republican Ottoman Smyrna. The second section explores how such ideological-historiographical constructs, and, specifically, the metanarrative trope ‘National Struggle’, were locally negotiated, during the centenary celebrations of September 9, in Izmir 2022. Against this background, the third section delves into the exhibition “Izmir Encircled by Fire”, discussing its organisation, narrative presentation, and visual-affective registers. We conclude with a brief, theoretical discussion on memory, assessing our findings in relation to the broader dynamics of the politics of memory in contemporary Turkey.

Forgetting Smyrna: Politics of Memory- in Modern Izmir

Contemporary Izmir is a city of tightly huddled, concrete apartment buildings encircling its bay. Except for the ancient castle, which lies hidden in this densely built urban environment, it is conspicuously devoid of monumental historical buildings, mosques, churches, or synagogues. Heritage sites, such as the Agora, Ottoman mosques, and the Konak clock tower are eagerly publicised in tourism marketing but fail to make a distinct mark in the urban landscape.

In effect, Izmir appears to have sprouted into existence on virgin land, through the rapid and unplanned processes of urbanisation in the 1950s and 1960s. The city offers few clues to an unsuspecting traveller that it has been around for two millennia, that it gained its significance in the seventeenth century, and that it became one of the most important port cities of the Mediterranean in the nineteenth century. Concrete has been poured over its past. There are hundreds of other cities around the world, especially in the global South, whose pasts have fallen prey to rapid urbanism, war, and disaster. Yet, Izmir stands out, we would like to argue, by not having its history inadvertently lost to the rampages of modernity or forces of nature. While modern nation-state formation and

the disastrous 1922 fire certainly contributed to the purging of its history, the Republican city came into being through a deliberate quest of state formation using politics of memory. Modern Izmir not only covered the sorry remains of Smyrna with concrete but also with layers of forgetting.

The urban make-up and demography of nineteenth century Smyrna reflected its character of an affluent port-city, handling one third of the Ottoman sea-borne trade.² Spatially, Smyrna was characterised by a fractured socio-cultural heterogeneity and intense density. Its population in the nineteenth century exceeded 200, 000, including Jews, Armenians, Greeks, and Levantines, comprising/made up the affluent merchant communities that found their way to the bay following the trade routes of the Mediterranean. The economic and cultural centre of the city was the Frank quarter. This was a triangular area framed by two railway lines and the port, further enhanced and developed by reclaimed land from the bay and turned into the city's famous quay (*kordon*) in the nineteenth century. The city centre included trading houses, consulates, theatres, opera houses, banks, post offices, department stores, hotels, restaurants, cafés and numerous arcades known as *ferhanes*, where businesses, shops, and offices were clustered. This density, in turn, made the impact of the Great Fire of 1922 evermore disastrous. It began on several locations on September 13, four days after the Turkish re-conquest, and annihilated about three quarters of the city, including the entire Frank and Armenian quarters and large parts of the Greek quarter.

The fire did not only ravage ancient Smyrna: it burned away its own traces. Put differently, the most striking aspect of the ways in which the fire was remembered during the twentieth century was that it was not. What is of interest here is how the fire has been both appropriated and systematically forgotten, at the same time, in and through the construction of Izmir – discursively, as well as materially. Or, to put it more accurately: how the fire *site* was appropriated in the imagination and erection of Izmir as a modern, republican city, while the *event* of the fire (and its victims) was erased from memory.

² Frangakis, “The Raya Communities of Smyrna”.

In official historiography, Izmir carries a symbolic prominence in the narratives of the ‘National Struggle’, as the city that marked the modern nation’s final and decisive victory. Izmir is the place where “the enemy was shovelled into the sea,” a turn of phrase that citizens of Turkey learn by heart as early as elementary school. Republican squares and Atatürk monuments are features of all Turkish cities, but in Izmir they carry a specific and nationally revered significance. The Atatürk statue at Izmir’s Republican square, erected in the heart of the former Frank quarter, and as the first structure to be built on the fire zone, is known throughout Turkey as a monument to Atatürk’s order for the Turkish army to march toward the decisive defeat of the Greek army. Pointing towards Izmir, Mustafa Kemal is held to have uttered the celebrated phrase: “Your first target is the Mediterranean”. Consequently, Izmir is lauded as the epitome of victory, associated with the *settling* feelings of success, gain, and national pride, while its pre-modern past carries little weight, and the *unsettling* events, such as that of the fire, even less.

The memory of the fire first began to fade away in official history. In his first appearance after the nationalists’ victory, in November 1922, Atatürk failed even to mention the fire, despite the fact that his speech was devoted to detailing the events and the battles of late August and early September. Similarly, the fire was absent from his six-day speech, in 1927, which was later published under the title *Nutuk*, a book which has been repeatedly reprinted ever since. The omission of this disastrous event was consequential as it moulded the unfolding narrative of the birth of the nation. From *Nutuk* one may trace the specific subfield of history studies known as the ‘History of the Turkish Revolution’, canonised in history books for all educational levels, from elementary school to university. Even in this official historiography, the Great Fire is described almost in passing, conceived as a necessary step towards the glorious victory of the ‘War of Liberation’ (*Kurtuluş Savaşı*), for which Izmir is glorified.

