

The Italians of Istanbul (Nineteenth-Twentieth Century)

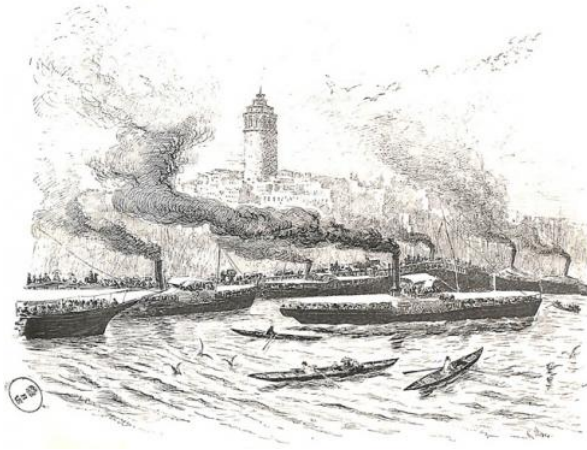
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ABSTRACT

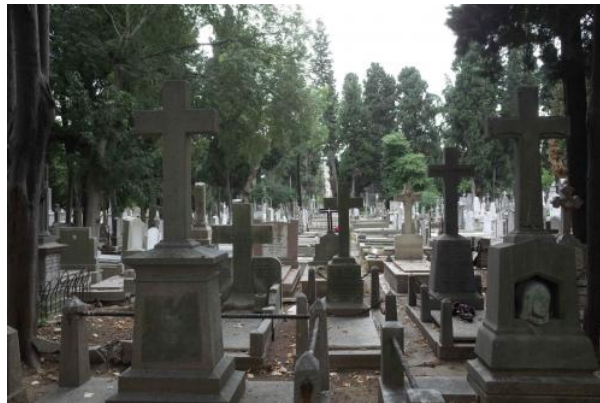
The Italian presence in Istanbul is centuries-old. It was renewed in the nineteenth century with the arrival of patriots, and later by migrants who came to try their luck in the Ottoman capital. At the turn of the century, the Italian colony numbered approximately 10,000 people. Like their predecessors, the newcomers first settled in the Galata and Pera neighborhoods on the European side, where community institutions were established, and later further out on the periphery. While there was a desire to structure a community around national institutions and values, the Italians of Istanbul had multifaceted senses of belonging and loyalty, within a multiconfessional Ottoman society. Catholic-Latin sites, such as the cemetery in Feriköy, were one of the centers of Italianness.



Italian sites in Istanbul (circa 1905). Map created by M. Yaghmai.



View of Galata Tower, engraving by C. Biseo, taken from the travelogue *Costantinopoli* by Edmondo De Amicis, Constantinople/Milan/Trier, 1894.



The Catholic Latin Cemetery of Feriköy. Photo Marie Bossaert.

A Stratified Presence Renewed in the Nineteenth Century

The Italian presence in Istanbul dates back to the Middle Ages, when merchants from Genoa and Venice settled on the shores of the Bosphorus. This presence, which stratified over time, was thoroughly renewed during the nineteenth century. The last descendants of this Italian-speaking population—mostly Catholic and referred to as Levantines or Italo-Levantines—mixed with new migrants. The reasons that prompted Italians to leave the peninsula for the Ottoman Empire and its capital were firstly political, as this immigration consisted of Risorgimento exiles. Multiple waves of arrivals followed the revolutions and the repression that came in their wake, as in 1821, during the early 1830s, and after the uprisings of 1848-1849. The reasons for departure were also economic. Arrivals resumed during the final third of the century.

It is difficult to provide an accurate number for this presence. In 1864, a consular investigation found that 3,500 Italians were registered at the consulate, and estimated that roughly the same amount (approximately 3,000) had settled in the capital without registering. In his reference book, Angiolo Mori indicates that nearly 9,000 individuals were registered in 1905, with an actual presence between 12,000 and 14,000. To this enduring presence should be added people traveling through, who disembarked daily in the capital's

port and stayed for a few days or a few weeks: sailors, artists, laborers on their way to the construction sites for Anatolia's railroads.

The history of these individuals, of their crew and company, largely remains to be written. We are more familiar with the major figures present in the circles of sultans, such as the musician Giuseppe Donizetti (1788-1856), or Fausto Zonaro (1854-1929), who was the painter of Sultan Abdül Hamid II (1842-1918).

