



Summary :

The great developments in the collective activities of the Greeks in Constantinople from the middle of the 19th century until the 1920s were due to the favourable conditions created by the reforms introduced to the Ottoman Empire; such include the institution of egalitarianism for both Muslim and non-Muslim subjects, as well as the legal foundation of Greek-Orthodox communities. These associations embarked upon rich scientific, educational and recreational activities, while ideas, anxieties, expectations and aspirations were being expressed amongst their number with regard to public affairs.

Date

Mid-19th – Early 20th century

Geographical Location

Constantinople (İstanbul)

1. The phenomenon of collective activity by Greeks

The collective activity of Greeks in [Constantinople](#) was especially vigorous during the 19th century. The term “collective activity” refers to the foundation of associations with specific aims accommodating the cultural, social and educational needs of the Greek-Orthodox population of Constantinople. It was a phenomenon that reached its peak only during the later period of the Ottoman Empire. For the precedent period, it is known that some of these needs were covered by local parishes, albeit not systematically or for extended periods of time. [Manouil Gedeon](#) refers to the activity of parish confraternities, such as the ones of Agios Spyridon and Agia Matrona (St Spyridon and St Matrona) founded in 1816 and the Agios Ioannis (St John) Confraternity (1814). These were responsible for collecting money during the feast day of each saint, while also distributing alms to the poor. He also records with certainty the existence of confraternities in the past, especially one established for the support of the Patriarchal Academy founded by the patriarch [Dionysios III](#) in 1663.¹

These activities, however, cannot be compared to what followed after the mid-19th century and until World War I. During this period dozens of associations were founded – in fact according to an estimate their number reached 500. The extent and density of the phenomenon is also related to the tolerant environment created by the [Ottoman reforms](#), as well as the institution of egalitarianism for both Muslim and non-Muslim subjects. This new environment allowed individuals to found associations aiming to accommodate different needs. In order to establish such associations, a group of people had to take initiative and decide to found a club, an educational or charitable society by publicly declaring its purpose. The association was founded by an assembly which, subsequently, decided upon the board and the deed of the association (charter), which was usually published independently. Despite the fact that the initiative came from small groups, the associations were aiming to draw in greater audiences and increase the number of their members, a pursuit that proved quite significant for their success. Surely, the number of people whom each association targeted varied according to its specific type and activities.

The legal foundation of Greek-Orthodox communities introduced by the Ottoman reforms also contributed positively to the development of associations. The singular modernization process known as [Tanzimât](#), which combined mild westernization with the maintenance of absolute monarchy and the legal recognition of non-Muslim communities, gave new perspective to the communal charitable societies and schools. To the degree that these communities were granted jurisdiction over areas such as [education](#) or the administration of communal areas and funds, the need to contribute financially rose; and the associations could contribute to the fulfillment of this need.

In these cases, the associations’ activities and the private initiative intercrossed with the need to support communal enterprises. In any case, however, the activities of these associations were firmly based on volunteer work; from this point of view, they were indicative of a new stance towards public affairs adopted by an extended group of people or networks, chiefly deriving from the middle urban



social strata.

2. Classification of associations in Constantinople

The associations founded in Constantinople can be categorized in different ways, although it must be initially stressed that the collective activity phenomenon was so varied that it is very hard to integrate the total number of associations in one singular classificatory model. It is known that some associations survived for long, that others were short-lived, while several did not operate at all. The existing material records the foundation of associations, due to their extant charters; we cannot be sure, however, that they actually operated and for how long. On the other hand, a lot more is known for several associations because of the exposure their activities received by the [press](#). Even though the activities of these associations were clearly recorded, the ones not covered by the press cannot be dismissed as non-operative ones, since such was the multitude of associations that the press could not follow them all.