This absence planted in official history grew, on its own right, in collective memory, and gradually took on new shape and form. As demonstrated in an oral history study, conducted in the late 1990s and based on interviews with child witness of the war and the fire, an inter-

esting reversal of the timeline of the fire emerged. While official history correctly records that the Turkish army marched into the city on September 9 and the fire began on September 13, interviews tell a story of the Turkish army marching into a burning city and saving it.³ This chronologic reversal is a mistake, an error. Yet, as Alessandro Portelli observes, this unreliability is embedded in oral accounts, falsehood and errors, which are part and parcel of collective memory, help us to look for layered meanings that can be found beyond the facts.⁴ Hence, an unsettling narrative of loss and destruction is overwritten with the settling narrative of gain and creation – under the patronage of the modern Turkish state.

This discursive reversal, turning destruction into creation, came to physical expression in the spatial choices when the city was being rebuilt in the 1930s, alongside the radical demographic transformation after the population exchange. “No space ever vanishes utterly, leaving no trace” Lefebvre reminds us; new addition “inherits and reorganises what has gone before”.⁵ What was re-organised in post-fire Izmir was, largely, an assembly of *absences*: social, material, ethnic, religious, and cultural. Izmir was not only destroyed spatially, but socially as well. The compulsory population exchange agreed upon by Turkish and Greek authorities in 1923 and supported by the British government, resulted in the forced migration of almost 2 million people. About 1.5 million Greek Orthodox citizens of Turkey were exchanged with half a million Muslims living in Greece. The city of Izmir was, hence, largely re-populated with citizens who had no memory of the pre-war city.

The erased heart of the city came to be known as the ‘fire zone’ and remained untouched for a decade and a half, due both to political indecision and scarcity of funds. Once re-building began, the burnt parts of the city became a monument of forgetting rather than remembering, as vanished neighbourhoods were never to be restored. Instead, the first structure built on the fire zone was the Republic Square and the Ataturk statue. This was followed in 1936 by the creation of the *Kültürpark* in-

³ Kolluoğlu Kirli, “The Play of Memory”.

⁴ Portelli, “The Death of Luigi Trastulli”.

⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*: 164.

spired by the Gorky Park in Moscow. This area of 430, 000 square meters was planted with trees and furnished with permanent exhibitions on national history, a zoo, a parachute tower, all considered amenities for a healthy, modern nation. The park was also chosen as the location for the annual economic fair, devised as a measure to reboot and reinvigorate national economy. With time, this event developed into the city's primary festive fixture in public space, held every year on September 9 in commemoration of the city's Turkish reconquest.⁶ In short, not only has the fire been systematically forgotten in the city's narrative, but also spatially and materially, as well, due to being temporarily overwritten by a narrative of victory and development, reflected in its new uses though public leisure, commerce, and festivity.

If this order of politics of remained more or less unchallenged throughout most of the 20th century, several factors contributed to the emergence of more fragmented forms of remembering it the century's final decade.⁷ The major context of this "memorial turn" was the corrosion of the power of nation-states in the wake of neoliberal globalisation. Exposed to the deregulating forces of global finance, nations have lost their privilege to organise societies along independently formulated, progressive trajectories of national economies. The loss of control of national economy accentuates the need for *cultural* control and autonomy, becoming the driving force for ideas of national purity and difference and often having violent and repressive effects.⁸

The notion of a 'national ethnic purity' is, of course, not unique to Turkey; nor did it suddenly emerge in late-modernity – albeit the 1990s was certainly a turning point for generating notions of memory, culture, and identity. It is interconnected with the very idea and emergence of a modern state,⁹ and "has been *produced* and *naturalised* at great cost, through the rhetoric of war and sacrifice, through punishing disciplines

⁶ Kolluoğlu Kirli, "Forgetting the Smyrna Fire".

⁷ Ahiska and Kolluoğlu Kirli, "Introduction to Social Memory"; Özyürek, *The Politics of Public Memory*; Gönlügur and Sezer, "Therapeutic Forgetting, Agonistic Remembrance".

⁸ Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference"; Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*; O'Reilly, *Places of Memory*.

⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*.

of educational and linguistic uniformity, and through the subordination of myriad local and regional traditions”.¹⁰ In the context of global neoliberal capitalism, however, such processes and categorisations have proliferated. This, we would like to argue, has triggered the particularisation, and polarisation of memory observable in Turkey as of the 1990s. As the monologues prevalent in narratives about ‘where we are going’ collapses, imaginaries about ‘whence we have come from’ become similarly fragmented. In the process, notions of a ‘we’ becomes ever more associated with anxiety, and overlain with memory-cultural reifications. Hence, one of the great paradoxes of our time arises, i.e., the proliferation of insecurity goes hand in hand with the production of certainty.

In the case of Turkey, perhaps the most significant aspect of such processes found shape in the ascendancy of the neoliberal and religio-conservative AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) to power as of 2002. AKP unsettled the established Republican narrative that Turkey was founded on a break with the Ottoman past. In secularist Republican memory, the loss of Ottoman territory had been overwritten with a narrative of gain and victory. The ‘loss of Salonica’, birth city of Atatürk and the heart of the empire in the Balkans, stood back for the ‘gain of İzmir’. Republican nationalism had turned its back on ancient Istanbul, the political nucleus of two empires, in order to embrace Ankara, the newly founded remote city in the middle of Anatolia, as the new heart of the modern country. Chipping away from this narrative, AKP anchored its vision of the modern Turkish Republic as founded as a successor to Ottoman history, yearning for its restoration within the framework of Turkish modernity and citizenship. In turn, this neo-Ottoman political imaginary has been stimulated by (and sometimes conflicting with) a neo-Ottomania proliferating in Turkish popular culture, entertainment, architecture, and consumption, adding to the fragmentation and polarisation of memory and culture in contemporary Turkey.¹¹

Parallel to such nostalgic, institutionalised, and commercial reengagements with the past, a diverse flora of academic, journalistic, artistic

¹⁰ Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*: 4.