The Sites of Italians and Italy in Istanbul

New arrivals preferably settled in the Pera (today Beyoğlu) and Galata neighborhoods on the European side of Istanbul north of the Golden Horn, where their predecessors had settled, especially in Galata, with its photogenic tower of Genovese origin, which gradually eroded the hill on which it stands. Italian was long spoken there alongside Greek, Turkish, and French—a certain Italian that the writer Edmondo De Amicis (1846-1908) dubbed “bastard,” more motley than “The tongue that might be made by mixing together the dialect of a Piedmontese porter, a Lombard fruit-seller, and a Romagnol carter.” The newcomers lived next to, and sometimes with, Europeans who had settled there for longer or shorter periods, including Levantines, Greeks, Armenians, and Jews.

These two neighborhoods, which underwent profound transformations during the nineteenth century (often described in—debated—terms of “modernization”), were places of European culture and housed theaters, department stores, and fashion stores. Italian opera was popular there.

This is the area where the institutions around which the Italian community gradually organized were based, such as the Artigiana charitable society, the Italian Labour Society of Mutual Aid, a hospital, and a number of schools. New places of worship were built in the vicinity of older ones: the Catholic Church of Saint Anthony, whose architecture evokes Venice, was built at the beginning of the century in the Grand Rue de Pera, with financing from the Italian state. It housed the Italian pavilion, at a time when the country was trying to affirm its presence in the city. Most of these buildings still exist today, in states of greater or lesser disrepair.

These neighborhoods were also home to European diplomatic representations, including that of Italy. After unification, the new kingdom established its embassy in the former Sardinian consulate located in the Rue des Petits-Champs. The emblematic Venetian Palace, a former dwelling for bailos, passed long ago into the hands of the Austrians. Like other countries, Italy possessed a summer residence along the Bosphorus.

The Italian presence gradually spread in the city, first toward the north in the Feriköy neighborhood, home of the Latin Catholic Cemetery, where most Italians were buried. It later spread on the other side to Scutari (Kadıköy), where the Assumptionists have a church in Moda, as well as beyond the Golden Horn, in the more distant neighborhoods of Bakırköy and San Stefano (Yedikule).

What Italianness?

What did being Italian in nineteenth-century Istanbul mean? Can one speak of a community? The question is related to the construction of the Italian nation state. There was certainly a

desire to structure the community around national values and institutions. The first of them was the Mutual Aid Society. Created in 1863 by Italian patriots, it quickly became a central hub for the community. As its members increased, the society became more bourgeois: it brought together only some of the capital's Italian, even if it purported to speak for all of them.

School was another means of cultivating Italianness. In 1890 Italy launched an ambitious educational policy aimed at its "colonies" abroad. Schools were opened in the capital. One of the objectives was to promote the Italian language, which had lost ground to French. This linguistic policy, which also relied on the Dante Alighieri Society, was unable to slow the disappearance of Italian down. Parents of Italian children would rather send them to French schools, which were more prestigious.

Italianness was thus not necessarily defined by language, no more so than by nationality (some Italians were Ottoman or Austrian subjects), religion, or family: it is important to emphasize the diversity of belonging and loyalty, as well as the unstable nature of identifications in the Ottoman Empire until the early twentieth century. For many Italo-Levantines, ethno-confessional belonging (Latin Catholic) long prevailed over national sentiment, although this was not the case for those who frequented the Masonic lodges or the Mutual Aid Society of the early days. The Italian population also included a considerable Jewish component. In addition, regional belonging remained strong, as it did in Italy.

There was also the diverse nature of families, in which people married according to social rather than national considerations: in the words of a contemporary witness, this could include an "Italian grandfather and Armenian grandmother, [an] Italian father and Greek mother, Ottoman uncle and Russian aunt, a son who was Austrian and another who was French." The Latin Catholic Cemetery in Feriköy reflects this, where among the silence the rows of headstones present names that seemingly encompass multiple backgrounds.

It is therefore difficult to speak of an Italian community with well-defined outlines, and important to resituate these Italians within the context of the Ottoman society that was theirs, all the more so as some of them worked for the Ottoman state. The debate continues regarding this point, for some have celebrated the capital's cosmopolitanism, while others feel that the different ethno-confessional groups stood alongside without really mixing.

Conversely, Italianness was not the exclusive domain of Italians. Take for example the "Italian style," which adorns the façades of many buildings in Pera. Far from being an Italian import, it was actually a reinterpretation of the peninsula's architecture by Ottoman architects, a learned combination of local elements and reinvented motifs.

The expulsion of Italians from the Ottoman Empire in 1911-1912 in response to the Italian invasion of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica was a turning point, as they were commanded to choose between leaving the land where they had sometimes lived for decades, or staying and changing nationality.

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