Despite the difficulties referred to above, however, it is possible to distinguish the associations to educational-scientific and charitable, while a third category includes recreational clubs. The [Greek Philological Association](#) of Constantinople was the main example of the first category; the [Ladies' Charity Society of Peran](#) belonged to the second category, while clubs such as "Byzantion" and associations such as "[Hermes](#)" could be included in the third category. The educational societies were usually aiming to advance education and literacy, as well as to fund Greek-Orthodox schools in Constantinople and the rest of the Ottoman lands, provided that their financial situation allowed it. The Greek Philological Association of Constantinople, as the first of its kind, had managed to accumulate regular contributions, which were used for funding regional schools; when its financial activities were limited towards the late 1870s, another association stepped in, the "Agapate Allilous" confraternity, founded by the Patriarch Joachim III with the support of the same circle of [bankers](#) that until then had been financing the Greek Philological Association of Constantinople. The Ladies' Charity Society of Peran, founded in 1863, was systematically involved in charitable work; it drew a long and successful course until the beginning of World War I. During this period of time, the society was not only involved in supporting the poor, but also founded a medical practice where hundreds of paupers flocked to receive medical treatment. The practice would offer diagnosis, medication, even surgery. Moreover, the society founded workshops (sawing-workshop and launderette), where indigent women were occupied.

The third category of associations is not represented by any specific exemplary society, since many of them could play that part and none appeared more successful than the other. The characteristic of these associations is their focus on their "members' intellectual development" with several activities aiming to boost social interaction, such as public classes, evening gatherings, theatrical performances and musical events. These associations usually provided a library and study hall, where the members could access the daily press.

3. The deeds of the associations (charters)

Characteristic for the associations was their charters. It is indeed impressive how collective activity is evident in them. There are many differences among different associations, stemming from their dissimilar aims, their local or extended intended range or just the number of articles their deeds themselves were comprised of. Regardless of these differences, the charter serves as the symbolic verification of the intention expressed by one group of people to join a society by agreeing to certain obligations and enjoying certain rights on the basis of a specific and detailed document citing these obligations and rights. The associations, according to their statutes, are not only places of activity for their members, but also places of control, as stated in the detailed regulations referring to their conduct and in the punishments to be implemented in case their members behaved indecently. References to "indecent conduct" of members and to the process of their expulsion when they failed to meet the standards of conduct are characteristic in many cases. These specific references do not attest to an established regularity, but rather to its absence.

4. The social aspect of associations

The classification of associations mentioned above cannot negate the fact that the boundaries of collective activity were never stable. In fact, the charitable and educational work constantly intertwined, while the social interaction offered by clubs was obviously present



in other, more “serious” associations. From that point of view, associations and the phenomenon of collective activity should be understood as a complex field, where social relations were being constructed. In many cases the same people appear as members or donors of different societies. The associations’ activities, such as public classes and lectures aimed to a broader audience, without which the public focus of these associations would be inexistent. At a time in which education and learning were matters of everyday discourse, educational or scientific questions could not remain conversational topics among small groups only.

The public aspect of associations appears to be at odds with the status of “member”, a vital element of these societies. This status indicates closed social or professional groups that develop exclusive activities. Indeed, in some cases –mainly clubs– only members were allowed to cross the threshold of the building the society was housed in, a constraint that often appeared as an article of the charter as well. The deed of association for the “Byzantion” club, for example, stated that its members could not exceed the number 200 and that only “those who occupy themselves with commerce or industry, [those who] are professionals, scientists or land-owners” could join the club.² Save for members, entrance to the club is denied “to persons with no such right towards it [the club]”. The charter of the [Ypsomatheia \(Samatya\)](#) Philharmonic Club clearly stated that non-members were denied entrance.³ Moreover, access to study halls, coffee houses and recreational areas was also limited among members. From this point of view clubs seem to be of exclusive character, sealed by their statutes with specific references to the duties and rights of their members, as well as the procedure for electing new members. This exclusive character, however, is assuaged by the fact that a great part of their activities, such as public lectures, dances and other musical events were addressed to non-members as well. From these activities, the associations’ administration expected to raise money to fund operational costs. The public character was more obvious in the case of educational associations such as the Greek Philological Association of Constantinople, or the [Greek Musical Association of Constantinople](#), which considered the provision of public classes and lectures as a contribution to social welfare. This is the reason why the newspapers of Constantinople often published information with regard to their activities and why the statements of the annual assemblies, lectures delivered by speakers etc, received such extensive press coverage. In a nutshell, the public could be informed about anything happening within these associations. Consequently, one should treat these associations as a complex field of study, where the socially defined member status cannot negate their orientation towards the greater public. Within this context, associations proved to be quite successful both in serving the needs of those groups that wished to socially interact in a private and exclusive environment and in managing public affairs, such as education and charity.