¹¹ Ergin and Karakaya, “Between Neo-Ottomanism and Ottomania”; Janson and Kınıkoğlu, “Sacred (re-) Collections”; Janson, “Lovers of the Rose”.

and/or memory-activist initiatives have sprouted in Turkey. Many such initiatives have been geared at critically re-reading and re-signifying the past, acknowledging and re-narrating challenging, silenced, and violent events in Turkish history. Among such issues spurring heated national debate are the protracted Kurdish conflict,¹² debates over the recognition and conceptualisation of the Armenian genocide,¹³ and violence and discrimination against the Alevi minorities.¹⁴ In the context of memory related to Izmir, in the last decades there has been a re-engagement with local history in various contexts, some of which have been initiated by formal memory institutions and/or municipalities, such as the Ahmet Piriştina City Archive and Museum, which are committed to documenting, displaying, and supporting research on the local urban history of pre-Republican Izmir.¹⁵

More radical agendas have guided independent memory initiatives. They have aspired to re-assess local history by approaching the disasters and atrocities of the past from a perspective of collective and transnational mourning. In such alternative imaginaries, the national distinction of Smyrna/Izmir collapses, in recognition and lamentation of the loss of humanlife, and the demise of a physically, culturally, and socially unique cityscape. Uncovering and underscoring the legitimacy and value of Greek, Armenian, Jewish, and Levantine memory/memories has, hence, laid a road to circumnavigate the omissions, silence, and taboos in Turkish historiography. Beyond commemorating the event of the fire, memory activism envisions a complete memory-related methodological overhaul, exploring innovative approaches to remember the city beyond national fixtures, boundaries, and blinders. This has surfaced in a host of alternative, experimental, and performative registers of remembering, among them unofficial public and private commemorations on September 13; urban memory-walks among spatial absences within the fire zone; workshops dedicated to coming to terms with the past; and the

¹² Yeğen, *Devlet Söyleminde Kürt Sorunu*; Işık (et al), *Kürtler ve Cumhuriyet*.

¹³ Üngör, “Lost in Commemoration”; Turan and Öztan, *Devlet Aklıve* 1915.

¹⁴ Karakaya, *The Kizilbash-Alevi in Ottoman Anatolia*; Dressler, *Türk Aleviliğinin İnşası*.

¹⁵ Fuhrmann, “Vom stadtpolitischen Umgang”: 47-49.

creation of collaborative digital maps and (counter)archives.

The Birth of the National State in Local Commemoration: September 9 in Izmir

As noted at the outset of this essay, recent years have been replete with Turkish centennials, from 2019 commemorations of the ‘National Struggle’ to the celebration of the Republic on October 29, 2023. While some have been confined to traditional memory institutions (museums, galleries, monuments), others have extended into broader urban-public space. They have encompassed victim memorials, historic re-enactments, spectacular entertainment shows, art exhibitions, as well as festive street parties. In short, a broad spectrum of narrative approaches, performative formats, and affective registers have been mobilised to serve the memorialisation of the national state. These commemorations have also brought into play (re)negotiations of national and local memory. The September 9 celebrations in Izmir 2022 are a case in point, further complicated by the ambiguous, or according to Michael Rothberg, “multidirectional” memory of Izmir in national historiography (a point we shall revisit below).¹⁶

The Great War left the Ottoman Empire in a state of exhaustion under British military control. In Turkish national historiography, however, the armistice of Moudros (October 30, 1918) marks a beginning rather than a conclusion: the inception of a tumultuous, but ultimately triumphant, road towards independence. Taking advantage of the weakened Ottoman Empire after the Great War, and the chaos and banditry assailing its peripheries, Greece embarked on an irredentist military campaign in 1919. This expansion was ideologically embedded in the neo-Hellenic ‘Great Idea’ (*Megáli Idéa*) proliferating in Greek-nationalist circles in the early 20th century: to regain the territories of the Byzantine Empire, ultimately to re-conquer Constantinople/Istanbul. Supported by the British Empire, Greece succeeded in conquering parts of Eastern Thrace and Western Anatolia, culminating with the seizure of Smyrna/Izmir on May 15, 1919.

¹⁶ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*.

The loss of Izmir gave an impetus to the burgeoning ‘Turkish National Struggle’, and its transformation into a coordinated political and military effort to terminate foreign occupation and establish an independent Turkish nation state. Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal and his right-hand man Mustafa İsmet (later known as İnönü, after leading two decisive battles of that name), the dispersed militias were united into a regular army. After three years of mobilisation and indecisive battles, the Turkish army came out victorious. The final phase of the war is hallowed in national historiography as the ‘Great Offensive’ (*Büyük Taarruz*). Within two weeks of the Battle of Dumlupınar (August 30, henceforth, the national holiday ‘Victory Day’, *Zafer Bayramı*), the Greek army was expelled from Anatolia, and the Turkish forces triumphantly entered the city of Izmir on 9 September 1922.

A century later, this process has been the subject of several Turkish museum expositions. The first was the twin “Independence Exhibition” (*İstiklal Sergisi*), organised simultaneously in Ankara and Istanbul in 2019 (and *not* in Izmir). The choice of location was emblematic: it underscored the *national* character of commemoration. In fact, the “Independence Exhibitions” were little concerned with the city of Izmir, or Greek occupation for that matter. In their narrative, the significant event of 1919 was the arrival of Mustafa Kemal to Samsun, and his road towards embarking on the ‘National Struggle’ in the context of the Great War. In other words, local perspectives stood back for a meta-narrative about Turkish independence in relation to world events and global powers, far beyond the petty concerns of Greek irredentism.