At this point the matter of the associations’ social character is raised. Social exclusivity, which is part of the member status, points towards the close relationship of many societies with certain social networks. Indeed, if one studies the published list of members, one will conclude that the membership body bears close relations to the ascending urban elite, comprised of merchants, bankers, professionals and members of the Ottoman administration. Associations were often locally based, which points to the conclusion that certain people were selected to found a society in their place of residence. K. Karatheodoris, for example, presided over the Philharmonic Society of [Mega Revma \(Arnavutköy\)](#), Nikolaos Zarifis, Z. Mavrogordatos and I. Sekiaris were members of the “Byzantion” Club administration etc. Collective activity, however, was not a result of the formation of the Greek-Orthodox bourgeoisie; on the contrary, it contributed to its construction. It is indeed impossible to disassociate the phenomenon of founding societies with the social construction of the middle classes and their attempt to achieve social hegemony. This construction of the urban elite, however, cannot happen outside the complex cultural processes through which specific active subjects learn to perceive themselves as part of a special social group. Within this context, practices connected to the phenomenon of collective activity, such as volunteer work, as well as a certain system of values, such as literacy, decency of conduct, social “transparency”, individual responsibility etc, strong and permanent characteristics of the urban middle classes. Within the societies, members are taught to conduct themselves with “decency”; they are taught, subsequently, to follow a certain system of values and enjoy the status stemming from it.

5. Associations as part of the public sphere

Associations, however, mainly served a central means for the expression of “public opinion”, hence becoming part of the [public sphere](#). Indeed, societies such as the Greek Philological Association of Constantinople, the Ladies' Charity Society of [Peran \(Stavrodromi\)](#) and the [Philergos Association](#) played an important part in the production of various discourses concerning education and learning, poverty and charity, work and leisure. Within them ideas, anxieties, expectations and aspirations were being expressed



for current affairs in the Ottoman Empire, Greece and the Balkans, as well as for education and schools, science and literature. Despite the fact that societies forbade by charter any discussions on political and religious matters, it is obvious that the political aspect of any subject matter would be hard to suppress. Let us not forget that associations operated during the time of the nationalistic conflicts within the Ottoman Empire, which afflicted it during the last century of its existence. These matters concerned both individuals and groups belonging to a literate community, directly linked to the middle strata. Scholars and medical doctors, bankers and clergymen, merchants and lawyers assembled in the associations' quarters, discussed and fought among themselves, thus forming a "public opinion" and constructing the cultural profile of the Greek-Orthodox community within the Ottoman Empire. The phenomenon of collective activity in Constantinople comprises the greater part of a very extensive network of societies founded in many cities of the empire. Views expressed within these societies, especially the largest ones such as the Greek Philological Association of Constantinople, were diffused to other parts of the Ottoman lands.

6. The gender-specific character of the associations

The associations did not only have a social character, but a gender-specific one as well. Even it when it was not always categorically stated, only men could become members. This characteristic was part of the collective activity phenomenon from the beginning and from this aspect it influenced the formation of the public sphere in the Ottoman capital. Public activities and the world of politics and finance were considered places of exclusively male presence. This fact founded the distinction between public and private spheres on the basis of a gender-specific and hierarchical distribution of roles. Within this context, the exclusively male character of the public sphere was supplemented by the female character of the private one. With regard to associations, this is obvious in the nature of their activities. There is, however, one field of public activity, where women were also given a role: [charity](#).