This narrative emphasis has been pervasive in official memory constructions in/of modern Turkey, and by extension, Izmir. The historical role of the city is framed teleologically, as a stage for the drama of becoming a nation state. Hence, the significance of the *place* of Izmir has been coextensive with the *time* for its participation in the ‘National Struggle’. This, in turn, defined which aspects (and periods) of Izmir were considered as political memory significant. The city’s ancient history and cultural legacies carry little weight. Even less significant is the era (and aura) of early-modern ‘cosmopolitan Smyrna’. Bluntly put, with

the demise of Smyrna, the ‘foreign expansionism’ in the Eastern Mediterranean also went up in smoke. In view of this tidal shift of regional powers, the Greek occupation of Izmir becomes a mere parenthesis. While the Ottoman Empire was crushed by European Imperialism, the Turkish Republic ultimately emerged as victorious over both. The demise of Smyrna in 1922 became an ultimately ‘necessary’ event in the narrative of modern-Turkish national state founding.

Contemporary memory projects in Izmir should be regarded in the context of this mnemonic hegemony, staged in an endless row of Turkish history exhibitions in the Republican period. Then again, the engagement with local memory has the potential to simultaneously nuance and destabilise national discourses, precisely by imposing its local enunciation. What official memory gains in national scope, it loses in local relevance (and vice versa). This locally-national dynamic is often overlooked as an aspect of nationalist imaginaries. Even when emulating official narratives of the birth of a national state, local memory-constructs anchor notions of ‘national space’ in a tangible, physical location. Metonymic and faceless geographies hallowed in national drama (whether landscapes, habitats, or theatres of war) are, hence, emplaced in familiar localities, and populated with recognisable communities and personage. This re-scaling, re-framing, and embodiment of memory may paradoxically both affirm and subvert the official discourse, when reifying and performing ‘decisive moments’ of (world) historical processes as local memory fixtures in the present: “on this very day, in this very city...”.

The 2022 commemoration of September 9 and the centenary of the ‘Liberation of Izmir’ amply illustrate this point. It began a full year ahead of the centenary, marking the celebration of Victory Day (August 30, 2021) with the opening of the grand ‘Independence Exhibition in Izmir’ (*İstiklal Sergisi İzmir’de*), at the Atlas Pavilion of Kültürpark. Organised by Izmir Municipality, this was an extended replica of the Ankara/Istanbul ‘Independence Exhibition’ mentioned above. Hence, local memory literally emulated the national format of commemoration, in symbolic reiteration of national temporality.

Having said this, the İzmir exhibition significantly tweaked the

narrative of the original. It expanded the volume of the exhibit, while narrowing its scope, focusing on stories of local relevance and the role of Izmir in the process of building a national state. It particularly underscored the city's importance for restoring the economy in the young Republic. In addition, the expo included local resistance and martyr narratives, highlighting (and constructing) characters in/of local memory. Among familiar faces were Hasan Tahsin, the local journalist traditionally referred to as the 'first bullet' fired at Greek occupiers, commemorated since the 1970s with the 'First Bullet Monument' in Konak, central Izmir. Less familiar was the story of Süleyman Fetih Bey, an Ottoman colonel who had warned against the imminent occupation, ultimately to be martyred by Greek bayonets after refusing to defile his Ottoman uniform and his copy of the Quran.

The municipal programme for the centenary provided a rich menu of events. It included a 400-kilometre Memorial Walk in the steps of the Turkish army. Under the banner of 'Victory and Peace Road', a motley assembly of students, athletes, mountaineers, and other enthusiasts took off on foot from Afyon, where the Turkish army had assembled before embarking on the 'Great Offensive', to reach Izmir two weeks later, for the celebrations of September 9. Here it morphed into a massive flag procession through the city, followed by victim memorials, a helicopter show, and several dance performances on a massive scene complex set up by the waterfront. It all culminated in a spectacular augmented-reality show celebrating the city, before Tarkan (Turkish mega pop-star and vocal AKP opponent) performed in front of an audience of hundreds of thousands.

The performances and stage events of September 9 had a host of parallel events/exhibitions before, during, and following the centenary period. A permanent open-air photography exhibit was arranged by the quay, under titled "A Century-Old Enthusiasm" (*Bir Asırlık Coşku*), consisting of a self-referential documentation of local September 9 festivities in the city through time. Turkish independence was represented as a "just victory over the imperialism of the world", rather than as an insular event, as a formative process among citizens "in every field from education to art, from sports to production." Such an emphasis of the nation as

a citizen-based, cultural, and economic venture is common in Turkish national-feeling building discourse, but finds particular resonance in the context of Izmir, which is envisioned as the hub of economic revival as noted above.

This photographic exhibition (as well as the grand Independence Exhibition) recalls the familiar, celebratory, and *settling* themes of local national-feeling building legacies and lore. Notably, however, the centenary celebrations also included exhibitions drawing attention to traumatic and *unsettling* experiences associated with birth of the Turkish Republic, as illustrated by the three separate exhibitions (directly or indirectly) related to the 1922 fire. In K lt rpark, the central recreational area constructed in the heart of the fire zone, a smaller exhibition was arranged for the centenary, containing some 60 photographs documenting the city before, during, and after the fire, yet poorly supported with informative texts. What is also worth noting is the ambitious, retrospective exhibition of Kurdish artist Ahmet G neŐtekin, titled *G vur Mahallesi*, organised at the Atlas Pavilion in K lt rpark – in the immediate vicinity of the *İstiklal Sergisi*. Not only did several works evoke the memory of the 1922 fire and the population exchange but they intertwined such references with other controversial issues and taboos in official Turkish memory, such as the contemporary Syrian refugee disaster, and the repression of the Kurdish identity. In this contextualising information texts were markedly sparse as well, leaving references to the fire, more or less, entirely implicit, and likely largely ‘over the head’ of many visitors. Something very different may be said for the unique fire-exhibition arranged in the Bostanlı neighbourhood, to which we shall now turn.

Commemorating the Great Fire of 1922: “Izmir Encircled by Fire”

Across the bay from central Izmir in KarŐyaka, the newly established gallery *Çatı* (Roof) presented the extensive “Izmir Encircled by Fire: From Occupation to Liberation” (*AteŐ Çemberinde İzmir: İşgalden KurtuluŐa*) exhibition as its launching event. In cooperation with the local KarŐyaka municipality, the event opened on 11 September 2022, strategically wedged between September 9 and the centenary of the out-

break of the fire on September 13. The exhibition had originally been scheduled to last for two months but was prolonged several times due to extensive interest (not least from primary and secondary schools), until it finally closed at the end of May 2023. By then it had welcomed almost 10,000 visitors.¹⁷ Alongside the exhibition, the venue hosted several talks, revolving around local, Izmirian perspectives and experiences of the birth of the Turkish national state. It may also be noted that the ensuing exhibition at the *Çatı* gallery (running as we write this text) is devoted to the centenary of the Turkish Republic, called “A Nation Awakens: The Centennial of the Republic” (*Bir Millet Uyanıyor: Cumhuriyet 100 Yaşında*).



Figure 1. *Çatı* gallery, located on the roof-top of a parking garage in central Bostanlı, Karşıyaka Municipality, Izmir. Photograph: Torsten Janson.

¹⁷ This may be compared to the Güneştekin-expo, visited by about 10,000 per day. Hence, the ‘Encircled by Fire’ was a considerably smaller memory event in purely quantitative terms, if not less significant regarding the politics of memory.



Figure 2. The exterior and roof-top entry to *Çatı* gallery.
Photograph: Torsten Janson.

The “Encircled by Fire” exhibition was the result of the organisational and curative efforts of local-history enthusiasts and collectors Nejat and Aybala Yentürk. For three decades, they had assembled an extensive private collection of material documenting the early-modern history of Izmir. As early as 2016, plans were made to organise the show with Koç University (Istanbul), but were cancelled due to “changes in policy”.¹⁸ Again, in connection with the 2019 centenary of the Greek occupation, the Izmir municipality envisioned an exhibition of Yentürks’ collections, integrated into an ambitious plan for a new city museum of Izmir, which was not realised either. Finally, in 2020, an attractive venue was made available by Mayor Cemil Tugay of Karşıyaka municipality, allowing the gallery to be established in Bostanlı.

Located at the rooftop of a parking garage, *Çatı* gallery provides a spacious and largely window-less exhibition venue (Fig 1 & 2). Its light-grey, rough concrete flooring, plaster panelling, as well as exposed sup-

¹⁸ N. Yentürk, Interview.

porting beams and ventilation piping in the high ceiling create a minimalistic and slightly industrial atmosphere. The sombre character was underscored by the architectural and graphic design of the exhibit. The open rectangular space was subdivided into sections by free-standing or hanging display units and separation panels, painted in starkly contrasting crimson red and storm grey. Separating panels and walls were covered with extensive information texts (in Turkish only), photographs, and visual illustrations (Fig 3-8). Through this architectural arrangement, visitor were guided along a chronological line and narrative flow. It presented a story about the city's destiny, beginning with the end of the Great War and the Armistice of Moudros in 1918, and ending with its demise (and rebirth) with the fire of 1922.

While the expo was punctuated with interest-evoking subtitles or quotes such as 'The beginning of the end', 'Crimes kept secret', 'Whose land is this?' there were not any systematic sub-sections or 'chapters' that guided visitors. Even so, three narrative sub-themes are identified as traversing the exhibit: (1) The Turkish 'National Struggle' in the shadow and defence against imperialism and irridentism; (2) The Greek occupation and atrocities committed during their army retreat; (3) the Great Fire of 1922. In other words, the engagement with the fire, ostensibly the subject of the exhibition, was carefully circumscribed with a distinct metanarrative and teleological principle. The fire of 1922 was represented as the final and tragic conclusion of a historical process of European aggression, exploiting an exhausted and politically inept Ottoman Empire, ultimately salvaged by the victorious Turkish Republic.

In effect, therefore, the exhibition was not so much concerned with the event or repercussions of the fire in and of itself. Its rationale was to document and commemorate the allegedly forgotten humanitarian cost of the birth of the national state; a high price, largely paid by the civilian population of the region, exposed to "crimes against humanity" (*insanlık suçları*) and "systemic annihilation" (*sistematik bir 'yok etme'*) committed by the Greek army. This is the notion of Izmir as *encircled* by fire. In order to convey this story, the exhibition relied on extensive historiographic texts, material documentation (printed testimonies and photographs), and various audio-visual illustrations. The exhibition was laid

out in a dramaturgically effective, narrative flow, beginning with a dry and documentary address, and moving towards more affective registers, appealing to humanitarian empathy, moral outrage, and national solidarity.