Charitable activity in the Ottoman capital was systematic, due to the constant changes in the context of the urban population and the need to protect the indigent. Philanthropy in Constantinople entailed a series of practices, such as providing bread, coal, "salary", work, but also offering scholarships to children of paupers. Subsequently, aspects of charitable activity intercrossed with education. The need for philanthropy led to the foundation of charitable societies in many parishes of Constantinople, where women participated alongside men. The most characteristic example is the Ladies' Charity Society of Pera, founded by ladies of well-off Pera families with charitable purposes. The ladies of the societies undertook the duty to support the charitable work by funding through membership fees, volunteer work and securing the co-operation of the -all male- doctors in Constantinople. Mainly, however, they managed to motivate their wealthy relatives and co-members of the Greek community to support the society. The Ladies' Charity Society of Pera was not the only charitable society run by women; it proved, however, to be the most long-lasting and successful one. Another 44 female associations were recorded until 1914, for the majority of which however little is known and their work, if any, was probably limited.⁴ The raising question, however, is: where was this female charitable activity of a public nature based upon? In order to answer this question one must perceive female charitable activity as a distinction between the public and private spheres. If politics and finance were considered aspects of the public sphere exclusively reserved for men, then charitable work can be placed at a point of intersection of public and private, as an extension of women's duty to protect their weak offspring. Poor and indigent people were in need of communal protection, which the community as an extended form of family had to provide. At this "in-between" space, where social needs were met, the activity of the two genders could work complementary to one another. Female contribution to caring for the poor would complement male public presence, which extended to other aspects of the public sphere, without eliminating—at least categorically—the distinction between public and private sphere. The famous educator Sappho Leontias, who enjoyed a long career in schools of [Smyrna](#) and Constantinople, commented on this aspect in an article published at the Smyrna newspaper *Amaltheia*: "Nursing and curing the weak and invalid members of the society, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the incarcerated, caring for orphans, providing for the elderly, teaching all the members of the society, [...] these are the most significant duties of the society, comprised of both men and women. And the completion of these duties do not only bear upon the shoulders of men, but also women, [...] especially when they [men], pressed by obligations to provide for livelihood, do not suffice to successfully manage social duties ...".⁵

Female charitable activity and the foundation of female societies were certainly not accepted by all men, and many negative remarks have been recorded about it. There was, however, one activity that tested the resistance of the public/private axis without openly challenging it. From this aspect, even though the female public activity was highlighted through charitable work, it did not negate the



prevailing concept of “woman” as part of the private sphere. In historical narrative, the phenomenon of collective activity indicates the rise of the Greek-Orthodox population of Constantinople during the 19th century and before the [Asia Minor Catastrophe](#); it was much more than, however. The involvement of Greeks with associations was a complex and unequal phenomenon, a meeting point for the process of constructing social identities, “public opinion” and gender distinctions.

1. Μανουή λ Γεδεών, «Γηραιά ς Αδελφό τητος Ιστορί α», *Εκκλησιαστική Αλήθεια* (χ.χ.), pp. 154-156.
2. *Κανονισμός της εν Κωνσταντινουπόλει Ελληνικής Λέσχης Βυζάντιον* (Constantinople 1862).
3. *Κανονισμός της Ελληνικής Λέσχης Φιλομούσων εν Υψωμαθείσις* (Constantinople 1881).
4. Μαμώνη, Κ. – Ιστικοπούλου, Λ., *Γυναικείοι Σύλλογοι στην Κωνσταντινούπολη (1861-1922)* (Athens 2002), pp. 111-154.
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Glossary :

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The 19th-century reforms in the Ottoman Empire, which were inaugurated in 1839 with the edict of Hatt-i Şerif and came to an end with the Constitution of 1876. The reforms, which were considered an effort for the modernization and liberalization of the state, concerned every aspect of the political, social and economic life in the Empire. Of particular importance were the ones that equated legally Muslim and non-Muslim subjects.