Upon entering, the visitor encountered a monumental print of one of the iconic black-and-white photographs of the burning city, against a blood-red backdrop. It was overwritten with the exhibition's title, printed in time-typical Courier font, while the name of the city was rendered in block letters traversed by orange flames (Fig 4). The first sections, introduced as 'The Beginning of the End', set the tone for the entire exhibition. Supported by detailed historical accounts and extensive texts, they emphasised that the Moudros armistice ending the Great War was far from creating conditions for peace. On the contrary, it created the opportunity and incentive for the Greek irridentism soon to overtake the region, patronised by the European powers. The text, hence, implicitly suggested that the treaty and the ambitions of regional and world powers ultimately led to the horrors of massacre and disaster.



Figure 3. Separating panels and flag decorations dividing and creating chromatic contrasts inside the exhibition venue. Photograph: Torsten Janson.

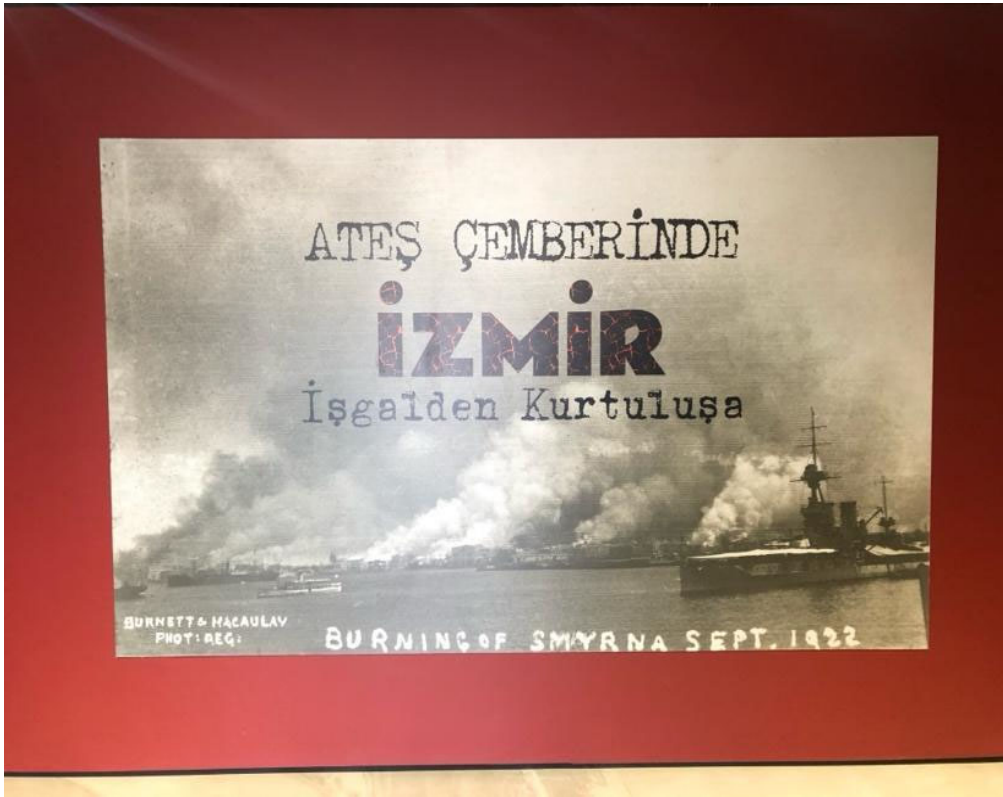


Figure 4. Reproduction of one of the iconic images of the Great Fire at the entrance to the exhibition. Photograph: Torsten Janson.

From this geo-political perspective, the exhibition zoomed in on the local/regional events and experiences of the Greek occupation starting in 1919. The open space running along the inner (eastern) long side of the exhibit, flanked by Turkish flags, was devoted to documenting the atrocities suffered by the civilian population, as well as the military brilliance and heroism of the Turkish riposte. According to the exhibition, if the 1919 occupation had already been a criminal and violent expansionist event, the worst atrocities were to be committed as the Greek forces were being expelled from the region. Several display units showcased international testimonies in publications and reports, bearing witness to the violence suffered by civilians, framed with visual illustrations and photographic material (Fig 5). At the centre of the hall, a separate and age-restricted section contained particularly graphic and disturbing narratives and material documenting humanitarian suffering (Fig 6). Simi-

larly, in the main hall, the suffering of the civilians of the region was described in a more individual and detailed manner. The exhibition was careful to underscore how this was allegedly part of a conscious “scorched earth policy” (*yakıp yıkma politikası*) and “plan of destruction” (*imha planı*):

Within the framework of this policy, the Greek destruction units torched the villages, towns and cities they went through, committing thousands of crimes of rape, torture, and murder. The object of the troops of destruction was to leave behind unusable and uninhabitable ruins, from warehouses to animal shelters, from water wells to poplar groves. The crimes committed by the Greek army in Uşak, Alaşehir, Salihli, Turgutlu, Manisa and many other settlements along the way amounted to massacres, and many Turks were murdered.



Figure 5. Display of international reports with testimonies of Greek atrocities, framed by artwork illustrating displayed Turkish villagers. Photograph: Torsten Janson.



Figure 6. Age-restricted area, containing particularly graphic documentation of humanitarian suffering. Photograph: Torsten Janson.

Progressing through the exhibition, the narrative of Greek cruelty gradually shifted towards the Turkish triumph of re-conquering Izmir, culminating in raising the Turkish flag at the fortress of Kadifekale on the 9th of September 1922: “With Turkish flags flying again in Izmir, the city’s days of occupation and oppression, which lasted 3 years, 3 months and 3 weeks, were finally over.” The triumph came to its conclusion with Mustafa Kemal’s arrival in Izmir the following day.

The final part of the exhibition, devoted to the Great Fire and the ruins it left behind, struck a different chord from those of the previous sections. It actually claimed a relatively small section of the exhibition, spatially as well as textually, arranged in the north-western corner of the gallery. Here, the display panels were dominated by photographic reproductions of various sizes. The accompanying texts were relatively short, and mainly conveyed witness reports of the disaster, rather than much contextual information (Fig. 7). While the fire itself was presented in

some 20 images, more than 30 documented the city in its aftermath. Here the texts drew attention to the extent of the destruction, and the ensuing social problems following, as the fire-zone remained “a bleeding wound in the heart of Izmir for 14 years”. The section also showcased a diorama of a burnt-out building, as well as map of the city, with the black hole of the fire-zone in its midst (Fig 8). In a separate space, opposite the photographs, a screen displayed a video-stream, documenting the destruction of the towns of the region, and the Turkish charity work in the aftermath of the fire, accompanied by a sombre musical score.

In other words, this third subtheme relied more on visual material and affective registers compared to the other sections of the exhibition and provided considerably less contextual information. The impressionistic character was further underscored by the avoidance of any clear stance on culpability, i.e., the sensitive question of who was responsible for the fire and the inability to contain it. Vaguely, the exhibition suggested that there were sinister forces at play. Referring to a testimony by the Head of the Fire Department, “arson took place at 25 independent locations” in the Armenian quarter, and fire-fighters “were shot [at] from all directions.” This indicates, according to the exhibit, “the existence of a pre-organised group (*örgütlenmiş bir grubun*), acting according to a plan (*bir plan çerçevesinde hareket eden*) not to extinguish the fire” – while no explanation was provided as to who may have formed this “group”. Beyond this opaque turn of phrase, visitors found no answers about culpability, nor any concrete detailed information about arson sites, etc.

Then again, avoiding the issue of culpability was presented as an active didactic choice, an aspiration to shift the framework of commemorating the disaster. As formulated in the promotional folder, rather than “being limited to” the question of culpability, which “often occupies the minds of the visitors”, the Encircled-expo “invites us to think about the villages, towns and cities burned by the retreating Greek army in Western Anatolia after the Great Offensive, and the unbelievable violence inflicted there, of which many of us are unaware.”

Such intentions found visual expression on a map over burned down cities and testimonies of Greek cruelties: here no distinction is

made between the cities torched by the Greek army and Izmir. In other words, the Great Fire of Izmir was framed as associated with and/or implicated by Greek expansionism and cruelty, without explicitly detailing the circumstances of its outbreak. Even if the exhibition had any intention of breaking longstanding amnesias of the fire in official memory, this map effectively transmuted into an (historiographically argued and affectively presented) accusation, directed at Greek irridentism. The only victims incisively accounted for were the local (Turkish-to-be) population of the region. However horrific, the price they paid in humanitarian suffering found its ultimate return and award in the creation of the Turkish Republic.



Figure 7. The section of the exhibition illustrating the fire, prioritises visual illustrations over textual information. Photograph: Torsten Janson.



Figure 8. Map illustrating the ‘black hole’ of the fire-zone. Photograph: Torsten Janson.

Accordingly, the last displays of the exhibit provided an epilogue on a more optimistic note, explicitly interconnecting with the nationalistic metanarrative. Already the text on the fire zone had claimed that the disaster of the Great Fire “somehow, paved the way for the creation of a modern city envisioned by the Republic”, while “rebuilding İzmir and making it liveable again would require a long and difficult process beyond measure.” Exiting the exhibit, visitors encountered texts and images celebrating the resilience and courage of the Turks in the face of such massive challenges, and how this morphed into the joy of liberty on September 9. Finally, the liberated Turks could express their “longing for red and white colours” banned during the occupation, “turning the streets of İzmir into a field of poppies.” The final panel pays homage to fallen heroes among the Anatolian people on the road of ‘National Struggle’, and to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in particular.

To summarise, the “İzmir Encircled by Fire” exhibition stood out as a significant memory-event. The theme of the Great Fire of 1922, as part of the centenary commemorations, represented a challenge of a

longstanding amnesiac hegemony in and of itself. In effect, however, the exhibition affirmed familiar Turkish memory tropes and frameworks, hence posing little, if any, challenge to official memory. Then again, this does not mean that we would like to argue that the exhibition should be discarded as merely reproducing national memory. Rather, it represented a form of negotiation with official historiography in multiple ways, by: a) underscoring the local/regional experience of the ‘national struggle’; b) by invoking international testimonies about Greek atrocities; and c) by heavily relying on affective registers, in the documentation of (Turkish) humanitarian suffering. In its overall effect, therefore, the exhibition’s engagement with the Great Fire remained paradoxically muted, despite the ambitious (or deceptive) scale of the exhibit, and the promise of its dramatic title.

While the humanitarian suffering of the civilian populations of Anatolia was documented in painful, forensic detail, the Great Fire of 1922 remained an abstract panorama, a vista observed from a distance. The representation of the burning city paid little attention to the population annihilated, dispossessed, and dispersed. Hence, the unsettling memory of the demise of ‘ethnically others’ was settled by commemorating Turkish suffering, inflicted by the co-nationalists of the same others. This mnemonic re-signification of the Great Fire provided the very rationale for (selectively) engaging with historical taboos, stirring the ashes in carefully chosen (and nationalised) quarters. The metanarrative of ‘National Struggle’ and the birth of the Turkish state provided a legitimising framework as well as a hermeneutic principle, cushioning the engagement with the past. In short, the trauma of the fire was trumped by the joy of September 9.

Stirring up the Ashes? Multidirectional Memory, Amnesia, and Revisionism

Memory, it has often been said, is the past made present.¹⁹ In all its minimalism, this captures the sensitivities still surrounding imaginaries of the Great Fire of 1922 in Turkish official politics of memory Histori-

¹⁹ Terdiman, *Present Past*; Huyssen, *Present Pasts*; Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*.

ographically omitted since the birth of the Republic, any public expression commemorating the fire -whether in exhibitions, memory walks, novels, or documentaries- inevitably challenges such a hegemony. In this perspective, the ‘Encircled by Fire’ exhibition organised for the centenary of the ‘Liberation of Izmir’ was something of a riddle in its concomitant affirmation and subversion of pervasive memory trajectories.

Michael Rothberg’s notion of “multidirectional memory” is helpful for untangling this apparent paradox. There is a tendency among proponents of memories of violent pasts, Rothberg submits, to compete for recognition with ‘other’ memories. This competitive notion of memory is predicated on the idea that *one* group owns (and is ‘owned’ by) *one* collective memory, and, therefore, is threatened by other identity groups and ‘their’ memories.²⁰ Hence, the memory of the Great Fire of 1922 has been perceived to ‘belong to’ and support Greek/Armenian identity constructs and state discourses (and more recently local memory-activists). Invertedly, official memory in Turkey has disengaged from the fire, solely remembering Izmir as the site of birth of the Turkish national state.

Contrary to such dichotomous (if politically useful) notions of ownership, Rothberg demonstrates that memories of violent pasts are, in effect, multidirectional and dynamic: they are “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing.” (Rothberg 2009: 3).²¹ Accordingly, we maintain that revisiting the Great Fire among memory actors in Izmir is expressive of similar multidirectional trajectories. They range from subversive proponents of cosmopolitan memory and cross-national solidarity to selective and loyal reproductions of triumphant nationalism. And while the first century of Turkish politics of memory was guided by silence and omission, we claim that the ‘Encircled by Fire’ exhibition chose a diametrically opposite strategy: an excess of memory-talk *in support* of official historiography. Or according to Rothberg: the “result of memory conflict is not less memory, but more”.²²

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this multidirectionality was the exhibition’s ambivalent hybridisation of victim consciousness and tri-

²⁰ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*: 3-29.

²¹ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*: 3.

²² Rothberg, “Multidirectional Memory”: 176.

umphant nationalism. This relied on a bricolage of (tendentious) historical contextualisation, ‘forensic’ documentation, and affective appeal to humanitarian empathy, moral outrage, and love for the nation. The exhibition, thus, expressed a distinctly *nationalised* empathy/admiration for the proto-Turkish victims/heroes, while it presented allegations and evidence against non-Turkish culprits. By extension, Turkey was exonerated from any historical guilt, while Greek, Armenian, and Levantine victims remained forgotten. The exhibition, hence, engaged with victimhood and historical-local trauma only in so far as it affirmed and celebrated patriotic memory, steeped in a nationalist gaze. Accordingly, the ‘real’, or perhaps more accurately, the *relevant* victims of the ‘War of Liberation’ were the Turks, while other (ed) victims were pedagogically insignificant for the metanarrative of the birth of a national state. Consequently, when the exhibition replaced amnesia with memory, this resulted in historical *revisionism*. As pointed out by Andreas Langenohl, triumphant national histories have adverse effects on memory work as an instrument for post-authoritarian transition.²³

It is of little surprise that local art and memory activism has been more radical in questioning official memory in the context of Smyrna/Izmir by re-memorialising the Great Fire from a vantage point of transcultural and transhistorical solidarity. As a space of critical reflection and empathy across geographic and temporal divides, Andreas Huyssen reminds us that art has the potential to challenge reified official memory, strengthen demands for accountability, sabotage organised forgetting, and resist memory-revisionism (itself perhaps a greater threat than pure forgetting).²⁴ Certain counter-memory interventions in Izmir (such as the various expressions of subversive memory activism in public spaces, or Ahmet Güneştekin’s art on repressed memory exhibited in the Kültürpark, the former fire zone, the very heart of official forgetting), have been expressive of precisely the kind of interconnectedness of human experience that revisionist memory attempts to obscure and deny.

This, in turn, underscores the spatio-temporal dynamics of critical,

²³ Langenohl, “Memory in Post-Authoritarian Societies”: 163-172.

²⁴ Huyssen, *Memory Art in the Contemporary world*.

transformative,²⁵ and transcultural memory work, when the focus shifts “from stable and allegedly ‘pure’ national-cultural memory towards the movements, connections, and mixing of memories”, to use a formulation by Astrid Erll.²⁶ An open-ended probing of the history of *our* place and present invites an exploration of its connectedness to (perhaps not so) *other* times and places. In the final analysis, even when framed by the politicised fixtures of public centennials and triumphant celebrations, local commemoration of the past in the present is always susceptible to re-reading and re-signification; always affording multidirectional reception and re-medialisation. Once stirred, the memories of past atrocities are cast into an unpredictable dynamics of movement, re-connection, and remoulding.

²⁵Assmann, “The Transformative Power of Memory”.

²⁶Erll, “Transcultural Memory”: 176.

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